New Books

The Dappled World: a Study of the Boundaries of Science
By Nancy Cartwright
Cambridge University Press, 1999, £35.00, £12.95.

Cartwright’s latest book brings together previously published and new material into a single volume. She offers an important and systematic perspective on the nature of natural laws that advances beyond her previous contributions. Her chief claim is that there is no pyramid of laws, with the laws of physics as basic and all others supervenient. Instead, the world is dappled, containing lots of different, localized domains in which there can be true laws capable of useful application. There can be no great scientific systematization of everything but this should not be a cause for disappointment. Her ‘bottom up’ perspective is more practical and there is no reason why we should not find beauty in variety. She quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins:

GLORY be to God for dappled things-
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

and so on (p. 19).

As with her How the Laws of Physics Lie and Nature’s Capacities and Their Measurement, the approach is markedly interdisciplinary. As well as philosophy, much of the book is concerned with case studies from physics and economics. The philosophical commitment that drives this is Cartwright’s empiricism where pure a priori metaphysics is not in general approved of. If we want to know how science works it is primarily science itself that should be consulted, not some detached philosophy that begins from a priori principles.

The pure philosopher will find much to frustrate, therefore, and also much that will have to be taken on authority unless, like Cartwright, their background is interdisciplinary.

In this review, however, I will focus on the philosophical merits of the book, both because I favour the ‘philosophy first’ way of thinking and because it is most likely to be what interests readers of this journal.

The main philosophical themes are: against fundamentalism; allowing that laws come from limited models that cannot apply to the real world without ceteris paribus clauses, and in favour of capacities or natures in the understanding of laws. I shall discuss each of these and their relation.

The title of the book summarizes Cartwright’s view of the world or, more accurately, how the different sciences relate: ‘The laws that describe this world are a patchwork, not a pyramid. They do not take after the simple, elegant and abstract structure of a system of axioms and theorems’ (p. 1). Rather, science is apportioned into different disciplines, governing different sets of properties at different levels of abstraction.
Cartwright is thus arguing against any form of supervenience of other laws on a limited set of fundamental ones. The reason she avows for rejecting the supervenience claim is one which is philosophically unsatisfactory, however. Against fundamentalism for physics and economics, she says 'My belief in the dappled world is based in large part on the failures of these two disciplines to succeed in their aspirations. The disorder of nature is apparent' (p. 1). Clearly this is not an argument that settles the question one way or the other. It claims that, as a matter of fact, the supervenience thesis is not proven empirically but those who hold the supervenience view will agree. Why decide one way or the other, then? Cartwright thinks that the evidence we have thus far favours the dappled view and that belief in fundamentalism can have negative funding consequences. Both claims are moot. The disorder of current science is empirically consistent with unknown fundamental laws. The benefits of knowing such fundamental laws, if they exist, could well justify the resources currently allocated to such projects, despite their lack of success hitherto. I suspect, therefore, that what is Cartwright's most important motivation is her view of where laws come from, but before leaving her direct argument we ought to consider its alternative. Cartwright sets out the issue that might concern us: ‘The view that there are macro-features that do not supervene on micro-features studied by physics is sometimes labelled emergentism. The suggestion is that, where there is no supervenience, macro-features must miraculously come out of nowhere’ (pp. 32–3). The concern is real indeed and it is not assuaged by Cartwright's response that immediately follows: ‘But why? There is nothing of the newly landed about these properties. They have been in the world all along, standing right beside the properties of microphysics’. This is no answer to the fear of emergentism at all. We are not denying that macro-features were there all along but this is not the concern of emergentism. Our concern is how there are these macro-features in the world if they do not supervene on the micro-features. The properties are newly landed, not in a temporal sense, but in an ascended-level-of-description sense. Cartwright's direct discussion of fundamentalism versus the patchwork view of laws is philosophically unresolved, therefore.

