The politics of possession

Alan Ryan

ANDREW REEVE
Property
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0 333 367960

The importance of property to political theory and political practice goes without saying. Locke explained the origins of government and justified its scope and limits by defining political power as "*a Right* of making Laws with Penalties of Death, and consequently all less Penalties, for the Regulating and Preserving of Property"; Hume had no time for the social contract by which Locke accounted for political obligation, but followed him in claiming that property and justice come into the world together, and that men's allegiance to government is to be explained and justified by the considerations that explain and justify their attachment to stable rules for acquiring and transferring ownership. As for the less nice business of practical politics, the view that politics is largely a contest between the haves and have-nots is perhaps too vulgar and abbreviated to be a complete political sociology, but it would be a rash politician who took it lightly.

Andrew Reeve starts from two propositions; the first that property is indeed central to political thought and practice, the second that it is very much harder than it looks to say just what property is, and therefore just how it is central. *Property* is avowedly an introduction to the subject. To say that it is the best introduction we have would be scant praise, for the fact is that it has no competitors. Lawrence C. Becker's *Property Rights* (1978) is the only comparable book, and good though it is, it is wholly devoted to a scrutiny of some standard justifications for private property. My own *Property and Political Theory* (1984) focuses on the connections which writers from Locke to Mill drew between ownership and labour – a topic to which Reeve devotes one chapter. *Property* is excellent as well as unique; to cover so much matter in so short a book must have cost him a good deal of sweat and anguish in the process of deciding what to omit, what to trim and what to compress. It is hard to see how he could have done it much better – indeed, it is hard to see how he could have done it at all.

Reeve tackles the jurisprudence, morality, sociology, political theory and economics of property rights with an altogether admirable lucidity and calm. Students who have read Reeve will no longer be swept away by C. B. Macpherson's implausible – and anyway obscure – claim that Locke invented an "absolute" conception of property rights uniquely suited to the domination of the bourgeoisie. Their sense of the importance of context ought to be sharpened by Reeve's reminder that among the important elements of a man's "propriety" Hobbes, like seventeenth-century lawyers, included "conjugal affection". And their feeling for the variety of issues which have sheltered under the umbrella of arguments about property ought to be strengthened by his sympathetic reconstruction of Hannah Arendt's claim that "public ownership" was a conceptual nonsense, while their grip on the principle that we ought to talk plainly on obscure topics will at the same time be strengthened by the way he demonstrates that Arendt chose a pretty misleading form of expression.

Not everything goes smoothly. Some writers suffer too painfully from abbreviation; so, when comparing Locke's account of the origins of property in "the work of a man's hands" with Hegel's account of the externalization of the will through possession, Reeve quite rightly objects to writers who describe Hegel's account as "Lockean" – human property is a utilitarian necessity in the Lockean scheme, and Locke's attitude to the individual will was to say the least ambivalent. But he has no room to go on to mention the ways in which Hegel integrates utilitarian considerations into the "externalization" story, and no room to mention that, in Locke's scheme, God's ownership of us in virtue of His workmanship is rather more like what Hegel thinks of as the essence of a possessory relationship, a fact which casts some light on Locke's lack of enthusiasm for worldly wealth as well as on Hegel's place in the philosophical project to replace God by humanity.

If that is hardly Reeve's fault, but a limitation on any introductory work, other slips are more nearly failures in the argument. Consider Herbert Spencer's claim in the first edition of *Social Statics* (1851) that freehold landed property was inconsistent with the equal liberty of all human beings. Spencer asked whether, when all the earth had been parcelled out among the existing owners, they had the right to tell newcomers that there was no room for them – that they could only stay on sufferance and on whatever terms the existing owners were disposed to offer. Reeve sees that it is only on a certain conception of ownership that the existing owners could do anything of the sort, and points out that Spencer does not much discuss what exactly ownership does or does not allow. That misses the point; which is that landowners can evict trespassers – can the present generation evict the next from *all* access to the earth and its fruits? Or, in Spencer's framework, if equal freedom entails an equal right to acquire exclusive ownership of a portion of the earth, what happens to equal freedom when all the earth has been acquired? Students of the subject will know that they must turn to Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* for some embarrassed answers; Reeve knows that, too, but momentarily forgets. It seems ungracious to end on a small quibble; but perhaps the smallness of the quibble is sufficient testimony to the virtues of the rest.

