

AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN WOLFF

JONATHAN BENN

JONATHAN Wolff is a Professor of Philosophy at UCL. His work has been predominantly focused on distributive justice with a keen interest in the relationship between political theory and public policy. He is a member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Nuffield Council Working Party on Personalised Healthcare. Previously, he has been a member of the Gambling Review Body, the Academy of Medical Sciences Working Party on Brain Science and Addiction, and the Nuffield Council Working Party on the Ethics of Research Involving Animals.

Jonathan Benn: *As a student at university, what was the initial attraction that made you specifically want to focus on doing political philosophy as opposed to specialising in other areas of philosophy?*

Jonathan Wolff: I don't know that I ever consciously made that decision. When I was an undergraduate I thought I was probably more interested in philosophy of science or aesthetics. But I think probably one of the main reasons was that when I was an undergraduate here at UCL, Gerald Cohen was one of the lecturers here and he was doing extremely interesting work. He was, at that time, already regarded as one of the leading Marxist thinkers in the world. And I thought it would be worth taking the opportunity

to study with someone who is at the top of their field, which is what I did.

JB: *You are very interested in the thinking and writings of Karl Marx. Why do you think that Karl Marx is still relevant to political philosophy today?*

JW: I'm not sure he's relevant to political philosophy as it's done in the journals at the moment. So if I see someone trying to take a 'Marxist stand' on some issue being discussed in political philosophy today, it's normally not very convincing. But I do think that Marx is worth studying for a couple of reasons. One is that he's just an incredibly interesting person to both read and to think about. So it's quite surprising that people always ask me "Why is Marx relevant today?" when they rarely ask why other philosophers like Leibniz or Augustine are relevant today. But you don't expect that it's only worth reading Leibniz or Augustine if you can find points of relevance because it is the interest of penetrating the ideas themselves which is worth studying. Secondly, I do think that no one has bettered Marx's criticisms of capitalism, not that I think he had anything to say about what we should do instead. But in terms of pointing out the problems and difficulties with capitalism, I think Marx is the best critic. But in contemporary political philosophy, the debate of "Capitalism: for or against?" isn't really a topic anymore.

JB: *Some people hold the view that philosophy is primarily an activity that should focus on theorising from afar, that is to say, leave the questions relating to how a theory could be practically implemented to policy-makers in other fields. In respect of political philosophy, to what extent do you agree/disagree with this view?*

JW: Well I'm not very keen on legislating the aim of philosophy by telling people what they should do and what they shouldn't do. I think there's room for all sorts of activities within philosophy. But I think there is a mistake that people make - and it's a mistake I've

made myself - which is to think, that, what political theory ought to do is produce a theory of some sort and then leave it up to policy makers to implement that theory as if what one has done is create a type of ideal legislation and the world has to change itself to meet that. I came to see after working on public policy committees, that probably no philosophical theory would give you sensible recommendations if you just tried to implement it as it is.

I mean take something like Mill's Liberty Principle, which we teach undergraduate students and everyone in philosophy thinks, broadly speaking, is correct - the only reason for interfering with the liberty of any individual is to prevent harm to others, and that is a sufficient warrant. Well that's a very stirring principle and it would be a good thing to have on a t-shirt, but if you actually try to apply that to the real world, it would rule out much of the legislation that we have because we just naturally think that governments are there to look after us, not just to protect us from harming other people. So, for example, one of the first things policy areas that I looked at was gambling law. Now if you apply Mill's Liberty Principle to gambling, then there should be casinos on every high street. You ought to be able to use your credit card to slot into a slot machine and drain it to your credit limit and so on because, after all, all you are doing is harming yourself. But we think that some people's judgements aren't to be always trusted; they fall into temptation, they're not always rational, they're not always a reasonable judge of their own best interests. And this is similar to Hume's view that we have governments pretty much to protect us from ourselves. But if you believe Hume, then you don't believe in Mill's Liberty Principle. But we like to think that we believe Mill's Liberty Principle. So I think it is only by looking at the real world that you can actually see whether you believe the theory you claim to believe. And so you do need much more of a connection between ideal theory or philosophical theory and the real world to see that, "Actually, I think most philosophical theory is not something that could be implemented." And so, in my view, the belief that philosophers should just formu-

late political theories and then leave it for someone else to implement them is just completely wrong.