There is a less direct argument for the patchwork view, however: it is an implication of Cartwright's view of where laws of nature come from. She now says she is a realist (she was perceived to be attacking realism in How the Laws of Physics Lie) but a local realist, by which she means that any particular law is true only within the limitations of the ‘nomological machine’: the well-controlled experimental set up that spawned it. When we try to apply such laws to the real world, their truth can be only ceteris paribus. This could offer some support to the patchwork view. If laws are nothing more than products of some limited nomological machine, then fundamentalism faces the difficulty of trying to defend some laws which are true absolutely and across domains. However, Cartwright’s case seems again philosophically underdetermined. Her approach is to offer a view and then try to persuade us through examples. This is her empiricist emphasis on how the sciences actually are, but it is not an argument as
such. It will not, therefore, affect the stance of someone who favours fundamentalism on non-empirical, metaphysical grounds. They could accept the difficulty of applying laws to the real world or to other domains without feeling forced into the patchwork view. It might be, instead, that we do not yet know the laws or that the actual result of various laws operating is very complicated and difficult to predict. Non-local realist explanations remain available, in the examples Cartwright describes, so the answer to this issue remains open.

The third key theme of the book is one I find far more agreeable, though I have one comment and two reservations to register. Cartwright defends the importance of capacities or Aristotelian natures for laws. Laws are about, or at least made true by, what the capacities or natures of things are and the ideal conditions of the nomological machine are those in which we are best able to discern such capacities or natures. Cartwright emphasizes that these are capacities in which we are interested, not dispositions. I find that the latter term serves just as well as her reason for favouring the term ‘capacity’ is that ‘Disposition terms, as they are usually understood, are tied one-to-one to law-like regularities. But capacities, as I use the term, are not restricted to any single kind of manifestation’ (p. 59). There is no need to be limited so stubbornly to the term ‘capacity’ as the notion of a multiply manifested disposition is quite familiar, such as everyday elasticity which can manifest itself in different ways in different circumstances (Cartwright mentions Ryle’s own ‘generic dispositions’, on p. 64, which are the same). There is, thus, nothing particularly special about the capacities Cartwright invokes. But this leads on to the more important reservations I have, which are about the metaphysical picture this view leaves us with. Cartwright dedicates the chapter in question to Rom Harré, who taught that ‘it is all right to believe in powers’ (p. 73). But we still need some convincing that powers are so unproblematic. What makes claims about capacities true? Cartwright answers that they are made true by irreducible facts about capacities (p. 72). But despite much attention that has been given to this issue lately, there remains something deeply metaphysically unsettling about such facts and Cartwright’s short metaphysical aside offers little to ease any such worries the reader may have.

My second, and most serious, reservation, however, is that a realism about natures and capacities, of the sort Cartwright advocates, undermines the second main philosophical commitment of her book, that laws are creations of nomological machines and true only within restricted situations. A key point in any realism about dispositions is that such dispositions are there whether or not they are tested and whether or not they manifest themselves. The same must apply to Cartwright’s realism about natures and capacities. However, the nomological machine is a set up of ideal conditions for such natures and capacities to manifest themselves, free from interference. If the laws are about the natures themselves, then they can be true regardless of any experimental situation that tests for their manifestations and her claim that laws come from the nomological machine is undermined. If the laws are about the manifestations created by the nomological machine, on the other hand, then Cartwright is not being the realist she
professes to be about these natures. I cannot see any way to resolve these two key themes of the book and Cartwright must give up either her realism about natures or her local realism, I think she should give up the latter, but then she would be giving up a key motivation for the dappled view. This would confirm, for me, that she offers no pressing philosophical argument against fundamentalism.

There is a wealth of material in Cartwright’s book which I do not have the space to discuss though I have outlined the most important philosophical claims. Despite my critical comments, I would still regard this as profitable reading for anyone working on natural laws, no matter what their perspective.

Stephen Mumford

From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics: Putting Practice First
By Charles Blattberg
Oxford: Oxford University Press, xiii + 294pp., £50

The politics of modern states is increasingly taken up with the claims of various soi disant cultural groups or other so-called ‘communities’ of people united in some aspect of their lifestyle or attitudes. The aim of politics in such supposedly ‘plural’ societies is to arrive at a fair and reasonable compromise between these frequently conflicting claims. Blattberg’s book is an attack on the political philosophy of pluralism which underlies this often unquestioning approach. In its place Blattberg proposes to install what he unselfconsciously calls a ‘patriotic politics’, though this turns out to be less alarming than it may initially seem to those with Johnsonian reservations about patriotism. What, however, are the crucial differences between pluralist and patriotic politics and why is the latter preferable?