No sense in the naive

David Freedman

NATHAN SALMON
Frege's Puzzle
194pp. MIT. £24.95.
0 262 19246 2

Frege's Puzzle concerns the degree of informativeness of certain sentences. The unfashionable, naive view of referring, supported by Nathan Salmon, asserts that a sentence such as "Thatcher hates Kinnock" contains information in which two individuals occur as constituents. Frege's Puzzle supposedly refutes this view. If the sole function of a name were to introduce the individual it picks out (its referent), there would be no difference in the information expressed by two sentences where the second is obtained from the first by replacing one name by another with the same referent. For example, there would be no such difference between (1) Superman is Superman and (2) Superman is Clark Kent, because the function of "Superman" is to introduce exactly the same individual as "Clark Kent". But Frege observed that since (2) is genuinely informative, whereas (1) is trivial, this cannot be the case. Hence, these names cannot function according to the naive view, but must have some additional attribute called "sense" that explains the difference in informativeness. Philosophers are still sensibly perplexed by the Fregean notion of sense.

Salmon's defence of the naive theory involves a distinction between two ways in which information attaches to language. The first he calls "semantically encoding", the second, "pragmatically imparting". For example, the expression "the inventor of bifocals" semantically encodes the information that it picks out whoever uniquely invented bifocals (ie, Benjamin Franklin), whereas the expression "Benjamin Franklin" encodes no such information. A definite description semantically encodes a richer store of information than a proper name, and Salmon observes that one failing of the original naive theory was to ignore this.

He maintains, with a deferential nod to grammatical and logical form, that the information contained in a sentence is simply explained in terms of the information semantically encoded in its constituent parts. Since "Superman" and "Clark Kent" semantically encode the same information (ie, nothing, if we are to accept the views of Saul Kripke on this subject), we are mistaken in thinking that (1) and (2) above contain different information. Frege's Puzzle misleads us by taking account of information merely pragmatically imparted by an utterance of a sentence (or by any other event) that may or may not reflect semantically encoded information. A sneeze might convey the information that Smith has a cold, but it certainly doesn't semantically encode that information. (2) pragmatically imparts much more than (1), but semantically encodes nothing that would count as a "valuable extension of our knowledge". Moreover (3) Clark Kent is a mild-mannered reporter and (4) Superman is a mild-mannered reporter semantically encode the same information, but pragmatically impart distinct information. Precisely this phenomenon explains the advantage of analytic definitions like "Ophthalmologists are oculists" over "Ophthalmologists are ophthalmologists" for the purposes of elucidation.

This basic distinction between conveying and containing is pivotal to Salmon's lengthy and fruitful discussion. This acknowledges a great debt to Paul Grice's ideas on pragmatics that have been bubbling around near the surface of "respectable" semantic theory for some years. With the red herring of "trivial identities" removed, Salmon presents the puzzle Frege should have found: how is it that a speaker (eg, Lois Lane) may be deemed to understand and be fully competent in the use of a pair of sentences (eg, (3) and (4)) yet fail to recognize that they semantically encode the same information? Salmon wrestles adeptly with the dilemmas this presents for the notions of understanding, rationality, belief and linguistic competence.

Unfortunately, *Frege's Puzzle* uses an inordinately technical vocabulary in order to make a thorough appraisal of current semantic theories, so this densely packed volume is not an ideal introduction for students. None the less, Salmon gives a superior analysis of the puzzle, and although his style is neither as conversational as Kripke's nor as forthright as Frege's, his book deserves the attention of any professional philosopher of language.

Stemming the tide

David Papineau

D. C. STOVE
The Rationality of Induction
231pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press. £22.50.
0 19 824789 3

The central sceptical thesis of Hume's *Treatise* was that reason is impotent to carry us from premisses about observed facts to conclusions about unobserved ones. For the best part of two centuries nobody, not even philosophers, took Hume's inductive scepticism particularly seriously. But since the overthrow of Newtonian science at the beginning of this century the climate has changed. Philosophers have now become extremely perturbed about the rationality of inductive inferences. Sir Karl Popper has even built an entire philosophy on Hume's inductive scepticism.

