

## Comment

### 'Freedom: Facts and Figments' – A Reply

ALBERT WEALE\*

In a useful note Peter Taylor-Gooby questions the approach adopted by some contributions to the special issue of the *Journal of Social Policy* on the topic of 'Freedom and the Welfare State'. I have no right, even if I were able, to reply on behalf of other contributors, but I should like to take this opportunity of taking up some of the general themes raised by Peter Taylor-Gooby's remarks. In particular, I shall comment on three of his criticisms: (1) a division of labour between political theorists and social administrators sets analytical and empirical work in separate compartments in a way that is harmful to thought about the issues involved; (2) the problem of relativism undermines any attempt to justify one particular evaluation of the welfare state; (3) evaluations of the effect of the welfare state on human freedom which presuppose some criterion of economic advantage involve the extra problem of having to give an account of that criterion.

Turning to the first of these criticisms, I am happy to clear up any misunderstanding that my introductory remarks may have caused. It was not my intention to establish a compartmentalized division of labour between political theorists and social administrators. Indeed my aim was the reverse, namely to show that understanding the problems of freedom in the welfare state meant bringing political theory and social administration together so that each of us comes to use the tools of these two disciplines. That each of us is to a greater or lesser extent a specialist should not preclude us from using the intellectual tools that are appropriate to the job at hand from whatever tradition they emerge.

There may, however, be a stronger claim behind the view that we cannot separate analytical and empirical questions, which I should want to contest. This is the view that in principle we cannot distinguish between the question of what are the various views about freedom which it is logically possible for members of a population to hold and the question of what views are in fact held by those persons. But surely we can distinguish these sorts of question, and often in practice we do so, as when someone devising

\* Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.

a questionnaire decides on how the answers to certain questions are to be precoded. Given that we can separate the question of what views it is logically possible to hold about freedom from the question of what views people do in fact hold, it seems that we are as entitled to be concerned with the logical structure of these possibilities, which has been one traditional concern of political theorists, as to be concerned with the distribution of public opinion.

This brings us to Peter Taylor-Gooby's second criticism, namely the failure to cope with the problem of relativism, since this problem is plainly occasioned by the fact that persons do hold divergent and mutually contradictory views about freedom. I agree entirely with his premiss that the existence of a certain distribution of opinion about the welfare state cannot of itself justify a particular set of organizational and distributional arrangements in the welfare state. But this in turn raises the problem of why any principle couched as a moral or a political claim should weigh with persons against other claims, say those of self-interest. One answer to this problem is simply to circumvent it and cast one's political theory in the hypothetical mode by saying: suppose principles were to count, what would they look like? Another answer, however is to say that the specification of principles and arguments is implicit in any sophisticated notion of what it means to hold a political position. To hold a certain political position as a social agent is not simply to be able to state one's opinions dogmatically, but also to explain the ground of one's opinion in a way that at least tries to make sense of one's position to an opponent. This is not to escape the problem of relativism, since ultimate values may be incompatible, but it is at least to display a potential for acting upon reasons that goes beyond self-interest, and which it may be necessary to exhibit if one is to avoid the charge of bad faith.

The third criticism was that any supposed link between freedom and economic advantage raised questions about how that relationship is to be conceptualized and understood. Here I suspect there is little disagreement of substance, though there may be some disagreement of emphasis. It is an interesting question, to which both Joan Higgins and Peter Jones devoted some space, as to whether all gains in economic advantage are to be counted as gains in freedom or not. But it is perhaps an even more interesting question to understand how views about freedom in the welfare state might be influenced by one's position in the system of economic rewards. To raise the problem of political argument should make us anxious to understand those patterns of political legitimacy that underlie the welfare state, which may themselves be transformed by argument into a new form of political life.