JB: *In light of this last answer, where do you stand in the debate between ideal theory and non-ideal theory?*

JW: The type of non-ideal theory I've done is very philosophically unedifying. So I've looked at gambling law, the regulation of drugs, the regulation of railway safety and all sorts of public policy issues that - with the exception of regulation of drugs - philosophers have either tended not to find very interesting, or it just hasn't occurred to them that it could even be a topic. For example, the regulation of public safety is an issue that very few philosophers have written about. Another area I have looked at is the ethics of animal experimentation, which obviously has been a very big public issue in this country as well as a philosophical issue. If you look at the philosophical literature, there are some very clear and striking theories about the proper moral treatment of animals by human beings.

Peter Singer, for example, is the most famous person to argue that all animals are equal. If you believe Singer, then what we routinely do within laboratories is worse than concentration camps, and that we have a moral imperative not just to try to make some changes, but that we ought to really be closing them all down. In fact, we're all huge moral cowards for not taking arms against animal laboratories because on his view, it would be like tolerating concentration camps in one's own country. So suppose you believe that view and that you are also sitting on the type of committee that I sometimes sit on, where you are asked to make recommendations in respect of a certain issue of public interest. In full moral conscience, you would have to recommend that we close everything down! But if you did that, then this would be a way of just making sure no one asks you again for your opinion because that is not, at the moment, a practical option. All we can do at the moment is recommend small changes. So we might say a certain type of experiment should not

be done anymore like test cosmetics on animals for example. But this all sounds very conservative because of its apparent status quo bias. So one of the things that I've been trying to think about lately is, given this status quo bias, how is large a change is ever possible?

In the UK, we made quite a number of large changes in the 1960s. We got rid of the death penalty, homosexuality was legalized, abortion became much easier or legal in some cases. So we did make a huge number of beneficial changes during this period. But how is that possible given the bias of the status quo? So I have now come around to the view that you need to distinguish 'status quo regulations' from the 'status quo values' that people have. This is because public opinion can be severely out of joint with current regulations, which is why we have committees for they look into that. Now, you will not, of course, get very far if you make recommendations that are totally out of joint with some major current in public opinion. So if you tried to legalize homosexuality in the 1930s, it is probable that it would not have worked. Therefore, the role of ideal theory is, I think, to try and shift the status quo of public opinion so that when if issue comes up for public debate, there becomes a chance of changing things.

So if you go back to Peter Singer, he was arguing for animal liberation for fifteen or twenty years. At the time he did that, there were a lot of horrendous experiments that were being done. There were some purely curiosity-driven experiments that had no medical benefit, which was tantamount to torturing innocent monkeys. Now in his book, it is quite interesting that he doesn't also discuss medical experiments. He only discusses the curiosity-driven ones. This is because he says that the latter are so obviously horrible, that we don't even need to also discuss the medical ones in order to know that we need to change the practices. And although people haven't changed to follow Singer's theory, I think his writing has shifted public opinion because after him came a number of people who shocked the public by writing about how horrible some of these lab experiments are - which then made it possible to make small legislative changes.

So I think that the role of the philosopher and the role of ideal theory can be really important, even in public debates. But you have to understand how the causation works. It is not that the theory will then be implemented, it is that the theory will - in a diluted and trickle-down form - shift public opinion to some degree, and that when public opinion is shifted, it is possible to change regulations or bring in new regulations. So there is a role for ideal theory in terms of its indirect ability to influence practical matters. But I wouldn't want to say that is the only role for ideal theory because I think it's a perfectly respectable way of spending one's time, even if you don't think of it as having any practical applications. After all, if you are working in other areas of philosophy such as the philosophy of time, for instance, you wouldn't say "oh, that's very well, but what are the practical implications?" So why should political philosophy have more to answer for in terms of its practical implications than other areas of philosophy? So to sum up, I think there is 'pure' work to be done that is very valuable and important. Sometimes it will have an accidental spillover into the practical world. Sometimes it will be done in order to have that spillover. But I think there are different things to do in political philosophy without having to say that it should all one form.

JB: *Let us now turn to egalitarianism and how it has been conceptualised in philosophy within the last twenty-thirty years (going back to Ronald Dworkin). You have criticised a lot of the literature during this period for focusing too much on the notion of responsibility at the expense of other important, egalitarian values. Can you tell us a bit more about this concern of yours?*

JW: Yes. So I think there is a historical reason for why Dworkin and people like Gerald Cohen and Richard Arneson have been very interested in issues of responsibility. It is because they were shaken by Robert Nozick's criticisms of equality and the idea that if you believe in equality, you have to somehow subsidise the idle, the lazy and people who refuse to work. And so Dworkin's theory of

equality claimed that you don't have to believe that you should subsidise the idle if you believe in equality, but that you can have a theory of equality that just says we equalise unchosen brute bad luck. It still allows for people to exercise freedom of choice, but it states that if the reason why you are poor is that you voluntarily decided not to work, then we (the government) do not owe you anything in the name of equality. But if you are poor because of brute bad luck, then we do owe you something. So this sounds like a very humane view in a way, because you are not penalising people for things outside of their control. Furthermore, it also looks like an autonomy-respecting view because it allows people to get the benefits of their freely made choices.

