

INTRODUCTION

For a variety of reasons, there has been a renewed philosophical interest in the concept of political neutrality in recent times. First, western states develop more and more toward multicultural states and whilst political neutrality was originally an answer to the reality of religious plurality within western culture, it may now be invoked as an answer to cultural plurality.

Second, communitarianism challenged the abstract philosophical concepts which are at the core of liberal political philosophy. From the idea that the self is always already an embedded self and that societies are communities of shared values and understandings, concepts of political justice that are derived from concepts of individual rational action were rejected as being unrealistic. Politics should be based upon cultural realities and take account of not rationally chosen commitments which bind people together in a community. From this perspective the idea of a neutral state was challenged both as being alienated and unfeasible and as being undesirable.

Finally, the so-called growing permissiveness, indifference and anomia within modern states, expressing itself in drugs abuse, pornography or recreative criminality is invoked as a clear illustration that political neutrality is untenable and that a state has the right to enforce moral ideals in order to protect its integrity.

In this volume, not all of the issues concerning political neutrality are discussed, but nevertheless many of them are, at least implicitly, at stake in all of them.

Jonathan Wolff challenges the idea that a concept of political obligation — and thus of ‘citizenship’ — only makes sense if it is possible to identify one general obligation which is common to all citizens. He argues that political obligations may arise from a variety of reasons and that only pluralistic models of such obligations can take account of all that is meant with the concept of political obligation.

Jos De Beus discusses the sources of liberal equality and argues that human reason is not the only source. After having distinguished internal and external sources, he discusses two approaches to enlarge the sources of liberal equality; separating egalitarian citizenship and cultural identity on the one hand and connecting citizenship and culture on the other.

Govert den Hartogh analyses the arguments for toleration and argues that they do not support a full fledged principle of political neutrality. Daily policies are inevitably perfectionist. What political neutrality implies is rather that a state should not make use of force to change people's thoughts, but it may very well enforce outer behaviour.

In his contribution, Frank van Dun criticizes, from a libertarian point of view, welfare state's interferences with personal life. As a matter of fact, a welfare state is the very negation of what political neutrality exactly requires. Philosophical as well as factual statism is radically opposed to the idea of a neutral and impartial attitude, so he argues, even to the point of denying that a personal morality is of any value to man.

Hartmut Kliemt analyses the implications of the Hayekian concept of 'the rule of law' which should guarantee true generality and thus neutrality of rules. He particularly looks at 'schematic equality' and at various taxing systems from the point of view of whether they do not infringe the rule of law.

In my contribution, I present first a variety of problems which the concept of political neutrality is supposed to solve. I argue that the problem of what a state may legitimately enforce is central to the idea of political neutrality, even within an egalitarian point of view. Morals legislation which enforces particular values on persons should be rejected.

It should be clear that 'political neutrality' is not an uncontested 'value' within political philosophy and that its meaning and implications are widely discussed. This should come as no surprise for politics itself remains a basic philosophical problem, dividing libertarians and egalitarians, individualists and communitarians or liberals and republicans. What is recognized as being 'the basic problem of politics' fundamentally determines the view one develops on legitimate state action. There is today, neither within philosophy nor in the broader society any consensus to be found on this issue.