In answering the former question Blattberg first finds an affinity between the pluralist and the patriot that sets them apart from those ‘neutralists’ who, like at least the earlier John Rawls, construct a political theory to systematize social practices in such a way as to arrive at objective judgments on which are right and which are not—which are right, that is to say, independently of the disparate conceptions of the good life that different groups engaged in them may entertain. A neutralist approach of this sort stems, Blattberg argues, from adopting a theory of language as principally representational, so that Rawls’s conception of the right can supposedly be made to accord with all reasonable political systems just because it is couched in terms that represent a political reality which underlies them. In stark contrast Blattberg recommends an expressivist theory of language that refuses to allow the distinction which representationalism requires between signifier and signified, social practices thus being fused with the symbolism they employ in such a way that no shared reality between radically different political systems is detectable.

Within this expressivist paradigm pluralism and patriotism differ in the accounts they give of practical reason, although for both, unlike for neutralism, such reasoning cannot be disengaged from the particular social
practice with its own distinctive conception of the good within which it takes place. Pluralists, however, conceive of the values involved in practices as distinct atoms, so that practical reasoning consists in striking a compromise between them, while, as we shall see, patriots aim rather at reconciling diverse but not unconnected goods, and do so through conversation rather than adversarial dialogue. Blattberg intends to give pluralism so characterized a run for its money, particularly in the strong form in which it rejects, pace Michael Walzer, any political ideology like liberalism, and holds that clashes between different values can reasonably be resolved in different political systems in different ways. But such a resolution will simply involve, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s phrase, ‘civil war carried on by other means’. It is precisely this bleak picture that Blattberg’s patriotic politics is intended to replace.

It is central to Blattberg’s case that, in contrast to pluralists, patriots adopt a hermeneutic conception of interpretation of a sort that he derives from Heidegger, Gadamer and, with less obvious justice, Wittgenstein. According to this conception goods can be incommensurable, as in pluralism, but they are not isolable elements to be balanced against each other since they are integral parts of a practice from which they gain their meaning. In consequence practical reasoning for hermeneuticists requires a reinterpretation of the whole range of goods in a way that reconciles conflict by integrating the goods more harmoniously into a total way of life. Blattberg illustrates the hermeneutic conception by considering how moral conflict between different goods—between, for example, the demands of friendship and of the academic life—might be resolved in the life of an individual, but the method is intended to be generalizable to cultural conflicts within a society. This involves Gadamer’s celebrated ‘fusion of horizons’, whereby, while remaining within one’s own cultural framework, one attempts to extend it to include goods recognized within another. Since one’s identity is constituted by one’s goods then such an extension, if successful, involves a transformation of one’s very identity.

Why, though, to take up the second of the questions I started with, is such an account preferable to pluralism? Blattberg does not offer arguments that directly favour the hermeneutic conception on which it rests. Rather he supports it by arguing that it allows for better resolutions of conflict, both intra- and inter-personal, than the pluralists’ sole option of compromise. For reconciliation, as Blattberg terms the result of a successful integration of diverse goods, need involve no moral loss, in the sense that no objects still valued have to be set aside to some extent in the pursuit of others—the inevitable consequence of compromise. The way to intercultural reconciliation is conversation, which, unlike negotiation, does not leave the parties to it the same at its end as when they entered it.

Blattberg next moves naturally to consider what kind of polity can make such conversation possible. It is, unsurprisingly, one that has much in common with classical republicanism, for classical republicanism aims to unite diverse cultural groups under a shared civic identity. Blattberg’s patriotic politics, however, breaks with republicanism because republicanism presupposes a unified common good into which its associated virtues, civic
and heroic, cannot in fact be coherently integrated. It fails, furthermore, to take account of the rejection of such a unity that underlies modern democracy. A patriotic politics aims to incorporate the insights of both republicanism and democracy by allowing, with the former, that society’s goods can be shared by all citizens, while denying, with the latter, that they can be aggregated into a unified common good. In accordance with the hermeneutic conception of practical reason that Blattberg favours, the patriotic polity aims, instead, to find a way of rearticulating and integrating the diverse goods its members seek.

