The Passions, Real Politics, and the Practice Of Political Theory

An Interview With Mark Philp

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CG: In your book *Political Conduct* (2007), you remark that much contemporary moral and political theory falls victim to the 'illusion' that 'human passions, ambitions, loyalties, and treacheries ... can somehow be eliminated from the process.'[1] The persistence and intractability of the passions in politics is an important factor in your call for a more 'contextual' approach to political theory that is sensitive to the autonomy of the political domain and the situatedness of political agency.[2] You like to talk about politics as a particularly 'grubby' area of human activity.[3] Other contemporary political realists, with whom you are sometimes associated, place rather less empha-

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[1] Philp, *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.
[2] Philp, *Political Conduct*; 'Political Theory and the Evaluation of Political Conduct', *Social Theory & Practice* 34.3 (2008): 389-410; 'What is To Be Done? Political Theory and Political Realism', *European Journal of Political Theory* 9.4 (2010): 466-484; 'Realism Without Illusions', *Political Theory* 40.5 (2012): 629-649.
[3] Philp, *Political Conduct*, 4, 37, 112; 'Political Theory and the Evaluation of Political Conduct', 389, 410; 'Realism Without Illusions', 646.

sis on this theme.[4] Why do you see the interplay of the passions as endemic to the political domain, and what difference does it make for our understanding of politics?

MP: 'Passions' is an interesting word, central to the way in which people thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was largely laundered out of our vocabulary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We don't tend to talk about the passions much anymore, so first we probably need to think a bit more carefully about what they are and how they fit within the political process.

There's a classic 'reason vs. the passions' distinction that I don't consider very helpful. For instance, is justice a passion? Jean Itard, who was a late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist, brought up a 'wolf-child' called Victor of Aveyron.[5] The child didn't have language, but Itard wanted to test whether the child had a sense of justice. Itard was very consistent in his behaviour towards the child: rewarding him when he was good, and showing displeasure when not. So one day he just reversed this. The child didn't understand. Itard tried to punish him for something the child had done right, fully aware that this was a terrible thing to do, and the child got more and more furious about it, until he finally sank his teeth into Itard's hand, utterly convinced of the impossibility of what was confronting him. So should we think of justice as a passion? We might equally reflect on Jean Amery's work on resentment (in *At the Mind's Limits*) to question any simple distinction between reasons and passions.[6] The boundaries of the passions are very difficult to draw. They are not wholly irrational, indeed, there is clearly some cognitive dimension to them, it's just something about the paucity of our language which makes us think that these things are either one or the other rather than very closely interlinked and working together.

[4] The *loci classici* of contemporary political realism are Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For an overview and critique of contemporary realism, see William Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory* 9.4 (2010): 385-411.

[5] Lucien Malson & Jean Itard, *Wolf Children and The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (London: NLB, 1972).

[6] Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. S. & S. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980 [1964]).

What I tried to do in *Political Conduct* was pin down the distinctiveness of politics as a realm. To think about it in terms of its internal complexity. To recognize that it operates with certain standards, which are fragile and embedded in particular conditions of possibility. Part of that fragility arises from the fact that you have to work with the full range of human emotion within this sphere. One way of thinking about politics without using the word 'passions' would be to think about 'values'. But I think passions has some sort of additional value to it, since it suggests that political things aren't just abstract commitments that we all hold. They're things we feel on the pulses, and it's important to recognize that we do so.

That brings me to my first point about the passions in politics. In *Political Conduct* I toyed a bit with the metaphor of politics as a game reflecting on its conventions and rules, on what enables people to judge performances and assess the way people conduct themselves, and so on. But we must also recognize that it's not *just* a game—it's much more important than that! Politics is not just a game, because it sets its own rules, judges the infractions of rules, and rewrites the rules, *while* playing the game. It's a process which contains an integral moment of sovereignty that can be a source of both innovation and instability, and which can change the nature of the game fundamentally. Like many games, for many people, it can be absolutely absorbing, something passionate, something that takes over people's lives. Both those who participate in it and those who are victims of it. But there are also better and worse versions of the game; and even if there's no ideal form, we can and must acknowledge cases in which it has gone badly awry. Moreover, in some contexts the game can be extraordinarily complex, such that to secure outcomes you have to act as an adept in a matrix of rules, codes and conventions. But in other contexts, other factors dominate—in post-war or post-disaster contexts, politics may have a much simpler and pragmatic form and a far narrower remit—and those differences will have a major impact on the motivations brought to (and generated by) politics and the emotions it elicits. Over time, I've become more and more interested in the many varieties of communities and cultures and the different spaces they allow for politics. Not least because it helps us focus on how *we* delineate the political, and what its conditions of existence are.

Second, there's the question about what should *motivate* people in our politics. The 'Seven Principles of Public Life' in the U.K. include selflessness. But nobody believes that anybody in politics acts entirely selflessly. And yet it does make sense to think that certain decisions are taken selflessly—that is, not in your interests, not focusing on your concerns, but relating to the situation as it stands and to the responsibilities of the office you occupy. This generates a kind of bizarre double-think in how we talk about politics. People readily dismiss politicians as self-serving, and they insist that they should be wholly committed to serve the public, but neither of those things is ever going to be entirely true—people have careers and ambitions which must inflect the decisions they make, to some degree. Even if people start their political careers with ambitions of complete disinterestedness, the process makes that increasingly untenable—not least because of what has to be done to get to a position in which you can affect outcomes, because of the relationships and expectations that are generated in that process, and because of the distorting impact of being in a position to wield power.

