Interviews

Declustering Disadvantage

Professor Jonathan Wolff on his new publication on the nature of being disadvantaged.

A study into political philosophy wouldn't be complete without Jonathan Wolff's broad overview of the subject. Acclaimed for its lucidity of style, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy (1996)* has become a staple on every university library's bookshelves. In this work, the professor from University College London also lays out his own vision on the vexed topic.

In doing so, he asks a number of uncomfortable questions. Why do we have a state? Why are we all allowed to vote? And why does each individual deserve to possess political and civic liberty?

Each insightful enquiry forces the reader to engage in some degree of self-reflection: what is it that's so great about this liberal-democratic 'Western' political ideal? Fortunately, the soul-searching doesn't end in a cynical relativist conclusion. Wolff recognises and lauds the intrinsic values of democracy, such as equality and liberty. These remain intact and superior to other considerations. One should therefore not be lead astray by the claim that a benevolent dictator would operate much more effectively.

In more recent work, Wolff has sought to flesh out his philosophic musings on politics. In particular, he has begun to focus on specific social and moral issues. He was involved in a project for the Nuffield Council on BioEthics on the treatment of animals in scientific research. Several train companies have approached him to analyse the safety of the railway network. On a more general level, he has begun to analyse the foundations and limits of cost-benefit analysis.

A topic of particular interest to him is that of disadvantage. Together with Avner de-Shalit, a political scientist working in the Hebrew University (Israel), he is about to publish a book on the nature of disadvantage. In this publication, he focuses on the way societies can identify and deal with disadvantage amongst their population.

How does one define being disadvantaged?

Although I am trained as a philosopher I'm not terribly interested in issues of definition as such. In the book we – me and my co-author –don't ever say 'our definition of disadvantaged is this'. But what we do say is that any theory of justice should give an account of what it is to be well-off or badly-off. And to be disadvantaged roughly would be to be less well of than you ought to be. We offer a pluralistic view of well-being. Well-being cannot be identified with preference satisfaction, happiness or with possession of resources. You need a much more complicated view which allows for quite a number of different dimensions of wellbeing.

If you're evaluating someone's life, it is necessary to see how they are doing on these different dimensions. Here we follow broadly the capability approach, founded by Sen and Nussbaum. We could equally call it the basic needs approach. The essence of it is that it's pluralistic, which is to say that it incorporates a number of dimensions: lifespan, health, bodily integrity, control over environment, affiliation and a number of other categories, in the first instance relative to how others in your society are doing. There is always a debate between relative and absolute definition of being disadvantaged. In our theory both are included: being towards the bottom of distribution is a disadvantage. But also absolute levels of functioning and capability are relevant.

Hume is sceptical of the merits of long term human-designed projects, given that the nature of human history is that of habit, not of design. One could follow this line by saying that there are always some people who are more disadvantaged than others, given different backgrounds. Is this justified?

I have a certain sympathy for Hume's position here, but there are a couple of things I want to say in response. First, I'm supposing that there is a near-universal consensus that we must give some sort of priority to the worst off. So I'm speaking to people who share that view, rather than trying to convince people.

Second, on a theory of relative disadvantage it may always looks like there must be people at the bottom, even if in terms of absolute disadvantage it's less clear that there must always be disadvantaged people. But what particularly concerns us is the clustering of disadvantage. It is true that there must be someone with worst health, someone with the lowest life expectancy, the worst control over environment, the worst affiliation, the worst enjoyment of leisure – but there doesn't necessarily have to be someone who is worst off in all of these. What worries us is clusters of the disadvantaged. If you think about health, education, income, housing, opportunities for leisure – we see they are

clustered together, in the sense that often the same people do badly in each. Those who suffer from multiple clustering are uncontroversially amongst the least advantaged in society. Though it is inevitable that there must be some people who are worst off in all these respects, it is not inevitable that people are there whose disadvantages are clustered.

We are interested to see how these clusters can be broken. Here we need to understand, through good social science, the causal mechanisms, which lead disadvantages to accumulate. It is a further, and more difficult, question to see how to break them. But this is what justice requires, in the move towards a more equal society.

You also look at people who are very prone to becoming disadvantaged. Could you elaborate on this focus?

An individual's vulnerability to the risk of losing their functionings is one of the things that got us writing this book. There are often many ways in which philosophers fall out of step with real life as we reflect at the more abstract level. But when you think about social policy in the UK, we talk about social security. You pay national insurance and you receive social security benefits. What you're paying for is a type of guarantee that things will never be too bad. It seems odd to say it but the philosophical literature had barely registered this aspect of advantage and disadvantage. Rather it tends to assess people in terms of income, present welfare or standard of living, rather than their ability to sustain that income and level of welfare. We feel that, whatever theory of wellbeing you have, you need to think about people's ability to sustain what they have. People can live very vulnerable lives, even though by some other measure they would not count as disadvantaged. For example, in earlier eras it was quite common for people to be day-labourers, with no security of employment from one day to the next. You may live a whole decade without unemployment, but there still is a very important difference with someone with a fixed contract. We think that this insecurity is a form of disadvantage.

