

**Raymond Geuss.** *Reality and Its Dreams*. Harvard University Press 2016. 312 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674504950).

Given that Raymond Geuss' *Reality and Its Dreams* is a collection of essays, it might be a surprise that it is largely cohesive. This should be no surprise, though, from one of the most esteemed writers of the contemporary Marxist-inspired school of political thought. With all of its wide-ranging set of topics, there is certainly a set of related issues explored, even if the last half of the work looks more like cultural and art studies. That said, this collection is unified primarily by being both a work in what I'll call 'meta-political philosophy' as well as something like applied political philosophy. What are the main claims of this book? There are many, but I'll mention three from the outset. First, there is the idea that utopian thinking is a natural way of oppressed peoples to express what they want, or even need. Second, moral philosophers have a tendency to universalize the needs of their society in such a way that they/we falsely believe them and, in particular, that they are offering 'universal ideas' about how to organize society; more precisely, there is a long line of political philosophers who propose to their readers, and to the people at large, that what they are doing is offering universal principles of distributive justice and of the nature of the state. But according to Geuss, such universal principles do not exist. Third, if we are to do good political philosophy, we should pay a lot of attention to the context of the issue at hand; there is no such thing as policies/practices/actions that are to be dealt with according to some universal code of rules. Finally, another big point Geuss makes is that we should think twice about how important it is to consider individuals within the framework of state and distributional justice. In particular, he suggests that there is something mistaken about even using the concept of 'the individual' in doing political philosophy. In this review, I will put pressure on this last point.

Why is Geuss' work 'meta-political philosophy,' and at the same time applied political philosophy? As for it being applied, one should continue reading *Reality and Its Dreams* in its later half. There, one will find that although he is doing stuff like cultural and art studies, he nevertheless has very poignant points to make about political philosophy and ethics in general. But more importantly, Geuss works with meticulous details throughout, particularly in the first half of his book, in such a way that the reader can't help but question how political philosophy has proceeded in the last half-decade. In particular, Geuss is questioning of the way various political philosophers have worked in a kind of vacuum that does not consider history or the facts of sociology. If deciding the best course of political action requires considering facts of sociology/social psychology/history, Geuss accuses various political philosophers of not paying attention.

Geuss' work is extremely funny. He puts such political theorist hotshots like Rawls and Nozick in their place (but perhaps unfairly). For example, in the fourth chapter of *Reality and Its Dreams*, Geuss discusses the views of Rawls and Nozick, as well as the positions of Thatcher and Reagan. The chapter is entitled 'Russell Brand, Lady T, Pisher Bob, and Preacher Bob.' In this chapter, Geuss spends most of his time on Brand's work. Although he talks about how Brand does something that so many other 'theorists' don't do, he gives too much weight to the thinking of a comedian (Brand) and much less weight to some thinkers who sincerely spent much of their lives contemplating distributive justice. The idea of distributive justice seems almost offensive to Geuss at times, and this might explain in part why he is so offended by the works of Rawls and Nozick (who, of course, was no fan of distributive justice, although he did genuinely and yet aggressively argue against it). Geuss is right in pointing out how Brand talks about solutions to political and social problems in such a way that does not rely on the typical political philosophies. Given that Geuss can be rather funny, it is only appropriate that he place a comedian at the center of the stage in terms of

how to do some good social/political philosophy. That said, I want the reader to consider the fact that Rawls spent much of his life thinking about how governmental institutions and policies should be centered around an idea that is impartial and yet responds to concerns of those who are in need and who are more importantly not being respected in any recognizable way.

This point about Geuss perhaps neglects Rawls' contribution about the importance of respect and may lead some to think about how Geuss treats Rawls. For those familiar with Geuss' work, it should come as no surprise that Geuss is not friendly to Kant's work; given that Rawls relies heavily on Kant, this makes complete sense. Geuss coins a number of concepts for the purpose of his work: 'Plato's Dream,' 'Platonist's Blackmail,' 'moralizing,' 'moralism,' 'realism.' These are just some of the terms/concepts coined by Geuss throughout *Reality and Its Dreams*. But they are helpful certainly. For example, with 'the Platonist's Blackmail,' we have Geuss writing: 'if you do not have a guide to action that is absolute certain and absolute universal, you have nothing at all. If you have do have Platonic-style ethical knowledge, you have no alternative but to live "at random,!"' meaning doing whatever you please, pursuing what happens to seem best at the time, and following momentary impulse, without trying to make systemic sense of the world at all' (60). Although this is an explicit attack on Plato, it works against Kant as well. In fact, there are numerous passages in which Geuss attacks Kant explicitly. But what is important here is that Geuss is against a kind of thinking in which, if one is not held by certain absolute and strict standards, then one is let go into a playground of anything goes. But I will contest this (and I'm obviously not the only one to do this). Obviously, we can think of morality and political action in terms of being constrained by contextually defined standards. Obviously, we can think that we don't have to know 'everything' morally and yet still pursue good goals personally, socially, and politically. And finally, to include Kant back in the mix of things, we can assume that we don't have to have full knowledge in order to give genuine moral respect to others.

But according to Geuss, it looks otherwise. At this point, I must give him some credit. Geuss is totally correct about what we should be doing in political philosophy. We should not be focusing on some kind of set of absolute political philosophical principles. But does that mean we should think Kant, or Rawls, have no significance? The rhetorically obvious answer is 'no,' but Geuss doesn't suggest this answer. Getting back to one of the main points Geuss argues for, let's consider 'individualism.' Whether it is well-being, bland utilitarianism, happiness, respect, or opportunity, it appears that Geuss is not the obvious theorist to appeal to. Why? Well, he needs to be more explicit about how any of these human goals can be obtained. That said, I think it is obvious that he is concerned with trying to obtain something like this—that is, whatever is good for human beings (even if it is subjective and varied), he does care that human beings are able to achieve human goals in social settings. In the end, the individualism Geuss is attacking is not some project of Ayn Rand or even classical libertarians. The individualism Geuss attacks is more like that of those who identify with John Rawls, or even perhaps Robert Nozick. Here, 'individualism' is not sinister. Here, individuals are being protected from undue taxation. To be more concrete, there are individuals who are lower-middle class who are trying to be protected from being taxed in order to fund programs they will most likely never be recipients of. With all of that said, it should be pointed out that any good objection to Geuss' position should acknowledge the fact that some level of social welfare is not only warranted, but also required by any correct theory of distributional justice.

I end this review by talking about how Geuss' book is in fact a work in meta-political philosophy. In order for a work to be 'meta' it needs to be concerned with the doing of the work it is scrutinizing. So, for example, for many years there has been a field of study called 'meta-ethics.' What it was doing was rather diverse. For one thing, it was concerned with the status of morality in the first place. Does morality exist? There was also the question of what it meant to ask that question.

Basically, Geuss is doing meta-political philosophy by putting pressure on the idea of what it is to do political philosophy in the first place. He looks extensively into what analytic political philosophy has been doing. He gives a diagnosis of what has been done; and he gives an explanation of why such philosophy has been done in its way.

I think Geuss' *Reality and Its Dreams* is an exemplar in informing us about the current state of political philosophy. Although I might not fully agree with Geuss' diagnosis, it is critically important to read his book. I think that Geuss' work will last. If it does last, it will probably look more like a novel in a few hundred years; this is because he has written something that when compared with other work in political philosophy stands out as drastically different. An essential read for any political philosopher and probably any philosopher interested in meta-philosophy, *Reality and Its Dreams* is one of the boldest philosophical works of this decade.

**Joel Dittmer**, Missouri University of Science and Technology