A lot of politics is about resolving conflict, and settling issues that people care deeply about, in ways that they can find authoritative, is very, very, difficult. Northern Ireland is a classic kind of case. People are deeply committed to their communities, to their religion, and to their reading of events. And in that divided community, it is extremely difficult to see how you could have a compromise that satisfied everybody. The fact that they managed to get a peace agreement out at all is one of the great examples of what politics can achieve. And the fact that the settlement has been put at risk, that there was no debate during the Brexit process about the implications for Northern Ireland, is an indication of just how bad politics can become, when political actors fail to recognize how fragile the political settlement is, how this community holds itself together, given that there are still bodies that haven't been buried. In forming the peace agreement, some things had to be accepted—that people would go unpunished for some of the terrible things that they did. And those terrible things had profound implications for other people, for the families of their victims, and so on. We could not take those passions out of those individuals, but we had to find a process and a way forward that somehow they could accept. And that had to be brought about by politics.

Lastly, you mentioned 'grubbiness'. My sense is that many political realists are 'meta' political realists. They want to tell you why there are *reasons* for being a political realist, rather than exploring the implications of political realism on the ground and in respect of particular instances or conflicts. So it remains pretty abstract. That's not entirely true, but on the whole there have been few attempts to focus on the nitty-gritty, the compromises people have to make in politics, the things people have to give up. No matter how ideal the aspirations are, the process is one which is non-ideal—which I tend to refer to (probably too often) as the grubbiness. While writing *Political Conduct* I read the first three volumes of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson.[7] It's impossible to describe that as anything other than grubby. And yet at every stage you have to ask, 'could he have gotten to where he needed to be in order to do the things that he did, without doing the unsavoury things that he did earlier on?'

It seems to me there are two ways a realist could approach the passions at a theoretical level. The first follows from the classical distinction that early modern thinkers like Descartes or Hobbes are also working with: the passions are something we 'suffer', passively, rather than something we choose rationally or deliberatively. That doesn't mean they can't be oriented in a rational or virtuous direction, but they have to be habituated rather than simply directed at will. Putting it that way comports with the distinction you make in *Radical Conduct* between the rational and deliberative ideals of political thinkers like Godwin and Paine in the eighteenth century, and the fact that they are immersed in a social context which doesn't perfectly conduce to realizing those ideals.[8] From this perspective, the passions look like one among many aspects of the context in which our agency is necessarily situated and over which we have only limited control. Realists should take an interest in the passions because they should be interested in the pricks that we kick against in the exercise of our political agency generally.

[7] Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson,* Vol. 1, *The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Vol. 2, *Means of Ascent* (New York: Knopf, 1990); Vol. 3, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Knopf, 2002).
[8] Philp, *Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability, and Equality in London, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

That view is not necessarily in contradiction, but perhaps in tension, with another possibility, which is that there are distinctive political passions definitive of the political realm as an autonomous domain of human action, which ideal theorists are hesitant to acknowledge. The history of political thought is full of rival arguments along these lines, that politics is or ought to be defined by certain passions or families of passions. A classical writer like Plutarch regards the love of honour (φιλοτιμία) as paradigmatically political.[9] Machiavelli speaks of a 'desire to acquire'.[10] For Carl Schmitt, it is friendship and enmity that distinguish the political domain.[11] Do you also see certain passions as intrinsically political and others as unpolitical? Does the political domain unleash certain passions in human affairs that wouldn't otherwise predominate? Or is it a mistake to see things that way?

You have to look at what you've got. Rather than thinking that there's necessarily going to be a distinct set of passions associated with politics universally, you have to look at the concrete political situation to see what kinds of passions are validated, what are invalidated, what is motivating people, what's not motivating people. In some respects, I'm not interested in the passions at all, *qua* whether there are specifically political passions. What I'm interested in is 'how does this run', 'what moves people', 'what is going to work in terms of creating coalitions and creating compromises, enabling people to negotiate', 'what are the risks, what are the costs', 'what's driving people', etc. That range of questions is very much the ballpark that I want to play in. The fact that *dignitas* was so important to Julius Caesar doesn't mean that it's so important for Boris Johnson. These are different kind of worlds; they operate in different ways. I'm not even sure 'enmity' operates in quite the same way across different periods and in different cultures. This fits with your very plausible account of the passions as things that we don't have a lot

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[9] The theme is pervasive in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*; for a recent discussion, see Hugh Liebert, 'Plutarch's Critique of Plato's Best Regime', *History of Political Thought* 30.2 (2009): 251-271.

[10] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. H. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), III, p. 14.

[11] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, exp. ed., trans. G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

of immediate control over, but which we can gain some kind of purchase on or discipline to a certain extent. Individual agents do not control or discipline their own passions wholly autonomously. Cultures are partly about mobilizing and disciplining different ranges of passions. Different political cultures will mobilize and organize passions in different kinds of ways.

Your allusion to Caesar raises another set of questions about the relationship between the passions of the individual agent and the political realm. In the course of defending him against Machiavelli's criticisms in the *Discourses on Livy*, you argue that Caesar's ambition—his passion for his *dignitas*—should not be equated with a 'merely grasping sense of what he deserves' but rather 'legitimate expectations' on his part about the treatment he was owed on the basis of his standing within the social order of the later Roman republic.[12] The claim raises a number of questions: Where and how do we draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate political passions? Is the difference in the passions themselves, or some set of accidental features?

If we're to understand Caesar's behaviour, then we need to recognize what his culture was like, how individuals achieved standing and recognition within that culture, how central their sense of their dignity was for maintaining their identity and securing their lives in this extraordinary face-to-face political culture. What I wanted to do with Caesar was to try to paint a picture in which a moment of judgment is clearly available to him, and in which all our instincts are to ask, almost dumbfounded, 'Why would you do *that*?' I wanted to be able to tell the story in a way that made it comprehensible why you might go either way at the Rubicon, and why—although you *could* go either way—he really needed to go *one* way given the expectations of conduct that comported with the system he'd been raised in. I was trying to tell a story that made us ask, 'if you got to the Rubicon from that kind of cultural background, with those sorts of expectations, could you really *not* cross it?' It seems to me that a lot of politics follows precisely that kind of logic: there are moments in which agency is really constrained like that, narrowed to binary choices, and

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12 Philp, *Political Conduct*, 27.

yet the choices have dramatic consequences for communities and sometimes for the world more widely.

