



Political Philosophy, Clearly: Essays on Freedom and Fairness, Property and Equalities

By Anthony de Jasay • Reviewed by: Doug Bandow

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One of the great myths of society today is that life is too complex to leave unregulated. Liberty might have been fine for a simple, agrarian society a couple of centuries ago, but now, supposedly, we need vast intervention by the State to manage human affairs.

In fact experience demonstrates that it is even more important to rely on the decentralized decisionmaking of the marketplace as society grows more complex. The commissars had a passable chance at figuring out how to make steel, however inefficiently. In the midst of the information and other technological revolutions, though, creating an advanced economy is beyond any human's ability. Instead we must rely on Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of voluntary action within the rule of law.

In this meaty book, Hungarian-born economist Anthony de Jasay explores the ability of individuals to privately organize their affairs and other issues relevant to the debate between statists and advocates of liberty. The essays collected in this volume span a broad array of questions, including the private provision of "public goods," the viability of limited government, and the relationship between liberty and justice.

Jasay begins with a frontal attack on two traditional concepts of classical liberals: the social contract and constitutionally limited government. The basic problem, he contends, is that the "fictitious social contract" logically results in far more government than originally desired. That in turn is because "[t]here is an obvious potential gain to the government, or to be pedantic, the persons in charge of it, from exceeding this mandate, and the means are available for doing so." That is to say, paper guarantees that are meant

to constrain the growth of government and protect the liberties of the people are almost certain to fail. America's unhappy experience with the theory that governmental power can be contained by writing words on paper strongly supports Jasay's position.

It is true that limits on government are sometimes respected—for a time, at least—but Jasay notes that this is mostly for idiosyncratic reasons. He points, for example, to the once generally held belief that government should abide by the same financial rules that individuals do as having restrained government spending in the past. “For about a century and a half before Keynes' General Theory became common currency for the literate and semiliterate, it was widely believed that repeated deficits in the state household were mortally dangerous, liable to lead to the country's ruin, and to be countenanced only in desperate circumstances.” Once that belief among the mass of the citizenry eroded, no paper rules could restrain the deluge of federal spending and debt.

Another key issue that attracts Jasay's attention is the matter of what rights we hold. He asserts that “liberties are not rights, and rights are not liberties,” and proceeds to show that many artificial claims of “rights” conflict with natural liberties. In fact mistakenly calling things that people desire—medical care, housing, education, and so on—“rights” is at the heart of the destruction of limited government in America. That problem takes us back to the difficulty of putting limits on government. Politicians can and will build voting coalitions to enhance their electoral prospects by conferring new “rights” that entail taking property and liberty from some people to make others better off. Most voters see this growth in “rights” as progress and generosity, but fail to see the consequential shrinking of freedom. Keep expanding these so-called rights for a few generations and the idea of limited government becomes meaningless.

In recent months, the European Union has been much in the news, and several of the essays in the book deal with the EU. While the author is no friend of nationalism, he observes that in the case of Great Britain, nationalism has performed a salutary role by encouraging resistance against the tendency toward continental political consolidation. That consolidation—the centralization of power in the hands of EU officials and bureaucrats—will have harmful consequences both for freedom and prosperity. (One strong example Jasay gives is the propensity for officials to interfere with business efficiency through their zealous antitrust enforcement.) Any reasons why people might oppose it, including “gut feelings” rooted in nationalism, are good. Americans have the same sensible, gut reaction against ceding sovereignty to transnational organizations such as the United Nations.

Politicians fight over policies, but those policies are shaped by broader public philosophies. It is those philosophies that Jasay ably dissects and explains. Although his essays often make for deep, difficult reading, their substance makes the effort worthwhile. They give an important boost to the cause of liberty.

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