So there is a lot that is attractive about it but the thing that worried me was that it seemed to imply things like willingness to work 'tests,' and the signing on for unemployment benefits that was identified as right-wing policy, not left-wing policy. It seemed to be very strange that the leading left-wing theorists were endorsing the punitive welfare policies of Margaret Thatcher's government, that supporters on the left were actively objecting to. So this was a case where the theories seemed to lead to a conclusion that the theorists didn't really want, or at least that leftwing activists didn't want. On the one hand, I found it to be an appealing philosophical theory, but on the other hand it led to public policies that I thought were objectionable.

So when I first wrote about this literature - almost fifteen years ago now - I thought that what one should do is change the theory. What I thought was that this type of 'luck egalitarianism' (as it is often called) was a very good theory of fairness. But I also thought that if you actually tried to implement this kind of fairness, then it has a number of very problematic consequences. What struck me when I was working on this egalitarian debate was that there really appears to be a kind of disposition - it's part of a universal human condition I think - which really wants to catch people who are taking advantage of us i.e. the free-rider. So if people push into a queue,

even if it actually makes no difference to anyone because everyone's going to get on the bus, then we find this to be very bad behaviour and we want stop that.

But the main point that I want to make is that, suppose you agree that Dworkin's theory of fairness is the right theory of equality, what happens when you come to implement it? What you need to do is to have tests that distinguish the deserving poor from the undeserving poor. But the left has been against this since the Poor Laws. They are against the idea that somehow you have to sort people into those who are deserving of your charity and those who are not deserving of your charity. And one of the reasons for this is that, it is actually humiliating to be declared that you are one of the people that's deserving of charity because you cannot support yourself. So I felt that there are cases where this attempt to make sure no one can cheat us has costs, not just for society as a whole, but for the people who are at the very bottom. So these responsibility tests seem to me, to have the effect of making the worst off even worse off by declaring them talentless and therefore humiliating them.

JB: *Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler have written about how egalitarian theories (namely, luck egalitarianism) are often strangely removed from the spirit of the political and social egalitarian movements of the latter half of last century e.g. civil rights movement. In their view, one of the aims of egalitarian justice is to end social oppression or exploitation in society in order to help people stand in a relationship of equality with others. Do you think that this kind of view of equality is correct?*

JW: Okay, so I agree with them. And I found the literature on equality from Dworkin onwards to be very strange. As a political philosopher who was interested in equality, I felt that I should be joining in the debate but I never found myself moved to work out whether I believed in equality of resources, equality of preferences or equality of something else. Before I studied this literature, people would ask me "Are you leftwing?" and I would say "Yes of

course,” and if they’d asked “Do you believe in equality of income?” I would have said “What’s that got to do with anything?” So the way I now see it is that I’m much more interested in a sort of romantic strain of egalitarianism, which tries to argue against the importance of material possessions. Rather, what we should be doing in life is cultivating our talents and our friendships. Of course you need food and drink and enough to have a decent place to live and so on, but material possessions are really just not very important. They are instrumental to other aspects of the good life and, for many people, the good life can be achieved with very few material possessions.

JB: *Do you share this view of equality with many of the great socialist writers of yesteryear?*

Yes. It is an old European socialist view which regrets the materialist turn in life; the emphasis on consumerism, conspicuous consumption and so on. So on this view, material resources are not very important. With a Dworkinian style of equality, however, we have already decided that we have got to share things out equally. The only question is what is it that we are sharing out? Is it money or is it something else? It turns out to be money, roughly speaking. But in order to get to this view, you have to make your mind up on a number of important questions. Are material goods so important that we should make sure everyone has the same amount? Or, are they so unimportant that we should be thinking about other things and not really worrying about the distribution of material goods?