I fear we are experiencing such a moment now in relation to Ukraine. There are lots of parallels. You've got a leader coming from an imperial tradition, who understands his responsibility in relation to that tradition, who is so bound up with the story of the past, that it is difficult to see how he can stop doing what he needs to do in order to preserve his standing. That is not to say I have any sympathy for him. But it is now quite easy to see how we could get to nuclear escalation. However, we also have to see how the West encouraged him to get there, how the West encouraged the Soviet Union to re-form itself but didn't do much to help reconstruct Soviet society in a way that might have opened alternative futures for it. Over and over again the West is guilty of thinking: *as long as it falls down, when it stands up again it will look like us*. It's almost universally true that that doesn't happen.

We don't make the effort, we don't take the time, we don't do the really difficult work of constructive politics—because it involves concessions (and critical self-reflection) on our part. If we could go back to 1989, there were courses of action available to us in which the Ukraine crisis never would have happened. It wasn't inevitable in that sense. But these failures have precipitated a series of events culminating in the current intractable situation. Now it's not clear what we're expecting Putin to do, except somehow give up. But we cannot claim to be unaware that that is simply not what most people in politics do.

To take up the Roman case again—by pointing out that Caesar's political agency is constrained, that his expectations are mostly legitimate, are you also showing a way for Cato the Younger and his party to exercise their political agency more effectively? That is, to mitigate or avoid this kind of crisis?

No. Cato's conservatism makes sense within the republic but is not sustainable within the empire. What they were dealing with was a system that was no longer capable of living in accordance with the values that it purported to uphold. Its politics had become outpaced by its success. And as a result, it was a tragedy waiting to unfold—one that was brought about in part by individual agency and which

could, at least in principle, have been otherwise (a condition that is necessary for 'tragedy' to be the right word).

So there's a kind of inevitability that we can perceive in retrospect in the Roman case. What about in the contemporary case? We do not know yet to what degree our fate has been written by actions taken in the past. Does recognizing that Putin is constrained, and that we in the West have not acted in ways that open sufficient nonbelligerent possibilities for him, itself constitute a step toward establishing an easier *modus vivendi* between us? And does looking at politics through a realist or contextual lens as you suggest then offer the West a better chance of coming to terms with Russia?

Well, I'm not sure, because there are lots of things we would need to know that I don't know in order to make that judgment. But I certainly believe *that* those things ought to be known, and *that* we ought to make such an effort of understanding. The tendency to bandwagon and insist on 'protecting the freedom and innocence of Ukraine at all costs'—that's a kind of avoidance of politics. Nobody says engaging politically is easy. But the fact that no one wants to be thought of as an appeaser, as open to political settlement, is exactly what lies behind the growing polarization in this moment.

It is interesting how often we do this. We take out Saddam Hussein because he is the person that's the problem. And we didn't ask, 'was he the only problem?—and for what forces was *he* the solution?' We let them take out Gaddafi, because he's the central problem. Really? Serbia, Kosovo, over and over again. There's a Western view of politics, which is about great men, war, and dictators. Great men getting it right and dictators getting it wrong, with the idea that systems change simply because the leader changes. Political science may recognize some of the deep, underlying tensions and conflicts within societies, and may appreciate the difficulty of providing for stable social organization and political life in particular social contexts, but our practice in the international world is rarely informed by the more subtle and sceptical dimensions of that thinking.

Your rejection of Manichaeism extends to the subject of corruption, a theme that runs throughout your work.[13] We tend to associate political corruption with a range of selfish passions: greed, avarice, lust, etc. This in turn suggests a highly impersonal picture of the ideal public official, either totally selfless or totally dispassionate. But you have argued that we should not be so confident in these typologies. How should we judge the passions of public officials, in your view? And how should this inform our expectations for their conduct?

I once held a number of focus group discussions with public officials about corruption in Kenya. One of the scenarios that we put to people involved the head of a local health clinic facing an outbreak of a potentially lethal disease: She's got two weeks of supplies for immunizations against a disease (this was before COVID) and cannot be sure when the next supplies will arrive. She knows she doesn't have enough supplies for everybody, she knows that people are going to be differentially vulnerable to disease, and she knows that it is communicable (so has to worry about keeping her staff safe). And she has to make a judgment: Do you immunize your own staff first? What about the families of members of staff? How do you structure this? We had a fantastic discussion, and the one principle that people stuck to absolutely all the way through was, 'You've got to save your grandmother's life'. Whatever happens, you've got to do that. That's not what people would have decided here, in the West. But if that's what people thought was the right thing to do in that context, then that would have been the right thing to do. Partly because if you are seen not to do that, then people's confidence in you as an administrator, as a leader, and so on, will evaporate. I thought it was powerful discussion that captured something really important: that the rules or principles of impartiality aren't 'up

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13 Philp, 'Defining Political Corruption', *Political Studies* 45 (1997): 436-462; *Political Conduct*, chs. 5-7; 'Realism About Political Corruption', with E. David-Barrett, *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 287-402; 'The Definition of Political Corruption' in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption*, ed. P. Heywood (London: Routledge, 2015), 17-29; 'Politics and the 'Pure of Heart': Realism and Corruption' in *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Sleat (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 194-217; 'The Corruption of Politics', *Social Philosophy & Policy* 35.2 (2018): 73-93; 'Political Corruption', with E. David-Barrett, in *Political Ethics: A Handbook*, eds. E. Hall & A. Sabl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 170-192.