One might have expected Blattberg to have gone on to a discussion of how such a polity might operate in multicultural societies and, in particular, what are the conditions for its operating successfully. For Blattberg concedes that reconciliation of conflicting conceptions of the good is not always possible and that in these circumstances compromise might have to be resorted to as a second best. Rather disappointingly to my mind he does not offer such a discussion. Instead he looks somewhat perfunctorily at the nature of elections and legislation in patriotic polities, at corporate decisions as more than the mere balancing of stakeholder interests and at respect for individuals as not capturable in the discourse of rights. Not only do these topics seem to me tangential to Blattberg’s theme, but, in concluding his book with them rather than with the apparently more central applications, an important theoretical question seems to be neglected, namely what sort of life provides the necessary background, in Wittgensteinian fashion, for the sort of social reconciliation that Blattberg advocates. One might perhaps suspect that it is not a way of life available in modern multicultural states where self-ascribed cultural identities are seen as relevant to politics in a way that they were not in the classical republic. If so, compromise, not conversation, may be the best that can be hoped for since conflicting cultural groups are unlikely to be convinced by arguments to the effect that they share a defective theory of meaning.

My synopsis of the argument, as I understand it, has passed over much interesting consideration of other views, of, for example, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Rawls, Walzer and Berlin. Blattberg’s book is often difficult and sometimes exasperating reading. It is, however, among the mass of work on related issues now appearing, a genuinely original and worthwhile contribution.

Paul Gilbert
concentrate here, comprises the unfinished manuscript of that last work. Almost all the articles collected in the second part, which forms an extremely valuable complement to the manuscript, have been previously published, and commented on, elsewhere.

According to Feyerabend, the book would be ‘intended to show how specialists and common people reduce the abundance that surrounds them and confuses them, and the consequences of their actions. It is mainly a study of the role of abstractions—mathematical and physical notions especially—and of the stability and “objectivity” they seem to carry with them. It deals with the ways in which such abstractions arise, are supported by common ways of speaking and living, and change as a result of argumentation and/or practical pressure’ (p. viii).

‘Rationalism’, ‘objectivism’, ‘falsificationism’, and ‘the method of counter-examples’ are Feyerabend’s code-words for the target he mainly has in mind, whose principal representative is Karl Popper. Popper is given the honour of presenting what Feyerabend thinks of as the usual story of the rise of Western rationalism. (Quite remarkable, when one considers the reception of his work on the pre-Socratics, and Plato.) The beginning of this story, as Feyerabend presents it, is that certain pre-Socratic thinkers broke away from tradition, overwhelming the naïve worldview of their predecessors by force of superior argument, and replaced it with a ‘rational’ account. Xenophanes’ critique of traditional religious ideas about the Gods is supposed to have been devastating, bringing on the realisation that such ideas cannot be taken seriously. Parmenides, ‘by the sheer power of his mind’ and unmoved by any external agencies, attempted to prove that what exists is a single stable and indistinguishable block: Being. But Democritus and Leucippus refuted his monism by research, finding a counterexample to his conclusion, and replacing it by a better one (atomism).

Feyerabend’s alternative story is complicated and fragmentary, but seems to be roughly as follows. The world contains an enormous variety of things, and of kinds of things. But most people block off this abundance, unconsciously and consciously. ‘For them the world is still too complicated and they want to simplify it further’ (p. 4). The urge to interfere with nature could not be confined to material culture, but entered the domain of belief. A ‘search for reality’ accompanied the growth of Western civilization, and ‘played an important role in simplifying the world’ (p. 5). It is usually presented as something positive. But it has a strong negative component: it does not accept phenomena as they are, but changes them. These changes involve simplifications, in which the particulars and relations which distinguish things one from another are removed by abstraction. But what remains is then called ‘real’, and regarded as more important than the original totality! In this respect, the actions of intellectuals are as destructive as those of their more brutal contemporaries. Science destroyed spiritual beliefs, traditions, relationships between man and nature, and put in their place nothing but an anxious quest. Was it worth it? Is the ‘modern world’ sufficiently wonderful to make us reconfirm the decisions that allegedly led to it?
According to Feyerabend,

