

Is State-Centered Inculcation of Virtue Utopian in Nature? Thoughts on George Klosko's *Jacobins and Utopians*

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Staking out new territory in utopian thought and analysis, George Klosko's Jacobins and Utopians examines neither utopian theory nor the actual practice of political reform but what might rather be termed the "theory of practice." Despite this innovation, the book remains underdeveloped, relying on some weak arguments and unexamined assumptions to support its central claim: that persuasion models of political reform are ineffective and that only state-centered inculcation of virtue in the citizenry—which Klosko labels "educational realism"—is sufficient for radical change. By failing to consider the performative and the possibility that theory might be a form of practice, Klosko misrepresents the effectiveness of persuasion models in order to champion his preferred alternative. Nevertheless, the book offers much that is of value beyond its initial distinction: there are fascinating accounts of major, and not-so-major, figures in the Jacobin and utopian traditions.

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Faced with the "famous irony" of Socrates, Goethe observed that whoever could tell when Socrates was being serious, and when he was joking, would be doing humanity a great service (Goethe, quoted in Nehamas, 1998, p. 7). George Klosko believes that he is the man for the job. The *Republic* is, Klosko asserts in his new book *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform*, the blueprint for an ideal society that Plato believed would solve the problem of political virtue (or lack thereof) in the ancient world. As such, Klosko dismisses any suggestion of Platonic irony in the text. Whether this is indeed the great service suggested by Goethe remains, however, to be seen. For although there is much in Klosko's book that is of great value—including

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some fascinating discussions of major and minor figures in the utopian and Jacobin traditions—the central claims of the book, such as his assertions about Plato, seem to be under-supported, resting as they do on circumstantial evidence and a number of unexamined assumptions.

The text of *Jacobins and Utopians* (2003) is made up of Klosko's presentations at the Loyola Lectures in Political Analysis. It draws on the work of an impressively wide array of political actors and thinkers starting with Lycurgus and Solon, through Plato, More, Machiavelli, and Rousseau, to Marx, Bakunin, and Lenin. Interspersed are less detailed, but nevertheless insightful, discussions of Saint-Just, Charles Fourier, and Montesquieu. Defining a Utopia as "a fundamental break with what exists, a 'new state of being' or the pattern for a human condition that is totally new by any standard" (p. 4) and a Jacobin theory as "an ideal vision that the author has not only thought about establishing, but has done so realistically" (p.5), Klosko draws a distinction between writers who have merely sketched their ideal cities and the activists who have sought to implement them. He asserts that his concern is the latter. "Unlike most students of utopia," he writes, "I focus on strategies for realization and so also on impediments that must be overcome. In other words, I am more concerned with means than ends" (p. 1). As befits a careful thinker who has made his career generating new ways to think about old problems, Klosko moves beyond the simple theory/practice dichotomy of much of the previous work in this area. He is, he says, "less interested in actual attempts to change the world than in what has been written and thought about them and so less concerned with the practice of radical reform than its theory" (pp. 1–2). *Jacobins and Utopians* is neither a book about utopian theory nor a book about Jacobin political practice, but rather a book about what might be termed the "theory of practice." This is, perhaps, a somewhat difficult distinction to hold in one's head but no less compelling because of it. Indeed, there seems to be something distinctly performative about the distinction. That is to say, one cannot think about the issue in exactly the same way after having read Klosko: the very distinction that he draws affects our understanding of the problem. This is, however, somewhat ironic as Klosko himself ignores even the possibility of the performative in his discussion of the theory of utopian practice.

The performative factor is overlooked in Klosko's work because of his dominant but largely unexamined assumption: that persuasion models of radical moral and political change are simply insufficient to achieve their aims. The argument for this claim seems to be two-fold: first the "proof"—provided by the death of Socrates—of Machiavelli's dictum that unarmed prophets go to the gallows; and second "the fact that virtue requires extensive education or conditioning" (p. 3). Klosko refers to this "fact" as the doctrine of "educational realism," asserting that a "great advantage of focusing on educational realism, as it seems to me, is its obvious truth" (p. 3). This makes the argument against the value of persuasion models of radical change—such as that advocated by Socrates—somewhat tautological: "If the assumptions underpinning educational realism are true, then persuasion based theories cannot hope to succeed" (p. 6).

This is clearly a lapse in logic. It is perfectly possible for educational realism to be a valid theory of moral reform but this, in and of itself, does not make the persuasion model false or even ineffective. Both models could exist in tandem. By asserting that

one is true and one is false, Klosko excuses himself from having to show why he favors one over the other, and a great opportunity for careful investigation is lost. It would, for example, be hard to argue that Socrates has not had a profound effect on Western philosophy and, by extension, Western political behavior. It is, perhaps, nevertheless hard to see that Socrates has indeed produced fundamental moral and political reform precisely because we are so enmeshed in it: we do not have a world in which Socrates never existed with which to contrast our current existence. Part of the problem here is that Klosko appears to have a rather linear notion of causality: we must be able to see the way in which practice has shaped reform in order to compare the blueprint with the outcome.

For all his good work in avoiding the simple theory/practice dichotomy—that which allows him to consider the theory of practice—Klosko fails to consider the ways in which theory itself might indeed be practice, an issue which is not unconnected to his failure to consider the performative. An approach which incorporated a conception of the performative would allow for the creation of a method as fundamental moral and political reform. Klosko, however, can only see fundamental moral and political reform when he compares the blueprint with the outcome and finds congruence. It is for this reason that Klosko focuses so exclusively on questions of power. “[D]iscussion of fundamental moral reform,” he writes, “leads inexorably to questions of political power” (p. 2). The state is, he seems to suggest, the only body capable of achieving fundamental moral and political reform. This is, however, clearly a corollary of his belief that educational realism is the only plausible model of radical change. Once this claim is called into question, the value of much of Klosko’s argument is similarly undermined.

