

David Runciman (2008) *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, xii, 272pp. ISBN 978-0-691-129-310.

David Runciman's *Political Hypocrisy* poses an especial challenge to reviewers. The author reminds us that there 'are not many professions, or callings, that can claim to rival medicine for the range and varieties of hypocrisy that they place on display. But book reviewing is certainly one of them'. Better tread lightly then. Or at least have you think that's how I'm treading.

For those aspiring to make the often byzantine researches of intellectual history accessible to more lay readers, Runciman offers exemplary guidance. Down-playing the oft-intimidating style of academic work (footnotes are placed at the back, language is kept clear and non-technical), Runciman ably bridges the gap between the murky depths of the history of political thought and the problems and concerns of modern politics. For those self-assured practical sorts who loudly presume that the philosophical rumblings of long-defunct academics have no use, Runciman has uncomfortable news.

The core thesis of *Political Hypocrisy* is that in the politics of modern liberal democracies *some* hypocrisy is inevitable. But it is not enough to simply recognise that fact and assume one has arrived at some important truth. On the contrary, the trick – the difficult trick – is to recognise that whilst some hypocrisy in politics is inevitable, not all hypocrisy is desirable or to be tolerated. Runciman accordingly sets out to trace a line of thinking which aims to separate different varieties of hypocrisy and to broadly classify them according to whether they fall into the camp of tolerable, necessary and perhaps even good – versus intolerable, unnecessary and most certainly bad. And then trying to work out how to keep the former,

but ditch the latter. Without becoming a hypocrite. Or rather, a hypocrite of the bad sort.

And just how complicated it all turns out to be. For a start, Runciman reminds us that there are different *levels* of hypocrisy. This is brought out excellently in the chapter on Bernard Mandeville, and what Runciman calls ‘first’ versus ‘second’ order hypocrisy. First order hypocrisy is (usually) the sort we’re all familiar with: saying one is committed to A whilst doing B; campaigning on not-X but then X-ing when in power, and so forth. But further, hypocrisy can be hypocrisy *about hypocrisy*, too: campaigning for not-X, but then X-ing, having known all along that *anybody* faced with the situation would have to X, whilst pretending that there was an alternative but really knowing that there wasn’t. Or more bluntly: denouncing other people for engaging in hypocrisy whilst knowing that if you were in their shoes you’d engage in exactly the same hypocrisy they are exhibiting and you are denouncing. (As a general rule, second-order hypocrisy is helpfully illustrated by recalling most of the spirited denunciations and policy promises issued by Britain’s Liberal Democrat party, before it unexpectedly found itself in Government in mid-2010).

But things don’t end there. For there is also the question of *self-awareness* regarding one’s own hypocrisy about hypocrisy; the problem that one can be a hypocrite without even knowing it. Here Mandeville comes to the fore. If one is fooled by one’s own hypocrisy into thinking one’s vices are virtues, then one becomes a very special sort of self-deluded hypocrite – though one whose selfish actions may inadvertently have public benefits. So long, that is, as one does not join the likes of Lord Shaftesbury on the Pompous High Horse of socially-asphyxiating, self-deluded moralising... which is (you guessed it) a species of self-deluded hypocrisy. All of which, of course, still leaves unanswered the question of *which* hypocrisies we are to tolerate (presumably the useful ones), and which to try and expunge (presumably the harmful

ones – but how to tell them apart?) All of which must be done without ourselves becoming hypocrites (of the bad sort) in turn.

If those last two paragraphs required a second reading, then that is to the good. For Runciman's subject is fiendishly complex, and it is a testament to his skill as a writer and thinker that for the most part his prose flows with remarkable ease. Certainly there are sentences in this book which require treble or quadruple readings. But this is a reflection of the complex issue under discussion, not a failure of the author. It's hard to imagine anybody else could have done it better.

Runciman's intellectual range in this work is also remarkable. He cruises with ease across four centuries of thought, exhibiting an intellectual affinity with such wide varieties of scholarship and history as to include Victorian novelists, the American founders, and 'canonical' philosophers like Hobbes and Bentham. Yet this breadth itself at times generates some problems, as it is frequently difficult to keep in sight Runciman's purported unifying thesis: that there exists a definite tradition in liberal political thought going all the way back to Hobbes, pivoting on particular attitudes to political hypocrisy. Certainly, it is clear that the thinkers Runciman discusses are all preoccupied with the complexities of hypocrisy. But it is not clear that they are interested in it in sufficiently similar ways, whilst addressing sufficiently similar concerns, to warrant classification in a definite and shared intellectual lineage or tradition.

Having said that, a helpful concluding chapter draws out the broad similarities that Runciman identifies, strengthening his contention that whilst all western liberal politics is necessarily hypocritical at some level, it does not follow that all political hypocrisy is equally good or bad, or to be equally tolerated. In turn, Runciman seems correct when he urges us to recognise that past thinkers have often seen this far more clearly than we do today. Even if one is left unsure as to whether as much of a definite intellectual tradition exists as Runciman suggests, the exercise in

faithfully tracing past thinkers' arguments and thereby taking them seriously is one of great intellectual pleasure. It is also a demonstration that knowledge of one's philosophical inheritances can provide better self-awareness of oneself and the problems one faces – and can be achieved without turning the thinkers of the past into mere *porte-paroles* for predetermined contemporary viewpoints.

Runciman's book is that rare thing: a work with as much appeal to the historian of political thought as to the curious lay enquirer. Although one can always quibble and make demands for more (the development and eventual reversal of Oliver Cromwell's legacy as hypocrite-in-chief is left tantalisingly under-explored, for example) this is a book jam-packed with unexpected gems and intriguing historical asides.

But then I would say that, wouldn't I? Beware the precocious graduate student. Or rather, beware what he wants you to think about what he thinks you should think about the work of somebody higher up the academic food chain, who might indeed read this review. After all, academia, like politics, is hardly a profession in which the darker arts are unknown.

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Robert Wokler (2012). *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, ed. Bryan Garsten, with an introduction by Christopher Brooke. Princeton: Princeton University Press, xix + 396 pp. ISBN 987-0-691-147-895.

The work of Robert Wokler (1942-2006) has long been known to students of eighteenth-century intellectual history. His *Past Masters Rousseau* (1995) – repackaged by Oxford University Press as a *Very*