I take the view that material goods are not very important in life, and that we should instead be focusing on cultivating our relationships, talents, ambitions and whatever else one likes to do, that is, as opposed counting up how much you have and making sure it is no more or less than the person next to you. So my reading of Dworkin, he has taken the legal principle of equality before the law (remember he is lawyer as well as a philosopher), and has then asked “What does this mean for economic justice?” So if the government

has to treat people equally, then how should the government share things out? Whereas for the European socialist tradition, it does not start from what the government should do, it starts from the question of what sort of society should we build together? What are the things we want to have in our society? What are the sorts of things we want to encourage? And this is how you start to formulate a conception of the good.

However, conceptions of material goods worth having - for many European socialists - are of a much lower profile. Issues of individual responsibility also take a lower profile. So in that respect, it is tolerant of people and their differences. So if some people do not want to work, you may not understand them but you think, well, they must have their reasons and we have plenty, so why worry too much about it. Now that may all seem very naïve, but it's no more naïve than thinking we are going to be able to equalise incomes in society, and I think it's a very attractive view to work towards.

JB: *So it seems like you are saying that luck egalitarianism is too fetishist in terms of the way it over-focuses on distributing a certain currency of justice. Rather, in your view, thinking about equality requires us to ask questions from a different starting point?*

JW: Yeah. So I think that most of this contemporary egalitarianism goes wrong by thinking that an equal society is a society that distributes something equally, and then we have to find out what that thing is. Whereas I think like Elizabeth Anderson, Samuel Scheffler, Richard Norman, David Miller and Michael Walzer, that, an equal society is one where the people show certain types of regard towards each other, rather than something being distributed equally between them.

JB: *So, in your view, the question of distribution (although important) should obviously take a back seat to other, more fundamental egalitarian concerns? In other words, whatever kind of distribution you have is only relevant in so far as it is instrumental to achieving further egalitarian goals?*

JW: Right. So you need a certain level of income in order to sustain any type of life and it may be - and this is an empirical question - that inequalities of income can destroy other types of goods. So going back to the discussion we had before, it may be that income inequality makes everyone unhealthy. And if that is right, then that would be a good reason for limiting income inequality. Or it could be that it destroys communities. So Richard Tawney writing about pre-war Britain talks about societies in which the ruling classes would just never have encountered the people they were ruling over, other than if they were served in a shop or something like that. They did not go to school with them, nor mix with them. So one of the social benefits that came about as a consequence of the Second World War was got people mixed together much more, and they realised they actually different classes weren't too bad. They actually had more in common than they had realised.

JB: *In your view, how might political philosophy evolve within the next twenty-thirty years? Are there any new methodologies or areas of interest that researchers should further explore if they aren't doing so already?*

JW: Climate change is obviously going to be a big issue. In fact, it already is. The areas of dispute will be questions about the duties of future generations and, bizarrely enough, the discount rate is going to therefore be an area of extreme importance. I predict a certain amount of activity in the journals discussing whether future wellbeing should be discounted, and if not, you get all sorts of paradoxical results. So if you are discounting money but not wellbeing, it turns out you shouldn't actually ever do anything because you can always get more benefit from your money in the future. So we need to understand - and philosophers and economists are not fantastic at this - why there is a discount rate? Is it simply because you could put your money in the bank and get interest on it or are there other reasons for it? So that is one area.

An Interview with Jonathan Wolff

Global Justice has taken off as an issue but maybe not much more is going to be done about that. Another issue that I very much doubt will take off, but I think the great neglected area of political philosophy is the philosophy of local government. After all, if you think about actual service delivery to the public, this is all done via local government. The way the state acts is by giving its money to public bodies such as the NHS, for example. But with social services, the state has no direct role in allocating these services to people because it is all mediated through mechanisms. As political philosophers we've always been interested in what goes on at the cabinet level. But we have shown no interest at all in things like local democracy, local decision making, or whether there is a type of information possessed at the local level which makes much more tailored interventions possible than otherwise at the national level? So I am not quite sure what the philosophical issues would be, but I believe that this is a neglected area.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Special thanks to Ivanka van der Merwe for transcribing the interview in its entirety. You are truly a goddess.

ABOUT LSE

The London School of Economics and Political Science is one of the world's leading research and teaching centres in the social sciences. Situated in the heart of London, its location and academic reputation make it a most exciting place to study.

THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, LOGIC AND SCIENTIFIC METHOD AT LSE

Karl Popper, the founder of the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, moved to the LSE after publishing *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1935), *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944) and *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). Popper was one of the foremost defenders of democratic liberalism in political philosophy, which made the London School of Economics and Political Science a natural home for him. Rational criticism was the cornerstone not only of his political philosophy but also of his views on the nature and practice of the natural and the social sciences. It was through Popper's efforts that falsificationism entered public consciousness as the defining criterion of the nature of science. Both he and his successor Imre Lakatos, who joined the department in 1960, were instrumental in shaping 20th century philosophy of science.