This is not to say that Klosko’s book is without merit, simply that his failure to interrogate his assumptions leads him to overstate his case and underestimate alternative possibilities. Indeed, many of Klosko’s central claims rest upon somewhat shaky theoretical foundations. Foremost among these is his assertion that the *Republic* is simply a blueprint for a society that recognizes the truth of educational realism, and seeks to utilize this strategy for inculcating necessary virtues in its citizens. Klosko does note that his account of the *Republic* flies in the face of much of the contemporary work on this text but he does not discuss that other work in much detail. His own claims seem to rest upon a combination of a rather literal reading of the text and some rather questionable assertions.

Klosko argues, for example, that Socrates’ description of the city “is far too detailed to be justified solely on the basis of what is needed for the argument that justice pays” (p. 61), thereby noting that Plato might have had more than one motive in writing the *Republic*. He concludes—solely it seems, on the basis of his own assumptions—that this ulterior purpose must have been to demonstrate the value of educational realism, for no other alternative is considered. Indeed, Klosko relies on the old trope of “careful reading” (p. 37) to support his interpretation of the text. The implication here is, of course, that if one disagrees with his reading one has simply not been careful enough in one’s own approach to the text. It is a rhetorical not an analytical argument and simply insufficient for Klosko’s purposes. That Klosko is perhaps aware of this deficiency in his approach is illustrated by his willingness to marshal even weaker evidence

and reasoning in support of his thesis, relying on what he calls “the overall accumulation of evidence” (p. 67) rather than careful argumentation. One particularly egregious example occurs when Klosko notes that many of “Plato’s students and associates took part in political reform” (p. 66) as evidence of his claim that Plato was concerned with actual political reform. Very few of us would, perhaps, feel comfortable with the actions of our students being used as evidence of our own attitudes and opinions. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Klosko’s argument occurs, however, in his discussion of the Socratic *elenchos*.

In discussing the Socratic *elenchos*—Socrates’ infuriating mode of inquiry, which lead him to question every aspect of a person’s argument with an unwavering and exhausting tenacity—Klosko notes that for “the most part, interlocutors leave the *elenchos* unaffected, while a few become belligerent, even menacing” (p. 38). His argument seems to be that because the interlocutors in the Platonic dialogues remain unaffected by Socrates, this is evidence that the persuasion model is ineffective. It is an argument that is used to bolster the case for Klosko’s preferred approach: educational realism. This is, however, a very weak argument, not least because Klosko, with his rather literal reading of the *Republic* and his linear model of causality, seems insufficiently attuned to the literary aspects of the Platonic dialogues, and those of the *Republic* in particular. Most obviously, Klosko ignores the very strong possibility that the depiction of the apparent failure of the *elenchos* is ironic. The text itself may well have a strong and persuasive effect on its reader, a reader who may well go out and engage him or herself in radical social reform. Simply because the interlocutors in the text do not react in the appropriate fashion, does not mean that readers of the text will be affected in the same way.

Klosko does discuss irony in the dialogues but never its potential effect on the reader; indeed, this would seem to correlate strongly with his failure to consider the performative aspects of Plato’s work. In discussing possible Platonic irony, Klosko—who continually conflates the literary figure Socrates with his author Plato—asserts that for this argument to work, it “must be shown that Plato believed they [the institutions of the ideal city] wouldn’t work. In other words, the institutions must be shown to be unworkable even if we grant basic premises and Plato’s political theory” (p. 63). This is clearly fallacious. I could feasibly advocate killing all human males as a way of wiping out the human race but this does not necessarily mean that I am serious about implementing such a policy. Rather, I could be saying it for the effect it has on my readers or listeners: to provoke a reaction, to upset complacency, and to lead people to think about radical reform for the first time. Showing that I am not serious about the policy does not require showing that my policy would be ineffective.

Similarly, showing that the policies advocated by Socrates could actually work does not refute the claim that Plato might have been ironic in his proposal of them. Not least because—as Klosko himself notes—Socrates’ ideal city sounds an awful lot like Sparta. Suggesting that a nation should be more like its enemy is not a sure-fire way to encourage people to follow one’s proposals, but it is certainly a way to shock them into some kind of action. By ignoring the possibility of irony and hyperbole, and indeed the various literary devices in the Platonic dialogues, Klosko undermines the value of his argument.

In many ways, *Jacobins and Utopians* is a literally preposterous book: the end comes before the beginning. It is less an investigation of the possibilities or theories of fundamental moral and political reform than, as indicated earlier, an argument in favor of what Klosko calls educational realism: the theory that the state is the only institution capable of inculcating moral values in its citizenry. As such the book ends up being neither one thing nor the other: neither a thorough investigation of Jacobin or utopian theory, nor a convincing argument in favor of a policy of educational realism. It is a strange mélange of two different sets of concerns. Nevertheless, there is much in the book that is of value, and Klosko is an engaging writer: these must have been fascinating lectures to attend. The breadth and depth of Klosko's references are astonishing. As a book, however, it is less than fully realized, and some of the argument needs to be tightened or, alternatively, less strongly stated. As far as Socratic irony goes, it may be that we—like Goethe—are still waiting.

References

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