Symposium on the Political Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon

Introduction

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T. M. Scanlon, the Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity at Harvard University, is one of the most significant moral philosophers of the past fifty years. His development of contractualism as a general view explaining the content of “what we owe to each other” represents one of the great systematic projects in recent moral philosophy. However, although Scanlon's contractualist moral philosophy has received an appropriately substantial degree of critical attention, there has not yet been quite the same degree of attention given to the distinctively political aspects or implications of Scanlon's project. This is perhaps surprising, for Scanlon's contribution to political philosophy, while perhaps not as systematic as his contribution to moral philosophy, is remarkable in both its scope and its philosophical power.

This contribution comes in two broad categories. Firstly, there are Scanlon’s unusually insightful individual essays on different topics in political philosophy, collected together in his book The Difficulty of Tolerance, which touch on a range of issues from freedom of expression, distributive justice, and human rights, to punishment, toleration and inequality. Secondly, there are his extraordinarily original and often highly radical


discussions, within his work in moral philosophy, of ideas that have important political dimensions and political implications; in particular, I have in mind Scanlon’s discussions of rights, value, well-being, promising, and responsibility. The full implications of this work for political philosophy are only beginning to be adequately explored.

Scanlon has given us a rich seam of philosophical work that relates to distinctively political issues, and it will be a fruitful task for political philosophers to engage with it, with care and imagination. Accordingly, the current symposium is addressed to the twin, closely-related tasks of engaging critically both with Scanlon’s work in political philosophy itself, and also with the implications for political philosophy of other aspects of Scanlon’s work on topics in moral philosophy. Our hope is that these articles help both to shed light on the significance of Scanlon’s work, and to encourage further, ongoing engagement with the issues and problems that Scanlon raises.

The symposium begins with Leif Wenar’s discussion of “Rights and What We Owe to Each Other”. Wenar explores the question of how well Scanlon’s contractualism can make sense of the scope and nature of rights. He argues both that Scanlon’s contractualism fails to account for the full range of rights, and that more generally, Scanlon’s contractualist approach to morality does not make good sense of the place of rights in our moral thinking. As with each of the other contributions to this symposium, Scanlon provides a generous and perceptive response.

We then have two articles discussing Scanlon’s continuing work on the significance of inequality. Jonathan Wolff’s article discusses “Scanlon on Social and Material Inequality”, while my own contribution is on “Constructing a Contractualist Egalitarianism”. Wolff’s article scrutinizes Scanlon’s work on the badness of inequality, paying special attention to the relationship between social and distributive forms of inequality. Wolff also examines the relationship between Scanlon’s work on equality and one of its more important philosophical precursors, R. H. Tawney, as well as its relation to the interesting form of anti-egalitarianism developed by J. R. Lucas. My own article discusses the “strength, salience, and generality” of Scanlon’s brand of contractualist egalitarianism, exploring its implications for our understanding of global distributive obligations, and its relationship to the “luck egalitarianism” of theorists such as G. A. Cohen, Richard Arneson and Larry Temkin. I also begin to sketch some of the potential implications of Scanlon’s work on inequality for our thinking about concrete issues in public policy, especially as it relates to the organization of work and to the distribution of power within the economy, looking in particular at the role of labour unions.