The Department's longstanding reputation in the philosophy of natural science is now matched by its strength in the philosophy of economics and social science, most notably in methodology and rational choice theory and philosophy of public policy. We are com-

mitted to teaching and research that makes a significant difference not only in philosophy and the philosophies of the various sciences, but also in the practice of the sciences themselves—from economics and political science to physics, biology and medicine.

The range of postgraduate masters degrees offered by the Department reflects its strengths: it offers four different MSc programmes, each dedicated to the teaching of one of its particular specialties. The MSc programmes are complemented by a PhD programme which creates an active intellectual environment with students working in philosophy of science, philosophy of physics, philosophy of economics, philosophy and public policy, rational choice and scientific methodology.

ACADEMIC STAFF

Dr Jason McKenzie Alexander, Dr Nick Baigent, Professor Richard Bradley, Professor Luc Bovens, Professor Nancy Cartwright, Dr Franz Dietrich, Dr Roman Frigg, Dr Wulf Gaertner, Professor Christian List, Dr David Makinson, Dr Kristina Musholt, Dr Miklos Redei, Dr Armin Schulz, Dr Katie Steele, Max Steuer, Dr Alex Voorhoeve, Dr Charlotte Werndl, and Professor John Worrall.

EQUALITY STATEMENT

The Department and the School are committed to diversity and equality in education and employment. The Department has a number of exceptionally successful individuals from underrepresented groups, and especially seeks applications from women and minority groups for student, research and faculty positions.

CONTACT INFORMATION

philosophy-dept@lse.ac.uk
www.lse.ac.uk/collections/philosophyLogicAndScientificMethod/

DEGREE PROGRAMMES

3-year Undergraduate Programmes:

- BSc Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method
- BSc Philosophy and Economics
- BSc Politics and Philosophy

12-month Masters Programmes:

- MSc Economics and Philosophy
- MSc Philosophy of Science
- MSc Philosophy and Public Policy
- MSc Philosophy of the Social Sciences

MPhil and PhD programme

MSC DEGREES

We will consider applicants who will have finished a Bachelor degree in any discipline with sufficiently strong results (for UK applicants, Upper Second or better) in any discipline and who have a considered interest in the area covered by the MSc.

The MSc Economics and Philosophy

Taught jointly by two internationally respected departments at LSE,

this degree is unique in offering students the opportunity both to further their studies in economics and to acquire a deeper understanding of the nature and significance of its methods, normative implications, and conceptual foundations. The degree offers a good preparation for doctoral research in both economics and the philosophy of economics and the social sciences, as well as for employment in such fields as financial and economic journalism, consulting and policy formulation. Applicants must have a strong undergraduate training in economics.

The MSc Philosophy of Science

This degree attracts primarily two types of students: those with first degrees in a science who would like to study the methods and foundations of science, and those with first degrees in philosophy who would like to specialise more in philosophy of science. As well as further developing the virtues of clear thinking, analytical argument and appreciation of the rules of evidence that are so useful in a range of high-level occupations, the course provides a solid foundation for doctoral work

in the philosophy of science and related fields, and for employment in such fields as science administration.

The MSc Philosophy and Public Policy

Taught at an institution which is a major centre for national and international public policy debates, this degree provides a foundation in the conceptual and normative questions underlying public policy formulation. It prepares you for policy-oriented careers in inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as for Ph.D. work in philosophy or related disciplines. It is distinctive in three ways. First, it is resolutely interdisciplinary. We take philosophical analysis to be continuous with scientific approaches to the study of political, social and economic problems. Second, it offers a thorough background in the classics of moral and political theory, which students learn to apply to issues in public policy. Third, students have access to a wealth of courses and resources at the Philosophy Department and LSE generally that are relevant for the philo-

sophical analysis of public policy.

The MSc Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Taught by a department recognized as one of the best in the world for Philosophy of Social Science, this degree offers students the opportunity to further their study in either the philosophy of social science or the philosophy of economics, in addition to studying one course selected from the many social science offerings at the LSE. Some of the questions that will be addressed during your studies in the MSc in Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Are the social sciences truly scientific? Are they objective? What accounts for the diversity of methods in the social sciences (and lack of agreement as to which ones ought to be followed)? Do evolutionary explanations of social phenomena provide an accurate account of why societies are the way they are, or are such explanations merely unverifiable just-so stories? What relations exist among rationality, choice, action, and interpretation?