it is strange and somewhat frightening to see with what enthusiasm
many intellectuals, then and now, embraced [the single God of
Xenophanes] and other monsters, regarding them as first steps towards
a ‘more sublime’ interpretation of the ground of Being. But they should
not be blamed for it: the idea was ‘in the air’. Only a very strong and
emotionally articulated commitment to traditional ways of living could
have evaded it. The common people, especially in rural areas, had such
a commitment. Intellectuals, who were city people, and looked down on
conventional habits, and whose connection with the lower strata of
humanity [sic] was never close, lacked it. They lacked the ability to pre-
serve the abundance they and their contemporaries had been entrusted
with. (p. 54)

Intellectual life reduces the abundance that surrounds us primarily by sup-
posing that underlying the variety of apparent things is reality, a more uni-
ified and law-governed set of ‘principles’ which are responsible for the
appearances. The resulting world-view ‘arranges phenomena in a hierar-
chy reaching from solid and trustworthy ‘reality’ via more fleeting occur-
rences to entirely spurious events’ (p. 9). But, Feyerabend argues (in a way
reminiscent of one of his erstwhile bêtes noires, J. L. Austin), there is no
single grand dichotomy between appearance and reality. The notion of
reality only makes sense when applied with discretion and in the appropri-
ate context (e.g. dreams v. waking events). There are many different types
of events, and ‘reality’ is best attributed to an event together with a type,
not absolutely. Common sense, traditional religions, and other well-
entrenched and practically effective forms of life are built in this way.
Feyerabend’s critique of the idea that underlying appearances is a thor-
oughly law-governed reality (see, especially, p. 219) bears comparison with
Nancy Cartwright’s (The Dappled World, (Cambridge University Press,
1999)).

The ‘search for reality’ makes sense only if what is real is assumed to be
hidden, not manifest. Western scientists, philosophers, and theologians
have developed this assumption into various forms of ‘realism’. But the
entities unearthed by science are important only if the resulting world is
pleasant to live in, and if the gains from the manipulation more than com-
pensate for the losses. The objection that the entities and laws that connect
them are ‘real’ and that we must adapt to them, has no weight. The prod-
ucts of nonscientific culture would have been just as instrumentally suc-
cessful as those we now have. (These claims, and the (social construction-
ist) idealism about material things associated with them, are perhaps the
weakest part of Feyerabend’s case. Here, I believe, philosophers such as
Cartwright and John Dupré (The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical
Foundations of the Disunity of Science, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1993)) have developed a far more plausible view).

Along the way, Feyerabend discusses (in chapter 1) an episode which
might be thought of as an instance of the discovery or invention of the
real/apparent dichotomy, and argues (chapter 2 and 3) that the ideas which
reduced abundance (including the real/apparent dichotomy) were not invented by a single stroke of thought, but evolved slowly from a more uniform material. The pre-Socratic philosophers ‘accepted them, even froze them with the help of a new instrument, proof, but in doing so they followed history, not reason’ (p. 40, emphasis added). So, in the end, Feyerabend does not lay the responsibility for the cancerous growth of Western civilisation at the door of the intellectuals. These thinkers, he argues, were not the cause of the break with tradition, but were merely following certain already-present social trends. It was not they who conquered abundance, even though they egged on and joined in the conquest, and then tried to take credit for it.