there', plain for all to see. The rules are heavily dependent on what we think is acceptable or unacceptable within our communities. And the wider moral is that political decisions cannot be impartial, indeed are necessarily partial in some respects, since in politics—as Bernard Williams says—some people win and some lose. That means we need to think in more detail about how to ensure that the worst is avoided—less a theory of good government, more a theory of less-bad, or least-bad government.[14]

There are not only different definitions, but different forms of corruption. Many forms of what the West regards as corruption aren't terribly important in some communities. Some of them are important for the people involved in them, but they're not destructive. Consider the idea of 'brokers': that is, someone you go to see who has no official position but knows who you should go to see if you need something. The broker manages points of intersection in networks of social relations, and is someone who is trusted to advise you. There's a fantastic book called *The Fixer* about someone who basically provides a brokerage service in relation to this scheme for visas to America in Togo.[15] In order to get a visa for America, there's a lottery. But in order for the lottery outcome to lead to the issuing of the visa, you need to go through lots of interviews and evaluations. And people need help to negotiate that kind of process. The American Consulate is of course outraged that anyone tries to interfere with the process at all. But what their system has created is a set of possibilities that is not well integrated with the subjective sense of people within the wider community. So the brokers advise about whether people should be married or not married, and who they should be married to, and whether it would be good to have children. It's a very complex process. But clearly in that sense, the Western views about what counts as corruption just aren't connecting with how this work is done within the local community.

At the same time, there are cases of colossal corruption and fraud in building regulations in many states. These have catastrophic effects on people's lives. When it comes to corruption, then, so many diverse forms of social relations fall under the name that we need to think harder about it in concrete terms: what should we be wor-

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[14] Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed*, 13.
[15] Charles Piot & Kodjo Nicolas Batema, *The Fixer* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

rying about in *this* situation, at *this* point of time, in relation to *these* individuals? Corruption is not always the worst problem. And often it's not corruption that is the problem—it's the disempowerment, it's the exploitation, and the consequences of both. But political science generally hasn't been very good at doing justice to these differences.

If the West is wrong to pathologize as 'corrupt' the acts of public officials in non-Western contexts, who are only responding in kind to the distinct norms and values of their own places and cultures, how much sense does it make to speak about 'public' officials and 'political' corruption in the first place? Is what we're looking at instead something like societies where political order is immersed in a network of other, competing orders?

That's often the case, yes. There's a relatively low-level independence of politics from other kinds of orders, and then there are questions about what would enable a higher degree of political norm-setting, and what would follow from it. It doesn't always mean that it's the right way to go. You have to try to ascertain exactly how far something like public office is able to operate in such a situation—and whether there are clear advantages to its doing so.

It seems like someone deeply committed to state sovereignty, or to representation in a liberal democratic mode, would have objections to the political order not taking primacy, or the absence of a clear hierarchy among different kinds of social orders. But you think that isn't necessarily a problem—that political order isn't always the superior organizing principle?

Yes, I would accept that. I think the liberal political order has a lot to be said for it, but it is not always attainable. David Sneath, who worked on corruption in Mongolia, has written about how unhappy people became and how they felt corruption was spreading throughout the social system after the dismantling of the old Soviet order.[16] It's a very good example of the extent to which people's expectations frame the way they see the world and frame their normative

[16] David Sneath, *Mongolia Remade: Post-socialist National Culture, Political Economy, and Cosmopolitics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

judgments about it, and their judgments about how other people are behaving. In this case, introducing markets into areas where other forms of allocation have taken place before is often deeply disturbing to people, and they see it as tremendously corrupt.

The other thing I'd say is that I don't think there's just one liberal order. There are lots. And it's important to recognize that variety, and the interdependencies between different elements of the wider social and cultural context. Wanting all systems to be the same is a perverse and dangerous dystopian vision. The one thing I haven't stressed very much in the responses I've given so far is that, for my kind of realist, it's not that there aren't values, it is that there *are* values—there are multiple, and they're competing. You can't have it all, you get some; you win on some things, you lose on others. That multiplicity of values and the consequent challenge for politics—trying to chart your way into a position of being able to meet to some degree some of most people's expectations across the different kinds of value commitments they have—is deeply affected by the wider social and cultural context in which they are embedded.

Mistranslation between different contexts of corruption can occur not only between Western and non-Western states, but also within pluralistic Western societies. You may be familiar with Boss Tweed of nineteenth-century New York, who was the subject of a series of scolding cartoons by Thomas Nast. Tweed was a machine politician in Tammany Hall who became an object of loathing to the WASP elite at the time, and then progressive *cause célèbre*, and was eventually tried for corruption. But in retrospect it looks like a case of mistranslation between the expectations of Nast and his peers for official decorum on the one hand and the expectations of the masses of Irish and Italian immigrants, crowded into tenements on the Lower East Side, for the provision of social goods by their elected officials on the other. Do you think these sorts of misunderstandings can be avoided or at least better negotiated?

The U.K. has its own version: the trial of Warren Hastings. There are moments at which people begin to rethink what legitimate expectations should be in particular contexts. And we've got a narrative about the progressive elimination of corruption from politics over

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But I'm sceptical. The more complex and sophisticated and, in a sense, 'ordered' your political system becomes, the more possibilities there are for political corruption. The more things go right, the more things can go wrong. Political scientists tend to think teleologically in terms of arriving at a place where there's no corruption. But if we follow their advice, we're not going to end up in a place where there's no corruption; we're going to end up in a place where you've got to be continuously and assiduously concerned with how people follow, break, and enforce the rules. And in that case we need to think more about specific instances of corruption, rather than thinking we can clean it all up.

