

## **Craftsmanship, vision, and the other analytic political philosophy**

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*Abstract.* In this paper, I present the possibility of some other analytic political philosophy, in contrast to what is usually given this label. I do so by rejecting what I call the dualism between craftsmanship and vision.

Some writers of literary fiction are said to be good craftsmen, or craftspeople, but to lack vision. I have heard a contemporary novelist described in this way. The remark reminds me of one by an essayist who is probably hardly known at all now, namely C.E. Montague. I believe that for a long time he was mainly known in Manchester. My aim here is not to recommend the essayist, rather to attempt a little deconstruction, but the remark is worth quoting. In “The Well-Made Play,” Montague tells us,

Let us not be unjust to these minor accomplishments. Still they are minor. And that was the mark of the well-made piece as a whole—to be great in minor respects and minor in great ones. Not, of course, trivial in one way because it was fine in another. Always beware of the sentimental disdain of good craftsmanship as something over against, and at war with, the soul's higher energies. But somehow the well-made pieces had brought technics and ideas—both of them things calling out to be perfected—into a wrong relation. (1925: 73)

I anticipate a similar reaction in response to other things apart from fiction, including in response to the analytic tradition in philosophy. I would bet there are people who

have the following reaction: “These analytic philosophers are good craftspeople – they have skills in specifying premises, in precisely articulating definitions, in devising counterexamples – but they lack vision, in a metaphorical sense.”<sup>1</sup> They lack the kind of thing which in popular culture defines, or is part of what defines, the philosopher. However, it seems that an exception can at least be made for what is called analytic political philosophy: it has philosophers in the old-fashioned sense. Under this heading, there are some people with visions, with novel systems.

Where do these visions come from? They build on research that existed before the philosophers wrote but they also seem to be leaps from earlier writings. Let us take the most well-known example (Rawls 1999). “The original position, the liberty principle, the difference principle, a third way between minimal state liberalism and socialism derived from a model featuring self-interested individuals – amazing!” one wants to say, even if one does not agree, or at least I do.

Now the concepts of vision and craftsmanship need clarification. Someone might not even be prepared to grant that there are these things without a clarification. A way of defining vision is that a philosopher counts as having vision if they conceive of a novel philosophical position. And a way of defining craftsmanship is in terms of being replaceable. Craftsmanship has a routine quality about it, the application of skills one applies again and again. A point you have made in a certain topic is the result of craftsmanship if, and only if, should I take a large set of individuals with some talent for philosophy and train them and direct them to focus on that topic while

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<sup>1</sup> Here is another quotation from Montague on craftsmanship from one of his last essays (his best essay?): “Surely one of the most delectable bees that ever buzzed in a bonnet is the old dream that in art the right thing to do is to do without workmanship. From time to time it visits in force the minds of the young. To write, to paint, to sing—all with your soul alone and without the tainted assistance of any mere technical methods...” (1928: 143)

somehow preventing knowledge of your work, your point is sure to be independently produced. Perhaps this is not an entirely adequate definition<sup>2</sup> because there might be some topics that you discover and these others would not independently discover – they do not just use their techniques anywhere and they would not use them there – and that discovery should somehow count as transcending craftsmanship; but I am going to work with the definition.<sup>3</sup>

But even if we now grant that there is this thing called craftsmanship and there is this thing called vision, there is also another thing: a question of whether it is a mistake to insist on a strict dualism, to insist that where some work of philosophy exhibits vision then the material is not the result of craftsmanship. Is this dualism of craftsmanship and vision not something we should somehow “deconstruct”? Given the definitions, one can arrive at a vision by means of craftsmanship. A philosopher carefully analyses a position as involving a commitment to three propositions. He examines each one. The result of this process is that he comes to realize that by rejecting one of the propositions, we can arrive at a novel position – “fictionalist disjunctive liberalism” let us call it. Regarding this position, he can now say, “I am a philosopher. This is my philosophy!” This craftsman has somehow climbed further up the mountain, by means of his craftsmanship. There he is looking at the scene from this majestic height, slightly above all his friends. His entire mentality changes!<sup>4</sup> Or hers does. A dualism between craftsmanship and vision must be rejected.

At present this arriving at a vision by means of craftsmanship is much more

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<sup>2</sup> It (forgivably?) leaves details to be worked out: how large a set? how much talent is some?

<sup>3</sup> Montague on the introduction of a new topic in literature: “To supply a whole town with water from a well, the water must be pumped up to the top of a tower higher than any of the domestic cisterns which it is to fill. I think of a tragic writer’s mind as a tower like that, and I think of his “subject,” the facts from which he starts, the murder of Caesar or of Duncan, as so much water at the bottom of a well, not available for human use until the tower has enriched it with the property of elevation.” (1928: 136-137)

<sup>4</sup> This is not meant to be satire. I fear I am at risk of misinterpretation!

common in other areas of analytic philosophy, rather than philosophy that is explicitly about what the government should do. I would like to provide examples to support this claim, but fear someone will say, “How dare you suppose that my vision would have been independently discovered!” Anyway, I do not see why this kind of craftsmanship cannot enter here as well, to provide us with what I call “the other analytic political philosophy.” Perhaps the success that visionary system-builders like Rawls had in displacing earlier contributions by fine craftsmen led various researchers to believe that this is not a place for them.<sup>5</sup>

### References

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<sup>5</sup> I suspect there is some loss of “intellectual DNA” in this change.