Nevertheless, I think Feyerabend feels that there is still something more seriously wrong with intellectuals: they are the only members of successful cultures whose views can really be incorrect. His former unrestricted theoretical pluralism has here developed, via the invocation of ‘Aristotle’s principle’ that what is real is what plays a central role in the kind of life we identify with, into the view that although there is more than one way of living and, therefore, more than one type of reality, only successful cultures latch on to reality, since it is only to them that Being responds positively. (So the ‘principle of tenacity’ which he earlier argued for has been toned down). Feyerabend never does anything to support his willingness to say that things that some people believe in, such as gods, exist (not merely that they exist ‘for’ those who believe in them, whatever that means). One gets the impression that he thought that merely pointing out that some people believe in them, or that enough people believe in them, was enough. His reluctance to take sides between those who do and those who do not believe in such things sometimes takes the form of supposing that everything believed in by anyone from a ‘successful’ culture exists. But he doesn’t seem to recognize that his own ontological pluralism represents a preference for one ontological belief over against others. ‘Physicalists’, for example (like an earlier Feyerabend) believe that all that exists is purely physical. According to the later Feyerabend, they are wrong. But why should people’s views about what the world contains be taken seriously only when they don’t try to support them by ‘abstract’ argument, as physicalists do? Why is it only the intellectuals, specialists, experts, whose views are wrong? Just because those views have led to, or arise from, a world which Feyerabend dislikes? Don’t intellectuals comprise one of the more ‘successful’ (sub-)cultures ever known? Why is it that one can always disagree with the ontological views of a philosopher, or a scientist, but never with those of a layperson? Is Feyerabend’s attempt at populism merely the latest form of the trahison des clercs: agree with the laypeople just because they are laypeople, and we (parasites?) ought not to offend them? His example reminds us that anti-intellectualism is by no means confined to the British, or to those who aren’t themselves intellectuals. The romantic rural idyll (and the accompanying disdain for intellectuals, perceived as urban) was a theme in post-Kantian German philosophy, and has been a preoccupation of intellectuals (urban or otherwise). Feyerabend’s later thought might profitably be seen as an expression of reactionary romanticism, the desire
to return to (what he thinks of as) a prior stage of culture, a golden age in which people got on with their lives untroubled by intellectuals and their tendency to universalize concepts and forms of thought (e.g. logic). (All this from the person who translated Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* into German!). ‘Aristotle’s principle’, which is in blatant conflict with the Austinian conclusions about reality mentioned earlier, is undoubtedly one of the culprits here.

From what has been said so far, one can surmise that Feyerabend’s critique of the claims of science ultimately boils down to the accusation that science isn’t comforting: it doesn’t satisfy certain human desires. Some of those whose job is to promote the public understanding of science would undoubtedly reply that scientific conclusions aren’t meant to be comforting. But the ensuing debate is often a result of a flawed premise shared by both parties, the assumption that science can legitimately address all our questions. Too often, for Feyerabend, our choice is between a completely scientific culture (or part of a larger culture) and a completely non-scientific one. He fails to recognize that within a culture or sub-culture, philosophers can help confine science to those questions and areas which it can usefully address, and to unmask its pretensions to address other questions. In this respect, I don’t think he got far enough away from another flawed premise which he himself identifies here: that forms of life are well-defined, clearly separated, or monolithic. His was (perhaps unsurprisingly) the pluralism of the USA, a melting-pot in which views and/or cultures bump up against one another while retaining their autonomy. If he had imbibed the deeper pluralism that he advertises here, in which cultures are open, interact, and are transformed via their interaction with others, he might have seen that science and ‘rationalism’ may be coped with and exploited in ways other than eradicating them, or confining them to ghettos.

Although Feyerabend did not live to complete the manuscript, Bert Terpstra has done an excellent job of showing us what much of it might have looked like. *Conquest of Abundance*, Feyerabend hoped, would be ‘a simple book, pleasant to read and easy to understand’ (p. viii). Terpstra has done as much as Feyerabend to ensure that it is. Along with the papers collected together in the book’s second part, I think the result is probably a better volume than the one now regarded by many as Feyerabend’s magnum opus, *Against Method*.

*John Preston*

**Democratic Procedures and Liberal Consensus**

By George Klosko

Oxford University Press 2000, £27.50

‘The argument of this study,’ Klosko writes in its concluding pages, ‘is that the principles of liberal consensus are the best possible that could be justified to a large majority of liberal citizens’ (p. 242). Such an argument will be familiar to defenders of Rawlsian ‘political’ liberalism who see the task facing liberalism as that of securing a consensus on political principles.
in the face of abiding and significant differences on all other fundamental matters. The consensus which Klosko believes the ‘best possible’ will, however, be uncongenial to Rawlsians because, although liberal, it is considerably less robustly and substantively liberal than they would favour. It is, in essence, an agreement on basic rights and democratic proceduralism but without agreement on strong individual rights and strongly egalitarian principles of distributive justice.

