

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Book Review

Charles Sherover, *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good: An Essay in Public Philosophy*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). xiii + 314 pp.; cloth \$59.50, paper \$19.50

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Contemporary political life, marked by conflicting claims to entitlement, requires clear normative principles for evaluating these claims. Yet few contemporary philosophers outside the province of the Left have advanced a systematically worked out, comprehensive view of our social being rigorous enough to function as an ontological framework for making such evaluations. Professor Sherover goes far in accomplishing this. *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good* is a carefully conceived and tightly argued work and may well be foundational for current political debates.

Drawing from the phenomenological and pragmatic traditions, Sherover presents an "authentic descriptive understanding" of our actual social being centered on what he calls the "three principles of polity," i.e., the existential categories of our actual social life. This descriptive task comprises the first section of the book. The second part sets out some of the normative criteria which flow from these categories, and a last section, "The Discipline of Freedom," takes up specific issues in contemporary public policy, including an agenda to be discharged and an appropriate method to be used for evaluating social programs if we are genuinely to pursue a common good.

Sherover puts forth three categories which he takes to be constitutive of our social being: membership, temporality, and freedom. These are derived in several ways: as a thoughtful appropriation from our political heritage as grounded in the Greeks, through a phenomenological, i.e., rigorously descriptive, approach to ordinary experience, and dialectically as a transcendental analysis of those structures grounding the very possibility of social being itself. Thus the book founds the notion of membership, for example, on an Aristotelian conception of the polis and the primacy of the social, on the notion of individual identity as requiring linguistic community and social membership, and on a Roycean notion of self-consciousness as an emergent from the social whole. In each case, these multiple perspectives are mutually reinforcing and add up to a carefully elaborated notion of our social being.

Assuming for the moment that these categories are both comprehensive and exhaustive, they provide the basis for inferring a clear set of normative guidelines for deciding questions of power, organization, and procedure in a free society. Sherover's reasoning moves here from the existential notion of membership to the political one of citizenship, from temporality to the power to control time, i.e., governance, and from freedom to the activities flowing from it, primary among these being livelihood. His discussion of the first of these political concepts, citizenship, is, in fact, very rich, entailing a whole series of substantive conclusions about equality and rights which can be used as a measure for weighing the legitimacy of various contemporary political claims. Sherover argues for a Burkean notion of "prescriptive rights," as emended by Thomas Hill Green, reminding the reader that there is a tradition of positive rights, i.e., those enabling protections which provide the means by which a society takes its members as citizens, within the conservative tradition which stands between the Lockean notion of abstract natural rights and the centralization of power marking the paternalistic state.

Given the second of his three principles of polity, Sherover is able to infer the legitimacy and necessity of republican government as it developed from Machiavelli and Montesquieu through *The Federalist*. Since time, conceived both ontically as a fact of experience and transcendently as the ground for the construction of all meaningful experience, is a constitutive element of our social being, the best government is one which allows the greatest openness toward the future and the greatest control of time to its citizens. Given a realistic conception of power, the pluralization of centers of power is the best way to secure and protect such openness and what Madison called the diverse "faculties of men." Indeed, our form of pluralism which checks even the possibility of legislative dominance through which a majority can move to complete power, becomes virtually a moral imperative for political life.

Finally, the three principles of polity generate a defense of a commercial economy functioning by means of the free market but one in which government can interfere as the "guarantor of the general interest" along the lines conceived by Hamilton. The efficacy of the dispersion of property within the framework of capitalism provides the empirical verification for Sherover's conceptual view, reinforcing the notion of the primacy of pluralism already made in the chapter on governance.

Given the assumption that the three principles of polity are sufficient for characterizing our social being, Sherover's arguments in the second section of his book are tight and well founded. It may be that these do not, by themselves, account for man's full socialness, however. If no other, the notion of social labor might have to be considered—labor seen not simply as an area left over for individual pursuit once social life is constituted but labor as essentially constitutive of our social being itself.