The book has made use of evidence from interviews you conducted with disadvantaged people and those who look after them. Is there a risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in the sense that evidence is used to confirm preconceived ideas?

We conducted interviews with disadvantaged people, their care workers and other professionals in service provision. There is indeed a real danger of circularity: if you want to know what disadvantage is, you identify the 'right' people and ask them, leading to your 'discovery' of the nature of disadvantage. There will be a type of circularity there.

We proceeded in a slightly different way. We began with theoretical account which we discussed with colleagues, and then thought about in relation to our own experience. Like other philosophers our position was rather privileged, there are certain forms of disadvantage that don't immediately come to mind. However I have spent most of my adult life living in south-east London, in fairly deprived areas, and in an informal way have come to understand some aspects of disadvantage which are not always so obvious. For example, I know people who would routinely break the law every day; not because they were criminals or because they were destitute. Rather they just didn't have money for lawful means to do what they thought they ought to be able to do as modern citizens: buy their grandchildren Christmas presents, go out once or twice a week. So they bought stolen goods in the pub, did cash in hands jobs and didn't insure their car or pay all their taxes. This was a normal part of their life.

We added one of our categories of functioning in 'being able to live life without breaking law', as part of a desirable and flourishing human life. As far as I know we were the first to mention this as a component of wellbeing.

In our interviews we took our theory a step further; we tried to see what we were missing. We were very worried about any philosophical bias we may have. What we found was that disadvantaged people have concerns we didn't have a lack of concerns where philosophical theory tells them they should. We found, for example, that a lot of people felt it was very important to communicate in the native language of a country. Although they get interpreters and translated document, if you don't speak official language you are held back in many ways. What one of our interviewees called "verbal independence", not being dependent on a third party to translate things, is therefore important. There is no reasons why philosophy shouldn't come up with that, but no one seems to have done so.

We had also initially inherited the category of "practical reason" from Nussbaum. The people we interviewed rather laughed at this. Being able to plan out life according to conception of the good is not a high priority. What they wanted was to get enough money to pay rent and buy the food. The idea of having a general plan to their life seems extravagant. This doesn't rule out wanting to save for a holiday or whatever, but plans tended to be rather small scale. So we came up with interesting different perspectives. But the point wasn't to confirm what we thought, but to spot things we missed. Nevertheless we didn't think we had proven something by conducting these interviews. We obtained a lot of qualitative material but it is not statistically significant. For us it was just new raw material to work with.

The clusters you are forming are very detailed. Does this not risk your theory loosing consensual support?

The theory does move away from its original consensual starting point, which is the idea that the government should take steps so that lives of worst off will be improved. We develop this in a way that differs from many other people both on the left and right. The difference concerns not so much clustering and the causal mechanisms of clustering, but rather how to understand the notion of overcoming disadvantage in terms of declustering disadvantage. A lot of people both on the right and left are prepared to accept some priority to worst off. Take Rawls' very radical maximin principle: make the worst off as well off as possible. This allows for inequalities if it improves the situation of worst off.

Many people on the right have adopted a similar point of justifying tax-cutting for the rich. This was part of Margaret Thatcher's argument: high taxes under the Labour government stifled innovation. There were fewer jobs and opportunities, which was bad for the poor. Therefore cutting tax for richest makes everyone better off. If economies get more prosperous, then worst off become better off. Justice is served when the prospects of the worst off improve. We find this problematic because it is consistent with gaps between rich and poor getting bigger and people staying in same privileged position. This form of priority to the poor could be consistent with class-divided society. We depart from the right in that we think class-divided society is one of the problems. Clusters of privilege need to be broken up. Someone has to have the worst education – but why do they also need to have the worst health and holidays? You can do badly in one dimension, but better in others. So yes, we recommend steps that will make life less comfortable for people at the top, and in this way we accept that we have departed from the consensus with which we began.

Nozick argued that there is a trade-off between one's needs and natural rights. He felt the latter should take priority. How would you argue against him?

Nozick doesn't think there is any role for the state other than facilitating individual transactions. We don't actually use the concept of 'rights' at any point in the manuscript. But of course we believe people should have rights to free association, speech, political affiliation and so on. We would accept something like Rawls's liberty principle. But in terms of a right to property, a right to education and so on, we just didn't think these were helpful terms to use. What we're interested in is people's access to functionings. It doesn't help very much to say

that whether they have natural right to one thing or another. We cannot fulfil all of them, as society does not have sufficient resources to give adequate levels of functioning in every respect.

What is the most effective way of 'declustering' society?

Everything in the book is premised on the view that we have no alternative in social policy but to start from where we are. The idea that we can somehow imagine an outcome and then drag society there is utterly unrealistic. So have to start off by thinking about how we are doing now.