Better and worse political systems can be assessed partly in terms of which ones successfully create a culture in which people are less tempted to follow paths that they shouldn't go down. Most people would have told you ten years ago that the British political system was the prime example of a political system that had cleared corruption out. I don't think anyone in their right mind would say that with any confidence now. It's not a one-off job. It is an ongoing problem. Political situations can arise in which everything moves into a much more fragile state quite suddenly. The question then is whether the political system is resilient enough to respond to those emerging possibilities for normative transgression.

The other thing is, what do you want someone who thinks about political corruption to tell you? Moral condemnation may be exhilarating, but it doesn't contribute to addressing the deficiencies that genuine corruption creates, to rectifying the harm people suffer as a consequence, or putting a stop to the people who are winning when they really shouldn't be winning. Those are the real costs inflicted by corruption, but the language we use to identify and evaluate corruption rarely helps us repair them. Moreover, invoking political corruption often splashes the mud indiscriminately. Which is why, when one talks to public officials and politicians, its rarely helpful to put political corruption centre-stage and better to work with them on what is not working, what could work better, what they might be able to garner support for, and so on.

You are speaking from experience about this: for several years now, you've held a consultative role in the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), an advisory body within the U.K.

Cabinet Office.[17] You have also praised the Committee's relatively 'parsimonious' approach to evaluating and regulating public conduct, and its clear 'separation of office from character'.[18] Why do you consider those qualities important?

I won't say very much about it, since I have always taken the view that it is best to keep my involvement in the Committee for the Committee rather than a wider public audience. What I will say is that I was asked to join because I'd been thinking about the interpretation of the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by Lord Nolan in 1995.[19] The Committee was about to engage in some public attitudes research, and it was out of that that my participation grew.

The Committee doesn't really have any power—its purpose is to review the landscape as it stands and to make recommendations for how it should change. That position means that the CSPL's impartiality and its moderation needs to be publicly demonstrated: zealousness leads to push-back from politicians, partisanship picks a fight with them on their own ground. It's a very fine line that such institutions operate with. They need to command public respect but they also need to command political respect. And as soon as people can type you as partisan, there is bound to be someone who says, essentially, 'we just need to get rid of, to scrap these standards bodies'. That thought is always going to be there for lots of people within the political system, because they don't like constraints, and see themselves as having a mandate to act as they do. In the U.K., there is also a long tradition of Parliamentary self-regulation, about which some people are still nostalgic. Any public body that is seen as responsible for damaging somebody's political reputation becomes a potential victim of people's resentment for that. Other bodies have particular jobs to do: they have regulations that they need to ensure are being implemented and so on. But the CSPL doesn't have any of that; its brief is constantly to keep an eye on how things are operating and where the problems are, where the problems might develop,

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[17] See Philp, *Public Ethics and Political Judgment* (London: CSPL, 2014). Further information about the CSPL is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>.

[18] Philp, 'The Corruption of Politics', 78-84.

[19] Philp, 'The Seven Principles of Public Life: What They Say and What They Mean' (London: CSPL, 2002, rev. 2012). The Seven Principles can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life>.

and so on. If that's going to be effective, it's got to be able to maintain a consensus across the political spectrum.

You are framing official impartiality as a response to the need to command public respect. But a strict procedural liberal, with a rules-based vision for political order, might think there is something backwards about that: fair and impartial rules should command public respect, not vice-versa.

I'm not a great believer in the public as a single thing. There are lots of publics, and different ones are mobilized at different times for different purposes. While I would like to believe the public generally share sets of commitments and values, and the Committee's research into public attitudes towards the Seven Principles suggests there is some consensus, it isn't absolute consensus. The trouble is that much liberalism tends to treat the public as uniform, but that's actually not the way the world is built. If you are trying to come up with regulations, conventions and norms that should guide people's behaviour in relation to political conduct, what you're trying to do is articulate what you think will float with the public—not necessarily what they would suggest themselves, but what they could (be brought to) see as acceptable. At the same time, politicians are going to be very concerned about how far what you are suggesting will end up constraining the way they act (as they see it, the way they are mandated to act). That suggests we will be dealing with a range of expectations and commitments pulling in different ways, between which no common line of impartiality will command support. (I am sympathetic to Bo Rothstein's suggestion that impartiality is central to government if we understand that as public administration; but the proposal wholly ignores the deeply contested world of politics).[20] I see the Committee as trying to act as a kind of broker, a mediator, between a wider public sense of how politics should be conducted (which it is also involved in helping to articulate) and a much more detailed understanding of the complexity of the institutions and the contested politics which the Committee is addressing.

[20] Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

You have been critical of contemporary political philosophy conducted in the mode of 'ideal theory', both for its subordination of politics to moral philosophy and its disregard for the first-person point of view of the political agent.[21] Much of this work has been done under the influence of John Rawls. However, Rawls himself was not insensitive to the problem of the passions in politics. Part III of _A Theory of Justice_ takes up the question of the 'social bases of self-respect' and the 'sense of justice' at length, prescribing measures to minimize dangerous antisocial passions such as envy, resentment, apathy, and despair.[22] Martha Nussbaum, in a similar vein, has argued that a liberal society must take seriously the task of educating and disciplining citizens' emotions.[23] Do you find these attempts to solve the problem of political passions from within the confines of ideal theory to be adequate? How do you assess the relationship between the passions and liberal theory generally?