David Stove's aim in *The Rationality of Induction* is to stem this sceptical tide. He accepts, of course, that induction is fallible: that the conclusions of inductive inferences can be false even when their premisses are true. But, he insists, it does not follow that inductive premisses cannot raise the probability of their conclusions. What is more, he argues that he can prove, from some extremely minimal principles of inductive probability, that some inductive inferences must indeed be rational in this sense, and that some must actually give their conclusions a high probability.

So far Stove is retracing ground originally covered in his *Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism* (1973). What is new in this volume are his attempts to diagnose the errors that have prevented other philosophers from embracing his views.

So, for instance, he spends some time on the widespread feeling that inductive probabilities are entirely chimerical. Most philosophers, when faced with Stove's proof of the rationality of induction, would probably not dispute the details, but simply object that calculations of inductive probabilities are about as significant as calculations of astrological influences. But Stove has little patience with this attitude. Inductive probabilities are just another way of talking about the degrees of belief that a rational person ought to have in certain propositions given other propositions. So nobody interested in epistemology can really avoid inductive probabilities – least of all the inductive sceptic, whose thesis, after all, is precisely that the observational evidence *ought not* rationally to alter our degrees of belief about the unobserved.

Less convincing is Stove's line on the epistemological status of inductive probabilities. Anybody defending the rationality of induction has to come to terms with Nelson Goodman's "new problem of induction", which shows that the worth of an inductive argument cannot depend just on its formal structure, since the same form of inductive argument will work with one subject matter but not with another. That all observed water has been colourless is a good reason to believe that all water will always be colourless, but that all observed diamonds have been smaller than a cricket ball is not a good reason to believe that all diamonds will always be smaller than a cricket ball.

Stove's initial response here is obvious enough: there is no reason why inductive logic should be a purely formal science. But then he makes the further surprising claim that we can tell good inductive arguments from bad ones by a priori intuition alone. Having come this far with Stove, it is surely more plausible to say that such knowledge is a posteriori, that it is empirical science itself that picks out "natural kinds" and tells us that the colours of chemical substances are "projectible", in Goodman's terminology, while the sizes of stones are not.

It is not immediately clear why Stove takes the unattractive a priorist line here. At bottom it seems to be because of his close adherence to a traditional analysis of knowledge. In order for something to be known, in Stove's view, it needs to be either directly observed or intuited, or inferred from other known facts by inferential steps whose rationality is itself known. It is this last, highly Cartesian, clause that causes the trouble. For if the rationality of certain inductive inferences is to be inferred from a posteriori empirical findings, which must in turn be induced from observational evidence, then we will need to know that these latter inductions are themselves rational, and we will be off on an interminable regress.

But suppose instead that the requirement on inferred knowledge is simply that the inferential steps should *be* rational, not that the knower should know them to be rational. Then the regress disappears. Even when, as epistemologists, we are concerned with the specific question of whether certain inductive inferences are rational or not, no regress arises, since we only need to *perform* the inductive inferences required to attain this knowledge, and don't need simultaneously to assure ourselves that those inferences are rational.

This book, like Stove's recent *Popper and After* (1983), is an example of a little-practised philosophical genre, namely, argument aimed at opponents who share none of your assumptions. Stove has evolved a distinctive style for this purpose. Droll and ironic, it consists largely of heart-felt expressions of amazement that anybody could be so misguided as to hold views contrary to Stove's. This style has the virtue of clarity, and it is fun to read. But it must be said it works less well when Stove is arguing a positive thesis, as here, than it did in his earlier attack on the Popperians. As with satire in general, rhetorical appeals to common sense can effectively subvert other people's idiosyncrasies, but they aren't much help in defending one's own.

This is not to say that Stove's overall position is indefensible. It is certainly highly idiosyncratic in parts. But leaving doubts about the details to one side, the general thesis that inductive logic is not dead and that Humeans have been having it far too much their own way recently is largely convincing. No doubt Stove won't persuade everybody. But he should at least succeed in reviving interest in an important philosophical topic.

Papineau, David. "Stemming the tide." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4368, 19 Dec. 1986, p. 1429. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200170368/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.