


BOOK REVIEW

Political theory, old and new: on Kei Hiruta's *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* (2021)

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(Received 20 June 2023; accepted 22 June 2023; first published online 18 September 2023)

One of the underlying motifs of Kei Hiruta's *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* is nostalgia for the older style of political philosophy that Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin practiced. Despite their mutual animosity, as well as the mutual animosity among their fans, Arendt and Berlin share several characteristics that differ from common stylistic conventions in the current political theory. These characteristics include their rhetoric, lack of analytical pretension, blurring the boundaries between work for scholarly and general audiences, and fusion of personal experience and theoretical reflection. Hiruta's book vividly illustrates their distinctive styles by elucidating how their writings emerged from their personal experiences. The book demonstrates not only how Arendt and Berlin can be understood as fellow thinkers who tackle similar, if not the same, issues of their time (such as totalitarianism and Zionism) but also how their thought developed through the contexts in which they lived.

Hiruta, however, is cautious (and impartial) enough not to give too much credit to their old style: 'their mode of living and thinking...is not unequivocally superior to the more detached and institutionalised mode of political theorising that has become the norm today' (Hiruta, 2021: 4).¹ Having read Hiruta's lively narratives about the two thinkers and his fair and sober assessment of their ideas, readers might wonder in what direction Hiruta thinks political theory should move; they also might wonder what they can learn from Arendt's and Berlin's style of theorizing. I begin by discussing how Hiruta distinguishes the old style from the current style of theory. I ask whether the distinction is legitimate. Then I consider if readers might learn from Arendt's and Berlin's blending interpretation of classical texts with theoretical analysis, by comparing Hiruta's own approach to Jeffrey Green's 'eclectic political theory'.

Political theory, old and new

Many have noticed the stylistic differences between, on the one hand, Arendt's and Berlin's theorizing and, on the other, contemporary political theory, notably its analytic strand. Yet the differences are often elusive, and attempts to distinguish the two are contentious.

Hiruta differentiates Arendt's and Berlin's style from that of the current scholarship by describing the former as a Weberian vocation, and the latter as being a 'detached and institutionalized' discipline (Hiruta, 2021: 4). In other words, for Arendt and Berlin, political theory is not merely a job that earns an income but a profession for and by which they live. By presenting a model of the intellectual for whom the personal, political, and intellectual indiscernibly coalesce, Hiruta describes the two thinkers as embodying the model of a 'Socratic thinker' who as an 'exemplar' attracts readers (Hiruta, 2021: 202–203). This model of political theorizing, however, risks confusing normative and empirical

¹Hiruta discusses 'political theory' without specifying subcategories. However, I take Hiruta as having in mind mainstream analytic political philosophy, given its hegemonic presence in the discipline. Also, Hiruta uses the terms 'political philosophy' and 'political theory' interchangeably, so here I follow his usage.

analyses. Hiruta points out that current (analytic) political theory excels in distinguishing the two modes of analyses because its institutional procedure guarantees that its practitioners concentrate on formulating normative principles that follow accepted reasoning.

Formulated as such, these distinctions help to make Hiruta's analyses convincing. Because their lives, their political commitment, and their ideas are inseparable, we learn from Hiruta's detailed, sober, and skilful analyses how their respective experiences influenced their similar but different ideas. Also, Hiruta reveals how their experience-infused ideas led them to distort reality. For instance, Berlin was reluctant to acknowledge British imperialism and Arendt was negligent of violent nationalism in the Hungarian revolution (Hiruta, 2021: Ch. 6). Hiruta's discussion of their styles successfully grounds an analytical framework that shows the appeal and shortcomings of their political theories.

However, I suggest this distinction is less compelling once it is scrutinized. First, it is not clear whether confusing normative and empirical analyses belongs to only the older style of theorizing. Certainly, both Arendt and Berlin often engaged in both normative and empirical analyses without distinguishing the two. Hiruta reveals how and in what ways their analyses go astray, when Arendt, for example, distorted the reality of Hungarian revolution to develop her ideal of council. Nonetheless, in her discussion of political judgement, Arendt emphasized the role of impartial spectators, who do not commit political action themselves. Although Arendt did not live up to her ideal in her own writings, her claim of impartiality is not worthless. In addition, current political theory is susceptible to the same confusion. Even if contemporary theorists focus on formulating normative principles, these principles may reflect their empirical contexts, most of which are situated in Western, economically developed, liberal democratic societies.

Second, vocation does not always contradict detachment and institutionalization. Max Weber famously demanded that science (*Wissenschaft*) be practiced as a calling (*Beruf*) and not merely as paid work. In fact, Weber also insisted that such callings should be pursued in disenchanted, rationalized, and routinized activities. Scholars ought to suppress their desire to become intellectual gurus and ought to embrace the expectation that their discoveries and views would be overturned as scholarship progresses (Weber, 2004: 11).