Klosko’s argument for the ‘best possible’ consensus is in part normative but in greater part empirical. If, as he says, the point is to defend principles that people can accept then it is essential to find out what they actually do believe. In consequence, he appeals to the evidence supplied by surveys, polls, and so on. Such evidence should not be accepted wholesale nor uncritically, and Klosko does not do so. But the originality and attraction of his study is that it is a work of normative political philosophy solidly rooted in empirically well established facts about the beliefs and values of actually existing citizens.

To assess his argument it is necessary to be clear about why he thinks that the ‘best possible’ principles of his liberal political consensus are both the ‘best possible’ and the ‘best possible’. They are the best principles because they are liberal. The key liberal political principle is that of legitimacy. This prescribes that ‘political principles should be able to be justified to each citizen, at the bar of his or her own reason’ (p. 19). Such a principle is defended by liberals from Locke to Rawls.

Klosko, on a number of occasions, characterizes the principle as making political agreement morally necessary. Such agreement is also a practical necessity for reasons of ‘stability’. This talk of two reasons for political agreement does somewhat obscure the fact that there is agreement in two different senses. There is practical stability if there is agreement between citizens. Where there is little or nothing to dispute there is no occasion for nor disposition to conflict. However there is legitimacy if and when the principles governing the terms of social and political co-operation are agreed to by each and every citizen; there is agreement between the citizens only in that each—‘at the bar of his or her own reason’—gives his or her consent to these terms. Practical agreement within a form of government could of course be secured in ways that would be sufficient to render any agreement to such a government invalid—by, for instance, indoctrination or coercion. This suffices to show that it is the moral agreement of the citizens, severally, to political principles that is crucial. It is not, in short, consensus as such, but what it is that brings it about that there is consensus—the unforced and informed agreement of each to some set of principles—which matters.

Moreover, as Klosko notes, justification is ‘bound up with and entailed by central liberal values’ (p. 9). Chief amongst these is that persons must be treated with respect, and, Klosko further argues, ‘human rights are closely bound up with requirements to treat people with appropriate respect’ (p. 11). This is largely uncontroversial though critics of rights might still argue that it is not inconceivable that a society which did not accord its members rights could nevertheless satisfy the liberal principle of
legitimacy, that is be governed by rules justifiable to each citizen at the bar of his or her reason.

More crucially for the book’s argument Klosko clearly has, and endorses, an ideal of liberal principles which are more robust and substantive than those which can be the subject of a ‘best possible’ liberal consensus. Such principles would comprise a strong conception of rights and strongly egalitarian principles of justice. A strong conception of rights proscribes the trading off of rights for other values (p. 58); the weakly egalitarian principles of justice currently favoured by the ‘dominant ideology’ give pride of place to equality of opportunity and distribution in accordance with merit (Chapter 6). Agreement on the basic need for rights and justice are rooted in fundamental liberal commitments shared by all. But Klosko concedes that there are different possible interpretations of what that basic need means. His own preferred understanding—a strong conception of rights and strongly egalitarian principles of justice—is but one interpretation contested by others.

Klosko criticizes Rawls for claiming to find an idealized, deep-lying, intuitive agreement on substantive liberal political principles within the public culture of a democratic society (Chapter 7). Rather, Klosko argues, we should aim first at minimally defined, uncontroversial principles on which all can agree. ‘Once we have determined the range of principles that can be justified to liberal citizens we can move on to argue for preferred conceptions of individual rights, democratic procedures and distributive justice, although … proponents of different comprehensive views will argue for different conceptions of these values’ (p. 190). Everything, in short, comes down to the play of views and forces within simple agreed democratic procedures. Klosko may hope that things move in the right direction but he cannot claim that the conceptions he favours are entailed of necessity by the basic liberal commitments all endorse, and ‘[w]ithout being able to invoke a strongly liberal conception of rights, liberal consensus is open to decisions that strong liberals could find difficult to accept (p. 233).