There are two things I should say: The first is that I have never seen myself as wholly at odds with Rawlsian theory. I simply think of it as a different kind of activity than the one I am engaged in. It is less sociological, less comparative, less engaged with real-world cases. Yet the people who have been in many respects most influential on my thinking—certainly Jerry Cohen, with whom I talked on a regular basis for many years—were very much part of that political theory world. So I don't feel I abandoned political theory so much as I stopped doing quite the same thing, recognizing that there are different sets of questions. There's a need for thinking harder about how exactly to formulate our ideals. But there's always a question, even if you have a well-defined philosophical view, there's still a question of 'How are you going to implement that? How are you going to make it matter to people? How are you going to bring it into play?' So they are different activities, and I don't do both. Nonetheless, the 'implementation question' does raise challenges for those who practice

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[21] See Philp, _Political Conduct_, Introduction and chs. 1-3; 'Political Theory and the Evaluation of Political Conduct'; 'What is To Be Done?'; 'Realism Without Illusions'; 'The Corruption of Politics'.

[22] Rawls, _A Theory of Justice_ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Part III, 395-588.

[23] Nussbaum, _Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice_ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

ideal theory as to the nature and significance of their project, with respect both to 'utopianism' and to what other people do with their ideas. Clearly, some major ideas in the ideal literature do end up in the political world—but 'levelling up' might be a good example of what can go wrong in that process.

That said, and this is my second point, Part III of *Theory* has some links to a republican tradition of thinking about how to educate virtuous citizenry in order to sustain the norms of a political state, and I've always had some reluctance about that kind of framework. I think it sees the world top-down. The real challenge is for political systems to entrust responsibilities to their populations so people get better at doing these things for themselves. There's a whole tutelary tradition within liberal thought, running throughout the nineteenth century, that says, 'Yes, we must give the people power, yes, they must have the vote, but not until they're properly educated and in a position to exercise it in a responsible manner.' I think that is just refusing to accept that what politics is: that it is a system in which there is always and inevitably the possibility of irresponsibility and conflict. The only way in which people are going to learn how to exercise their political agency responsibly is to be given the tools and the opportunities with which to do so. When you start running things for yourself, you start to see how difficult it is to do lots of things that you want to do. And it seems to me that *that* kind of educational process, by experience, is one that we involve people in less and less today. Local authorities have fewer and fewer powers and responsibilities and are constantly being required to answer to the central government. Yes, these can be chaotic systems. But we need to find ways of working with them, while acknowledging that it is their responsibility.

I believe it was Joseph II of Austria who said, 'everything for the people, but nothing by the people.'

It didn't really work for him, though, did it?

No. Is his mistake comparable to that of the ideal theorist, prescribing political panaceas from a perspective outside the political arena?

I think outside can be fine. One way to do this, which, sounds like a typical old school Oxford program, is to set up a settlement system whereby bright young things can go and provide support for local institutions. The idea is to send people into communities as a resource. But (less old school) those people then need to recognize the importance of working out what is going on before asking how things might then be different. Like going into any new organization, you may bring assets that the organization can't use, doesn't recognize, and so on. To be useful to them, you have to understand how the organization operates, how to work with it in a way that adjusts both of your positions and is consequently beneficial. For communities traumatized by events, or communities attempting to establish new arrangements, I do think having outsiders in to help them work out what to do can be very helpful. But it cannot be a relationship of authority. Which is why it doesn't happen very often. Partly because it's a very uncomfortable position to be in. But unless you engage with people as equals, unless you really try and understand where they're coming from, while also keeping a self-critical eye on your own sense of what is desirable, what is possible, what you want to achieve—unless you manage that balance, you achieve nothing.

Liberalism isn't the only political theory with an uneasiness about the passions and real politics. One implication of Foucault's work, for instance, seems to be that the passions are basically epiphenomena or empty signifiers because human subjectivity is nothing but an artifact of power. But you have been critical of precisely this view of Foucault's in a pair of early articles.[24] Could you explain your objection to Foucault's 'abandonment of the human subject'?[25] Is it possible to take the subject seriously again, after Foucault, in a postmodern context that no longer accepts the idea of the autonomous individual?

I first came across Foucault when I was working on questions related to mental illness and social work, right at the beginning of my career.

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[24] Philp, 'Foucault on Power: A Problem in Radical Translation?' *Political Theory* 11.1 (1983): 29-52; 'Michel Foucault' in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 65-82.
[25] Philp, 'Michel Foucault', 79.

What was powerful about him, I thought, was his sense of discursive formation as a process that frames how the agent sees the world. He also understood how the categories of thought themselves have an influence over us, a power of determinism over which we have very little control. Not unlike Wittgenstein, Foucault wanted us to think about how discursive disagreements draw on an underlying common framework. Power wasn't really introduced into the Foucault corpus until the mid-1970s, with *Surveiller et punir* (1975)*,* though there were a couple of earlier essays.[26] There was then quite a steady progression, until about the 80s, in terms of how he thought about it. Of course, we all translated 'power' as 'capacity'. But he was using it not as *puissance* but as *pouvoir*. That's an important distinction in French, as Morriss has pointed out in his book on power.[27] We read power—I think everybody tended to read it—as a capacity, whereas Foucault was really talking about it as more interstitial, more agential. That only becomes clear, I think, in a later essay on agency and power.[28]

But it means that he never said anything about structural in-equalities of access to resources. Which is surely quite an import-ant consideration. What he was interested in is a more Goffmanite picture[29] of the way in which interrelationships between individuals produce moments of tension and resistance, moments of agen-cy and so on, and how these instances are integrated by forms of knowledge into more systematic patterns of domination. Quite how that then fits with his earlier work on the subject is a bit less clear. In a Goffmanite world, agency is always potentially problematic; how far you can act in ways that don't simply comply with the expecta-tions of others is limited. And, in a sense, that's the Foucaultian pic-ture of the world, though Foucault's was more sophisticated, being committed to a view of the way in which discourse, particularly the discourses of the human sciences, frame sets of relationships so that administrative decisions about sanity and insanity, healthy and

[26] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977 [1975]). See also his earlier, *L'ordre du dicours* (Paris, Gallimard, 1970), trans. and rpt. in *Social Science Information* 10.2 (1971): 7-24.