The fact that labor is conceptualized as a residual and individual activity

takes its toll on the book's overall argument. For in the course of his work, Sherover refers on a number of occasions to the fact that his analysis must "faithfully" speak to our actual social experience, including the actual kinds of personal lives that an organized society permits and encourages. I would have expected the book to undertake such a concrete analysis at some point, if in no other place, in the section on "Livelihood." Unfortunately this chapter does not, I think, "faithfully" speak to our actual experience. Rather it veers off in the direction of abstract exhortations to free enterprise. As a result, Sherover's argument remains most compelling when the threat to freedom is posited in its starkest terms, namely a planned society with a centralized monopoly of power and authority. Sherover's initial categories allow this discrimination very well. However, they may be inadequate for catching the more subtle but nonetheless serious deformations of freedom arising from, among other places, the free market itself. It would be essential then to offer or at least to refer to a physiognomy of the contemporary soul, for the concrete historical instantiation of Sherover's categories is, itself, the measure of just how well we really are nourishing the life of freedom and the notion of a common good.

It is precisely because Sherover eschews the tradition of atomistic liberalism and takes the notion of the common good as central, that some more concrete analysis of the structures which form and support it is warranted. He seems to speak as if these structures are self-developing: "A free economic order has, indeed, increasingly provided the material basis for moral or virtuous behavior and for a social commitment to individual happiness consonant with responsible social life" (p. 220). And in a footnote in his chapter on livelihood, he assumes, with Michael Novak, that we can take as a given a moral-cultural system to restrain and check the economic system without noting how the market can erode the valuational systems counted on for its restraint.

Even if we assume the more optimistic picture, a society of individuals with decent, even actively sympathetic impulses, we still must address the question of how these individual affects can be formed into a public will to discharge the political agenda Sherover sets out. Thus there seems to be an omission in his analysis, even if we assume that the structures of consciousness and our affective life are such that there is a substratum of feeling or virtue to be mobilized. Certainly the issue becomes even more problematic if we take to heart Allan Bloom's description of contemporary interiority, its insularity and trivialization of feelings and ideas, summed up in his telling phrase, "the dreariness of the contemporary family's spiritual landscape."

A similar point is raised by James Miller. Commenting on Arendt's *On Revolution*, Miller notes:

For might not contentment with civil liberties, which protect the private pursuit of happiness, slacken the thirst for public freedom? Might not the very perfection of the governmental mechanism breed apathy, and create the conditions for a retreat

into those insular concerns that have become the image of “happiness” in America? Have not the generous circumstances attending the American experiment actually helped generate a fatal vacillation between an active commitment to freedom and the passive enjoyment of prosperity? . . . Has not America become the perfect model of a two-party plutocracy where (and directly quoting from Arendt) “public happiness and public freedom have become the privilege of the few”?’¹

And from Arendt herself:

It was precisely because of the enormous weight of the Constitution and of the experiences in founding a new body politic, that the failure to incorporate the townships and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity in the country, amounted to a death sentence for them. Paradoxical as it may sound, it was under the impact of the Revolution that the revolutionary spirit in this country began to wither away, and it was the Constitution itself, this greatest achievement of the American people, which eventually cheated them of their proudest possession.²

Certainly an analogous point can be made about the common good. Political life, in its highest sense, requires acting within the human community, an act, as Arendt points out, of self-revelation requiring courage and faith. Yet even if we take a less heroic and more modest view of politics as the institutionalization of procedures for persuasion and mutual accommodation, the structures of individual consciousness and social life must exist to make these possible as well. What institutions, organs, rituals, even public spaces are necessary for forming a public will dedicated to freedom and the common good? To assume that these structures exist and to lay out a political philosophy accordingly, may not be sufficient. Rather, the question may be how to theorize the proper organs of will formation consonant with a free society. It is all the more timely for believers in individual freedom to do this, since the attempt to answer this question from the Left has been so resoundingly defeated.

1. James Miller, “The Pathos of Novelty: Hannah Arendt’s Image of Freedom in the Modern World,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of The Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), p. 195.

2. *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), as quoted in Miller, p. 201.