Moreover, might the model of the Socratic exemplar be compatible – to some extent – with institutionalized political philosophy? Current scholarship of political theory may harbour some – or indeed many – ‘specialists without spirit’ (Weber, 2001: 190). But should we expect there to be many – or at least some – specialists with spirit? In fact, recent studies of John Rawls concur that Rawls had a strong sense of vocation.² The vocational political theory and current institutionalized theory may be closer than they initially seem.

Another political theory?

In claiming that the two styles are close, I do not mean to imply that political theory should be methodologically and institutionally unified under mainstream, analytic political philosophy. Let us set aside the dichotomy that Hiruta presents and explore a second commonality between Arendt and Berlin: how they employ intellectual history. In many of their writings, both Arendt and Berlin heavily relied on their interpretations of classic texts, even though Berlin had much contempt for Arendt's understanding of intellectual history. Hiruta by no means fails to notice the importance of classic texts when he distinguishes their orientations from current, ‘undiluted’ intellectual history. (I wish to know what Hiruta's exquisite analysis would reveal about their respective interpretations of canonical texts. However, doing so would require another 300 pages.) Here I turn to their reliance on intellectual history as a key difference with those who currently write analytic political theory.³

²See, for example, Gališanka (2019), Nelson (2019), and Tanaka and Saito (2021).

³Elsewhere, I focus on the importance of classic texts for Arendt and compare her use of such texts with how current political philosophy and empirical political science do so (Otohe, 2020: 249–257).

Jeffrey Green's defence of 'eclectic political theory' is illuminative here (Green, 2015). Against methodologically rigorous analytic political philosophy and intellectual history (namely, the Cambridge School), Green defends an eclectic combination of the interpretation of classic texts and philosophical reflection, a combination he finds in Arendt and Berlin. Green criticizes analytic political philosophy for its ahistorical universalism and narrow focus on normative principles. Analytic political philosophers, Green believes, pay little attention to the constraints of their contexts. Moreover, by focusing on 'what to be done', they ignore a wider range of questions. While the Cambridge School is free from this universalism, Green argues that it falls into historicism. Consequently, it denies perennial questions and rejects any interpretation that is not grounded on the text's historical context.

Against arrogant universalism and narrow historicism, Green maintains that the eclectic approach helps us nurture 'epistemic modesty' and reminds us of the historical constraints that are imposed upon us (Green, 2015: 428). Subscribing to a specific tradition provides us with intellectual resources as well as an awareness of our contextual constraints. Also, the eclectic approach counters the narrow focus of the analytic and historicist approaches insofar as it enables us to pose broader questions. Green argues that classic texts help us to explore these questions not only by conserving perennial questions but also by provoking, problematizing, unsettling, and challenging 'the political and social thinking of contemporary readers' (Green, 2015: 437).

Green's eclectic approach, however, does not embrace a non-institutionalized form of scholarship. Rather, Green defends the legitimacy of the eclectic approach against methodologists' criticisms by appealing to two quasi-institutions – a tradition of canonical texts and the conventions of interpretation and reasoning. Although this tradition and a community of scholars might foreclose new ideas, they usually help sustain eclectic practices.

A difference between Green and Hiruta is that, while Green attempts at reviving Arendt's and Berlin's style of political theorizing, Hiruta points out its limitations, albeit with some nostalgia. Nonetheless, Hiruta does not explicitly pose the old and current styles of theorizing as an either–or question. Moreover, if, as I have argued, the dichotomy between the vocational and the institutional is not exclusive, it should be possible to learn from Arendt's and Berlin's styles.

In fact, Hiruta's book itself seems to offer an example of an alternative approach to political theory. The book combines historical and philosophical analyses. While the underlying tone appears historical in that Hiruta narrates the contexts in which Arendt and Berlin developed their ideas, the book steps out of the narrow confinements of historicism when Hiruta discusses, for example, Arendt's and Berlin's ideas about freedom and Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil'.

Surely, there remain stark differences between Hiruta's and Green's approaches. Given his search for concise historical contexts and meticulous analyses of documents, Hiruta's approach is much closer to the Cambridge School than is Green's eclectic approach. Consequentially, Hiruta's narrative focuses more on popular misinterpretations of Arendt and Berlin than on broadening interpretations of the texts. Hiruta's restrained approach achieves its goals. As I stated earlier, his book vividly shows how Arendt's and Berlin's ideas emerged from the political turmoil of the 20th century and, against popular misinterpretation, how their ideas resonate with each other. Nonetheless, his approach leaves us to wonder what the use – or meaning – of reading Arendt and Berlin is. If, as Hiruta suggests, the two thinkers keep inspiring us, even though we cannot theorize or philosophize like them, how can we learn from them?

Competing interest. None.

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