[27] Peter Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) xvi-xvii.

[28] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power' in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 3, *Power*, ed. J. Faubion (London: Penguin, 1994), 326-348.

[29] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (New Work: Doubleday, 1959); *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

unhealthy, and so on, end up determining outcomes for people. All that seems to me very powerful. But Foucault himself, I think, was often very wittily sceptical about whether he'd dispensed with the subject, constantly saying 'don't try and stick me in a pigeon hole'. Yet that is surely what discursive formations do.

A better way of understanding what Foucault was doing is to set aside the concept of power and read him as telling stories that make it difficult for us to live in quite the world we think we are living in. They compromise our understanding of the emergence of liberal political order in relation to the welfare state, the prison system, and so on. These things simply don't work from a Foucaultian perspective, and what he's trying to do is tell us stories in which we can perceive with brutal clarity that these systems cannot be what they purport to be—objective, impartial, humanitarian, etc. If the standard narrative can't be right, then he has succeeded. He's used his genealogy of the institutions and practices to shift our perspective.

That seems to me a plausible reading of what he's trying to do, and a plausible reading of his effectiveness. It really has been an earth-shifting moment for many people to discover the history of colonialism in recent years. The University of London project, for example, shows how extensively many of our social and political elite were compensated for freeing their slaves in the political solution brokered in the 1830s.[30] Once you see that, we are never going to think the same about our society. That's not dissimilar to Foucault's strategy. Just as we now expect Germans to ask if their wealth was derived from labour camps, and if so, then we think they have a responsibility to do something about it, so too narratives of the past discomfort and reorder other aspects of contemporary politics. In a sense that's what Foucault was aiming for—to tell us a story about the emergence of the modern state that makes us uncomfortable. And for many people, that's quite liberating.

Can genealogical critique be politically crippling, though? There's a trend right now to interpret Foucault in relation to neoliberalism, not only on account of his late interest in ordo-liberal thinkers and California counterculture, but also the theoretical connection that can be drawn to his attitudes toward

[30] See: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/details/.

rights, revolution, and the modern state. These critics, coming from a left-wing socialist point of view, object that Foucault leaves us no agency to effect social justice, overcome class oppression, or rectify inequality.[31] You seem to see that as one possible reading of Foucault, but ultimately a misreading.

It's certainly not how I would read him. I think he found certain aspects of American liberalism liberatory, if that's the right word, particularly in relation to sexuality. And that sort of transformed his sense of himself. But we shouldn't confuse that personal story with the overall project. The overall project, I think, was to ask really serious questions about the worldviews we get trapped in, what they end up doing to people, and how we can then respond to those worldviews so that they stop doing those things to those people. You might want to take it in a liberatory, 'let everything hang out' sort of direction, that's one possible response. But it doesn't seem to me that the project requires it.

There's a manuscript of John Locke's in which he writes that 'the original and foundation of all Law is dependency. … If man were independent he could have no law but his own will, no end but himself. He would be a god to himself and the satisfaction of his own will the sole measure and end of all his actions.'[32] John Dunn quotes it at the beginning of his book on Locke.[33] But I think Locke was wrong. Just as Foucault would be wrong, *if* he thought that the only way to live out his perspective was for everybody to take a liberatory approach. I think if there's no metaphysical order, then one's responsibilities are bigger. You have to try and build things, you have to try and make stuff happen, you have to use politics to put together arrangements that avoid the worst excesses of the existing system and begin to produce certain solutions for people. You don't escape responsibilities; the responsibilities are there and cannot be shifted to some higher power. Why do we have those responsibilities? Because we want to shape the world. The shaping response is

[31] Daniel Zamora & Michael C. Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016); Mitchell Dean & Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso, 2021).

[32] Locke, 'Law' in *Political Essays*, ed. M. Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 328-329.

[33] Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1.

an instinct for, in the broadest sense, 'world-creation'. It's not that I go around thinking of the world in Foucaultian terms at some times, political terms at other times; rather, there is a lot we can learn from Foucault, *and* there are constructive things we can do to respond to concerns he raises for us and enables us to raise for ourselves.

In many respects Foucault is simply an exponent of a long French tradition. Take the following comment: 'The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.' That's Tocqueville.[34] But it is really a Foucaultian kind of thought. It's very much in keeping with a French tradition, that goes a long way back, of thinking about how the individual and the agent is constructed within a social world. It's remarkable that you can find, a hundred, a hundred and fifty years before Foucault, material that sounds very, very similar. The French and English think differently, but the French are worth thinking with!

You teach an early modern history course at Warwick, 'Individual, Polis and Society', in which students read prominent novels, memoirs, and diaries of the period alongside the canonical works of political thought.[35] What is gained for our understanding of politics and political history from this approach? What role do you think literature should play in teaching and studying the history of political thought?

I don't think I am teaching the history of political thought so much as teaching how people thought in this period, roughly 1650 to 1850: how they thought about the individual, how they thought about society, how they thought about politics. Civil society and political economy come in as well. It's a period in which those categories are shifting and changing. And that bigger story can't really be told in

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[34] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. H. Reeve (New York: Knopf, 1945), Vol. 2, pt. 4, c. 6, 337.

