

THE POLITICS OF PROCRUSTES

Procrustes is a mythical giant with a brutal disregard for individual differences. According to legend, he seized hapless travelers and modified their dimensions so that they might perfectly fit into his bed. Anyone too short was stretched; anyone too large was trimmed to fit. Justice came to Procrustes when the hero Theseus killed him by forcing the villain to sleep in his own bed. Anachronistically, we might say that when Theseus arranged for Procrustes himself to experience this unique brand of hospitality, he misapprehended the giant's willingness to universalize the maxim underlying his practice. As a modern-day Theseus, Antony Flew aims to destroy procrusteanism—not by serving procrustians a lethal dose of their own social panacea but rather by exposing its dark, noxious nature to the daylight of rational scrutiny. Such is the effect of Flew's latest book, *The Politics of Procrustes* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981).

According to procrusteanism's most sacred shibboleth, a society that makes its members more equal is morally better on that count alone. We should not be deceived about the thrust of this, for, as Flew reminds us, what we face here is "not a personal ideal, to be pursued by individual persuasion, and sometimes sacrificial example, but a political or administrative policy, to be enforced by the full power of an ever more extended state machine."

Procrusteanism's most extreme proponents interpret their commitment to making people equal in an unqualified way. Not content with forcible income redistribution in the pursuit of equalizing wealth, some advocate the abolition of that bastion of inequality—the family—while others toy with the desirability of "cognitive equality," a condition in which no one would know more than anyone else. Christopher Jencks, chagrined by the comparatively modest procrustean gains achievable through social engineering, candidly acknowledges that his principle might necessitate a eugenics program. "For a thoroughgoing egalitarian, however, inequality that derives from biology ought to be as repulsive as inequality that derives from early socialization." That such a statement comes from the writings of a respected Harvard professor bears witness to the fact that the idea of a socially controlled breeding program is not a distraction unique to crackpots and fascists.

Ironically, procrusteanism's obsession with comparative considerations can as easily be satisfied by a program that equalizes ignorance as by one that equalizes knowledge. It is a commonplace to think that egalitarianism is one of the pillars of the welfare state, but as Flew points out clearly, to think this is a mistake. Unless superseded by some other principle of obliga-

tion, the procrustean principle is indifferent between equal welfare and equal ill-fare. Supporters of a welfare state are commonly motivated by a concern that no one fall below a certain level of well-being. To accept the idea that no one should be distressed in certain ways involves a commitment to eliminate some distress. A determination that no one should be *unequally* distressed would positively forbid the elimination of a distress if the *balance* of distress were unfavorably affected. Perversely, the determination to eliminate unequal distress could be satisfied by an absolute increase in distress.

It was said of the late football coach Vince Lombardi that he treated all of his players equally—like dogs. For respected intellectuals and politicians to proudly affirm their allegiance to a cardinal principle, putatively moral, that is not offended by such “fair-mindedness” may seem incredible. Thus, Flew spends considerable time showing that the ideal he aims to devastate is not held by straw men. The book is replete with quotations that amply show the “good company” procrusteanism keeps. Some persons quoted appear to shrink from the implications of their principle, some boldly embrace them, while others display an amusing confusion about what their principle requires. James Callaghan, a Labour Party MP who served as British prime minister, was once speaking about a needed dose of painful medicine for his troubled economy. He said, “If this means hardship it has to be fairly shared, and Labour intends that the wealthy who are best able to take the burden should bear more than their fair share of sacrifices.” When served up for the consumption of “true believers,” such shabby reasoning may scarcely occasion a smile. Readers of Flew’s book will undoubtedly get more glee from howlers like this.

Were Flew’s book no more than a well-written ridicule of compulsory equalization of everything, there would be sufficient reason to read it, and those who have no use for the leveling ideal will have a nearly uninterrupted good time in doing so. But there is more benefit to be gained than this.

Professor Flew shows that “equality” is a complex idea sometimes used to make factual claims and at other times to endorse various ideals that are not only distinguishable from but in some cases actually incompatible with each other. Flew spends a chapter elucidating the various ideals of equality and concludes by arguing that the ideals of equality of liberty and equality of opportunity are incompatible with the ideal of equality of condition or result (true procrusteanism).

It used to be fashionable among social critics to begin by asserting that because all persons are in fact equal (in some respect) they ought to be treated equally (by the government?) in certain ways. Even the most ardent supporters of egalitarianism now recognize that this won’t do. Bernard Williams, in his much-discussed article, “The Idea of Equality,” allows that, “when the statement of equality ceases to claim more than is warranted, it rather rapidly reaches the point where it claims less than is in-

teresting."¹ Undaunted, Williams goes on to argue for the existence of an equal right to medical care by way of insisting that it is a "necessary truth" that *the* ground for the receipt of such care is the need for it. Williams thinks that it is the essence of medical practice to make sick people well. His nostrum can be a necessary truth only if there is such a thing as "relevance logic" and there are internal goals for human activities that are distinct from the goals people actually have in pursuing them. Flew adequately shows, as did Robert Nozick (1974), that this can't work.² There can be no goals-of-activities-in-themselves apart from persons whose goals they are.

Some of the best argumentation occurs in the section entitled "The Book of Rawls," acknowledging in its title the near-canonical status of *A Theory of Justice*. Flew argues that justice is essentially a past-oriented concept concerned with persons' deserts and entitlements. Thus, any theory that fails to give a central place to these concepts is not a theory of justice at all. Flew does not evaluate the feature of Rawls's book that made it famous—the "original position." Instead, he focuses on Rawls's reasons for denying desert a central place in the theory.

Rawls argues that desert cannot serve as a ground for basic claims of justice because no one deserves his natural assets and liabilities. The thinking is that for me to deserve anything by virtue of what I do with my talents, I must also deserve my talents. But plainly no one does. So desert cannot be a ground for testing the justice of alternative social arrangements. With characteristic accuracy, Flew points out that the logic of the concept of desert presupposes entitlements that are neither deserved nor undeserved.³ Failure to notice this conceptual point leads Rawls to the mistaken conclusion that, from the perspective of the basic structure of society, no one deserves anything.

Flew's book stands as a forceful statement that a morality grounded in a concern with comparative judgments is unworthy of support. Proper compassion for the poor is not framed in terms of how much less they have than others but in terms of how little they have. Making comparative judgments central to morality gives envy and feelings of guilt an undeserved purchase in human affairs. Laudably, Flew shows a keen awareness of this. "Again, much may be said—and at appropriate times and in appropriate places most certainly should be said—about people who cannot earn enough to buy even the most minimal necessities of life and health. But none of this justifies any general opposition between, on the one hand, the profit system or production for profit, and, on the other hand, production for use of production to satisfy human needs." We can hope that Professor Flew will next turn his considerable powers toward keeping this promise. Individualism in the classical liberal tradition is, according to a common perception, a selfish doctrine with a marked unconcern for the poor, whereas egalitarianism enjoys a reputation as compassionate and sensitive.

Reading Flew's book will be a shattering disillusion to those who harbor the latter belief. However, the former misperception, until destroyed, will for a great many stand as a barrier to full commitment to a social system that celebrates individual liberty.

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1. Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 230-31.
2. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 233-34.
3. Also see Lance Stell, "Rawls on the Moral Importance of Natural Inequalities," *Personalist* 59 (1978).