That much is honest. It would have probably been even more honest to drop the honorific adjective ‘strong’ (and its pejorative contrary ‘weak’). Klosko’s own commitments amount to but one contested construal of the liberal consensus with which he must enter the democratic battle in order to secure support but with no greater guarantee of success or better assurance of ultimate liberal provenance than other interpretations. Yet, throughout, Klosko cannot help characterising his own ‘strong’ views as the evidently most favoured interpretation of liberalism. But, if there is an argument to these views from the basic liberal commitments (such as, respect for persons), it is not to be found in this book.

Why are the principles of the liberal consensus the ‘best possible’? Klosko follows Rawls in believing that pluralism—a diversity within liberal societies of moral, religious, and philosophical views—is significant and ineradicable. In contradistinction to Rawls, as already mentioned, such a pluralism extends to the political in that there is widespread disagreement amongst the citizens of liberal societies about how to understand the
basic general principles of rights, democracy and justice. Such political pluralism is well attested to by the impressive array of empirical findings Klosko musters. Most will find this evidence discomfiting if not entirely surprising. Large numbers of people who profess their support for democratic principles and for the protection of individual rights would be prepared to abridge the liberties of unpopular minority groups. Many are intolerant in the sense of being unsympathetic to the canons of public reason and open minded inquiry which, it is conventionally believed, must animate democracies.

Nevertheless Klosko insists that there is agreement on democratic procedures and a general willingness to see the outcomes of such procedures as fair. Klosko thus endorses ‘procedural’ as opposed to ‘substantive’ liberalism, that is a liberalism exhaustively defined by its prescription of certain agreed basic democratic procedures and its acknowledgement that any more substantive commitments cannot secure the acceptance of a stable, enduring consensus. He shares this view, which has much to commend it, with Kurt Baier who speaks of a mere ‘constitutional consensus’, and perhaps also, though in a less straightforward fashion, with Stuart Hampshire’s recent *Justice is Conflict* (1999).

Klosko does not believe that the democratic process is itself transformative in such a manner as would secure eventual consensus on substantive justice—as the theorists of deliberative democracy such as Habermas would argue. Nor is he prepared to exclude as ‘unreasonable’—on epistemological rather than political grounds—some comprehensive views, and thereby make a more substantive consensus more likely, as Joshua Cohen and Gerald Gaus would argue.

What he also refuses to countenance is the use of education, general and civic, to play a transformative role. The argument here is less developed. What the evidence shows is that there is a clear direct connection between education and tolerance (pp. 46–7, 50, 64–50) just as there is a clear inverse relationship between tolerance and religion (Chapter 4). But although he believes thus that ‘education presents the greatest hope for increased political tolerance and so general agreement on democratic rights into the future’ (p. 114), Klosko also believes that an education in civic, non-religious beliefs and values may be claimed as an abrogation of a parent’s or community’s right to practise the religion of its choice (pp. 104 and 113–4). It may be but the claim here is not undisputed, and, given its acknowledged importance, Klosko might have devoted more space to a proper critical consideration of it.

In his ‘Conclusion’ Klosko represents the problem he is addressing in terms of a graph (pp. 237–8). On one axis is the ‘liberal content’ of the principles to which there is general agreement; on another axis is the percentage of the population accepting these principles. The area captured by lines running to the appropriate points on the two different axes represents the ‘best possible consensus’ that can be achieved. The intended idea is clear enough. But it is strange to see the numerical size of the support for some principles described as a ‘value’ which must be traded off against the value of the principles found acceptable. This is in part because of the
ambiguity in the term ‘agreement’ noted earlier. It is also because the mere fact of support for some principles lacks evaluative force without further epistemic qualifications about the source of such support, qualifications Klosko is unwilling to make to any great degree. This is perhaps just to say that Klosko’s refreshing attention to what is ‘possible’ is at the expense of a more considered examination of what is ‘best’. Nevertheless this study overall sets a fine example of how normative political theory might in particular, and must in general, engage with the messy facts of the real world, a world whose citizens are not the ideal deliberators nor completely reasonable individuals an idealized liberalism would wish them to be.

David Archard