[35] A syllabus is available at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/modules/hi2a5>

the absence of a wider framework. We had a session for a number of years on portrait painting, for example, which changes in this period. The way people want themselves portrayed, and how they portray others, definitely shifts. There is a change in how the subject, the *real* subject, is seen; the idea that there *is* a real subject rather than a representation of people's wealth and property. Shifting representation is important, and novels, etc., help add it all up. The course was meant to help people to think a bit outside what has been covered in the history of political thought and to provide a context for it.

This raises question of where you stand in relation to the history of political thought and its methodological factions.

I'm not sure I do it any longer. There are a series of conflicts for me about this. I do think the Cambridge school contributed hugely to our understanding of texts; but they have been less good at the ideas, in that more philosophical sense of enduring conceptions of things. I also think that, taking after Quentin Skinner, they focused very much on the early modern period, but they've been less successful in thinking about the world of politics in the late eighteenth through to the twentieth century. (One major exception is John Dunn, whom I don't see as part of that school so much as a realist *avant la lettre*—or, at least, before the latest iteration.) Istvan Hont, for example, for many years thought the nineteenth century was largely a mistake. And I had some sympathy with that view, but have subsequently recognized its limitations.

The Cambridge model of context is *other texts*. The challenge is what happens when texts are no longer written for a small group of people, whom they know or are aware of, about a limited range of things—and become pieces of work that are meant to engage a wider audience, are produced by a wider range of people, and often several people, at a time when the wider, more popular audience and its activists has no formal role in politics and is only in the process of trying to carve that out. The methodological injunctions fall short of that point. Then you need to start thinking harder about what the texts are, how they work, and how people respond to them. Alternatives to this approach include Michael Freeden on ideologies or, in Germany, Koselleck and conceptual history, which both tend to

place the accent on the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[36] But I'm sceptical of a lot of that material because I think it tends to treat what are historically quite specific moments, even if they last quite a long time, as indicative of the way of ideas relate to the world rather than recognizing that both are actually changing and shifting sands. It's partly my dissatisfaction with these various methodological programs that my recent work has been much less on political thought and much more on how to people try to live some of their commitments in practice.

So what distinguishes your historical work from Cambridge-style contextualism is that it denies the absolute priority of discursive context?

Well, actually, textual context is what they prioritize. Discourse, I think, involves speech. And while we don't have direct access to how people talked to each other, we need to recognize that wider world. In a sense the impulse for lots of the 'Individual, Polis, and Society' course was to think about what peoples' wider world of experience was like, rather than what their textual context is like. And that, I think, is where I am committed to a more open view of what context is; I'm less picky about what counts as appropriate context. More recently, I've become interested in popular polemic and popular culture, and the latter has led me to look at aspects of song, music, dance and so forth. If we think about people's aural worlds (for example) and how they might have influenced the way in which people read themselves and their location in the world, how they conducted themselves in relation to others, we might get a picture of everyday experience that is very different than it is for the modern world.

It's not that I think Cambridge has completely the wrong way of doing it. Two divergent sets of questions arise about what people argue: what do they think they are doing and with what are they engaging, and to what extent and in what ways have they got things right?[37]

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[36] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[37] See Philp, 'Political Theory and History' in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches,* ed D. Leopold & M. Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 2008), 128-149.

For me, the latter remains an interesting question, but I don't think that is a priority for many in the Cambridge school. It is important to me for two reasons: firstly, because sometimes we have to recognize that the way ideas track things in the world, affects people's ability to act and to order their worlds, and affects how they behave in them and what they then say about them. In that sense, there is a need think more holistically about the relationships between intellectual, political, social, and cultural history. It is hard to pull these elements together, but in different ways it was what I was trying to do in *Radical Conduct* and by doing so, to offer a way of thinking about a period in which there was very intense intellectual activity and exchange, which was nonetheless deeply embedded in social, cultural, and emotional experiences and practices that both supported those exchanges and sharply delimited their practical implications.

The second reason to consider whether they have it right, is that we should be thinking harder about our *own* commitments and whether *we* have things right. In a world marked by deep value pluralism and in which we are embedded in social and emotional relationships that move us deeply and tend to frame our commitments, there is nonetheless room for, and an important place for critical reflection on our commitments and the grounds for our beliefs. In a sense, the *Re-imagining Democracy* project that I have run with my colleague Joanna Innes over the last twenty years was driven from the beginning by a concern to avoid taking the ideas of democracy that dominate in the twenty-first century as definitive of what 'democracy' is really about, to ask what people at different times were doing with the term, and to do that in part for its own interest, in part as a way of promoting some critical reflection on the kinds of beliefs and commitments we now hold.[38]

It is true that we haven't quite written *that* book—yet! But another instance of my concern to think critically with respect to beliefs—and indeed—emotions and passions, is an article I wrote on how to think about family responsibilities in relation to care for the

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[38] Joanna Innes & Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); *Re-imagining Democracy in the Mediterranean, 1780-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Eduardo Posada-Carbó, Innes, & Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean 1780-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). See also https://re-imaginingdemocracy.com/.

aged in contemporary settings.[39] If the democracy project aims at a kind of critical questioning of current beliefs, the essay on ageing tries to understand why certain complex social situations are so difficult to manage, how easily they produce resentments and conflicts, and why they are quite so disturbing. I took up the issue with a critical (even quasi-therapeutic) aim of achieving a better understanding and expanded capacity for reflection in relation to what is a major area of concern in most modern societies—one that can be deeply entwined with people's affective and emotional lives. I don't claim that I handled those matters wholly successfully, but I do think they are questions that need asking. And I think our answers need to be historically and contextually informed, but also point beyond exclusively historical explanation, to facilitate critical reflection on the passions and emotions that drive us yet also often disorientate and disturb us. In that sense, that too is a paper about politics.

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[39] Philp, 'Justice, Realism, and Family Care for the Aged', *Social Philosophy & Policy* 23.1-2 (2016): 413-433.