

Geuss, Raymond. **Public Goods, Private Goods.**

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. 152. \$19.95.

Geuss's discussions of the unruly themes of these lectures display the intensity characteristic of his work since his extraordinary book on ideology in 1981. Here his study is the variety of distinctions between public and private in the ancient and modern worlds. The results are both edifying and disquieting.

In the book's first half Geuss illustrates three conceptions of public and private with vignettes from antiquity. First we find Diogenes the Cynic masturbating in the Athenian marketplace, flouting the rules by doing openly what the community thinks should be done out of view. Diogenes tosses away this public/private distinction in pursuit of his philosophical ideal of self-sufficiency—as Geuss says, “true self-sufficiency requires complete shamelessness,” (27) while accommodating to others requires avoiding offense.

Second is Caesar at the Rubicon, mulling the Senate's order to abandon his army and return to Rome for trial. With astonishing *superbia*, Caesar announces: “If I don't cross this river, I'm in trouble; if I do, everyone in the world is in trouble. Let's go!” (45) Caesar risks civil war for the sake of his status, putting private interest above public good. Finally Augustine retreats from his very public duties as a teacher of rhetoric, in order to meditate on his private, inner states.

Geuss's expository skills make his tour through the classical world as enlightening as the conceptual distinctions which are its official destination. The Cynic's self-discipline, the Roman view of “the state,” and the contrast between the Socratic, the Augustinian, and the Cartesian quests for self-knowledge are a few of the themes he instantly makes vivid. Geuss's rich style seems to transmit all the ideas that one would remember a week after reading texts of twice the length.

Analytically this half of the book is occasionally uneven. For example, Geuss appeals to a “principle of disattendability” to explain why Diogenes' onanism was and would today be offensive: in public one should avoid being systematically obtrusive, and not force oneself on others'

attention. Yet were this principle sufficient, a supermodel striding through a shopping mall would be as offensive as the Cynic's self-satisfaction. Moreover, an imperative for disattendability does not, as Geuss claims, define one of our notions of "public" space. Consider, for instance, the Supreme Court's 1980 ruling that malls have become such important public spaces that mall owners may not prevent citizens within them from accosting each other to canvas support for unpopular causes. Our public spaces are in fact partially defined as places where unknown others can force themselves on our attention.

What really does the work here is another of Geuss's principles—not disattendability but disgust. Diogenes was offensive because he forced on others the awareness of an activity they viewed as disgusting. Disgust is also more useful for marking the bounds of public space: public space is where social norms say one should not do disgusting things.

The book's second half takes on liberalism. The liberal, Geuss rightly says, is particularly concerned with who should control whether an individual may perform a given action (without sanction), and who should have access to information about the individual. Yet Geuss complains that the liberal attempt to decide these issues by distinguishing public from private is absurdly simplistic. There is, he says, "no single clear distinction between public and private but rather a series of overlapping contrasts, and thus... the distinction between the public and the private should not be taken to have the significance often attributed to it." (5) It is "a mistake to answer the question, 'Why shouldn't we interfere with that?' with '*Because* it is private,' and think that this is the obvious end of the discussion... By saying it is private, we just shift the locus of the argument to the question of *why* we think we ought not to interfere, and the reasons we give for this will be highly diverse." (107)

Geuss makes rather little effort to prove that most liberals actually use a unitary public-private distinction in the simple-minded way he attributes to them. His explicit target is Mill's attempt to split the two spheres with the idea of a self-affecting action. Mill's distinction is now widely regarded as moribund, and Geuss gives it another kick with the reminder of the historically common belief that god will punish everyone within communities that allow individuals to stray from the true faith. My allegedly private heresy might then affect you quite keenly.

Geuss also mentions Constant and Humboldt as adherents to the simplistic liberal view. Yet whatever the sins of the liberal fathers, I do not believe that mainstream liberalism today is guilty of Geuss's charge either in practice or in theory.

In practice, most recent conflicts over public and private have concerned religion or sex. In the US, the controversies have included whether schools may sanction student prayer (no), whether courts may display the ten commandments (no), whether the Boy Scouts can exclude gays (yes), and whether gays can serve in the military (not as such). In the UK: can the state prohibit adult men from pounding nails through each other's genitals (yes), can the state censor sacrilegious films (yes), and should Scientology be banned as a dangerous cult (yes). In the debates over these issues liberals have tended neither to appeal to a singular public/private distinction, nor to try to settle the disputes just by saying "that's (not) private." Rather, liberal advocacy has been specific to the issues, and based on balancing the particular values at stake as Geuss himself recommends.

In liberal theory it is much the same. If Geuss's charge is that all liberals believe in a private realm that is a "politically and socially distinct and protected sphere of life within which each individual is and ought to be fully sovereign" (4), then the reply is Rawls saying "There is no such thing." (*Justice as Fairness* [Cambridge: Harvard, 2001] p. 166). If the charge is that liberals uncritically exempt certain domains of life from scrutiny, then the reply points to the liberal feminist criticism of shielding family and professional life from public intervention. If the charge is that those liberals who do distinguish public from private make cack-handed grabs at dubious distinctions, then the reply exhibits Nagel's delicate accounts of what healthy individuals can bear to know that others know, and of what issues we can hope to resolve in our fragile public space. In the midst of this sophisticated liberal theorizing, Geuss's thesis that there is no unitary, unproblematic, value-free division between public and private is not news.

Yet to do justice to the vigor of Geuss's attacks on liberalism, it is insufficient to say that his account of liberalism is "incomplete." For it appears to be willfully so. Geuss is an acute critic and an admirable scholar. He must know that it is provocative to survey the modern liberal attitude towards privacy without mentioning *Roe v. Wade*. He surely knows that it will irk English-speaking liberals to see Rorty and Walzer footnoted as their only living representatives. What, then, is Geuss up to?

I believe that in this book Geuss may be musing on the correct posture for the leftist intellectual toward post-cold war liberalism. G.A. Cohen has turned his formidable powers to dissecting and revivifying liberal theory. Yet this option is unavailable to Geuss, for it seems he cannot abide liberalism in either word or deed. Geuss grudgingly concedes a few virtues to liberal society, yet in the main he regards them as rigid, moralistic, and unimaginative. As for mainstream liberal theorists, he appears to find their ideas too removed from the realities of politics to be anything but intellectual opiate. Indeed towards the end the book loses some Marxist invective (against false universalism, indefeasible private property rights, intellectuals as the mouthpieces of the privileged classes) that is truly unsettling.

Geuss in fact seems to be evaluating three contemporary intellectual stances, which we might crudely link to his characters from antiquity. Geuss has no time for the Caesar-like “classical” liberal, who valorizes the private over the public good. Nor can he countenance the Augustine-like left liberal—on the one hand cloistered in endless self-scrutiny, and on the other alarmingly ready to suggest that his political views be imposed on those who do not share them.

This leaves the Cynic, perhaps the true hero of the book. I do not mean to imply that Geuss intends to disgust his public (and certainly not as Diogenes did). But I do believe he aims to disconcert his liberal readers. The book’s disregard of much mainstream liberal thought appears to be a declaration of intellectual independence—the book is a public statement of self-sufficiency. Yet, as with true Cynicism, the purpose of such a stance is also didactic. Geuss intends to reveal the falseness of the liberal consensus by startling us into explaining why we mark our public/private boundaries where we do.

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