One of the problems we see at the heart of social policy is that action is delegated to agencies and authorities that tend only to have their own goals in view. People in health service care lot about health, and much less about anything else. Unfortunately the libertarian tradition on this point is quite right: government action has negative externalities. Friedman said that very well meaning policies can have bad consequences that it doesn't take into account. One example is quite well-known, namely the policy of slum clearance in the UK in the 60s. There were communities of people living in unsanitary housing conditions, basically horrible places to live. Many were evicted from these council houses and rehoused in tower blocks. The tower blocks were great on an architect's draw-ing board: warm, dry, with central heating and so on. But insufficient attention was given to the consequences of moving people away from areas they knew, and also to how people actually relate to housing and the street they live in. Walking down the street to the shops and passing people you know is a different experience from going down the lift and seeing no one else but shopkeeper. A very well-meaning policy addresses one form of being disadvantaged, but makes other things much worse by breaking up communities. It sounds rather banal but policy makers should therefore take into account the total effects of their actions. The particular agencies should consider doing things which inefficient in the terms of their own goals, but more efficient all things considered. Housing authorities should be encouraged to look at the further impact of one type of housing rather than another. Maybe they have to opt for a more expensive option with a lot of spillover benefits.

What in your analysis is the role of the voluntary sector?

We don't dwell on this very much in book, but I think this is an important point, however. In the traditional way of thinking about the organisation of society, we tend to think about it in terms of either the state or the market. If anything is needed, it is the role of government or free market. But as you imply, another

area exists, namely the voluntary sector. It's an ambiguous term. It could refer to the charitable sector: people out of the goodness of their heart do things for others. But we need also to think about the realm of voluntary associations, where people work for themselves and for others, rather than just for others.

Take the example of the internet. Although government and companies use the internet, the vast majority of pages are pages put up by people just because want to. Perhaps they are hoping to hear from others who are just as interested in model railway or left-handed bass guitars. They didn't do it for money or because they were told to – but because they find it valuable. Chess clubs, history associations, football on Sunday are all ways in which we organise ourselves in a voluntary fashion. For many people this is what gives them most satisfaction in their lives.

How does this work relate to recent political philosophy?

Our work is inspired by Sen and Rawls and therefore builds on the work of other. The main innovation I think is methodological. When political philosophers do applied political philosophy they have tended to produce their theories and work out how these theories can be applied in practice. What we've done is to take a detailed look at actual social policy, and we looked at areas of social policy where policies seemed to be relatively successful, and try to relate them to philosophical thinking, and being prepared to adjust the theory in the light of what we have learnt from policy.

An example is disability. In most of the philosophical literature, disability is regarded a medical problem. It should be addressed by giving disabled people more money. However if you look at the literature on social studies the medical model is considered highly reactionary, and transfers of money are not the main answer. Disability is a matter of the interaction between a person's body and the world in which they live., and giving disabled people more money is only part of what needs to be done. Of course disabled people do get money from the state because they have expensive needs, but other policies involve changing building codes and social attitudes. Some critics claim that this is political correctness gone mad. But on the whole the great majority of people see the point and justification of these policies.

Acceptable social policies should be consistent with, even flow from, from the best philosophical theories, but by and large they don't. We need to change our theory, so it entails the things in the world which we think are good policies. Therefore in this book our innovation is not just to look at policy areas, but use them as a way of enriching philosophical theory. For ex-

ample, the idea of risk is a new concept. Theorists in social policy are in some respects theoretically more sophisticated than philosophy, but haven't formulated their points systematically enough. They are therefore not so good at setting priorities. We need a sort of virtuous partnership between policy and philosophy here. Policy should inform philosophical theory, and philosophical theory can then help determine priorities in social policy.

Our Bodies, Our Organs - Ourselves?

Cecil Fabre on her recent book: *Whose Body is it Anyway? Justice and the Integrity of the Person:* Oxford University Press 2006.

Whose **Body is it Anyway?** **is in many respects a neat, complicated web of ideas.** **You establish philosophical connections between a number of varied and polemical issues pertaining to the contents and possible marketability of the human body, such as the confiscation of cadaveric organs, the right to rent one's womb as a surrogate mother, and the right to sell and purchase sexual services.**

Did you begin to work on this book with strong intuitions about

Arthur Kreuzer

the meaning of our bodies, in terms of how we ought to and do relate to them, and the sorts of freedoms that we ought to be able to exercise over them? Or, on the contrary, did your views on the nature and justice of each of these controversial practices help you to determine who, at least in those cases, ought to have control over our bodies?

I did not have strong intuitions, when I started, about the meaning of our bodies. The only strong view I had, really, was the view that once people are dead, their organs should be made available to those in need, irrespective of their (antemortem) wishes or of the views expressed by their next-of-kin. I have held that view for as long as I can remember. But I came to articulate a more systematic view of our relationship to our body only later, by trying to justify confiscation, commercialisation, and so on.

Why do you consider body parts to be fungible resources?

Because, as they are, right now, constitutive of our body in its entirety, they do not have value above and beyond what they enable us to do. And in so far as, for any specific body part, it is true that any other similar body part can do exactly the same thing, they are fungible. In other words, I need a kidney, not the kidney which happens to be located in