

Brian Barry
(1936-2009)

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I report the death of Brian Barry (Columbia University), a valuable member of this journal's editorial board. My thanks to Bob Goodin for offering the remembrance of Brian Barry that follows.

Mary G. Dietz
Editor

When Brian Barry died at age seventy-two, he had been a towering figure in contemporary political theory for quite nearly a half-century. The impact of his 1965 book *Political Argument* was immediate, Anthony Quinton hailing it as "perhaps the most uncompromisingly analytical treatment of politics yet published."¹ Through his 1970 book *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* he brought political theorists into critical but appreciative engagement with burgeoning rational choice approaches to politics.² In his 1980 Tanner Lecture he pioneered "global justice" before it was academically fashionable.³ He did foundational work on theories of justice, starting with the most trenchant critique of Rawls, Barry's *Liberal Theory of Justice* ("Was Jack really upset?" Barry once asked in all innocence) and continuing through own multivolume *Treatise on Social Justice*.⁴ Yet he never lost sight of the practical applications that really mattered to him, revisiting those with a vengeance in *Culture and Equality* and *Why Social Justice Matters*.⁵ Brian Barry was a political theorist who cared about politics, national, international, and local (he was a highly effective president of the Wivenhoe Society), and he knew his political science (he engineered the coup that modernized British political science⁶).

Readers of *Political Theory* know most of that already: what they might not know is how much more was written that they never saw. *Political Argument*, Barry's DPhil thesis, was a condensation of three wholly separate book-length manuscripts. The papers on power, coalition theory, and consociationalism are the printed tip of a several-hundred-page manuscript commissioned by Penguin to replace Mackenzie's *Politics & Social Sciences*.⁷ There is a whole book-length manuscript standing behind the *Nomos* paper on "global justice."⁸ There is an unpublished book on game theory. And so it goes. Pity the poor literary executor!

Above all, Brian Barry was a fierce critic. To get the full picture, you need to know that Brian was an insomniac. So when reading the purple prose, envisage Brian lying in bed furiously scribbling away (longhand, always longhand) in the wee hours, as Anni slumbered beside him.

At the celebratory dinner presenting Brian with the festschrift that Keith Dowding, Carole Pateman, and I edited in his honor, I quipped, "There is no truth in the rumor that we dedicated this book to Brian just to ensure he won't review it!"⁹ A joke: but truly a fate to be feared. His blistering review of Nozick lives in the profession's collective consciousness: "intellectual . . . cuteness that would be wearing in a graduate student . . . quite indecent in someone who, from the lofty heights of a professorial chair, is proposing to starve or humiliate ten percent or so of his fellow citizens (if he recognizes the word)." "There are, I believe, occasions when an emotional response is the only intellectually honest one," Barry went on to explain.¹⁰ Elsewhere Barry memorably excoriated Steven Lukes—whom he counted as a friend, for heaven's sake—for "horseback scholarship" in his little book on *Power*.¹¹

Being at the wrong end of Barry's politicking could also be painful. Longtime readers of *Political Theory* will recall that Brian Barry was on its founding Editorial Board and remained there until death. Only insiders with long memories will realize that Barry was a driving force behind the ouster of low-profile founding editors (Robert Lamb and Walter Odajnyk) and their replacement by Ben Barber after only two years.

Despite his "grumpy bear" image, Brian Barry was very much an institution builder. Readers of this journal may not know that Brian Barry was founding editor of the *British Journal of Political Science*, which quickly established itself and remains to this day one of the best half-dozen political science journals in the world. What they will surely know is the story of how Barry "rescued *Ethics*"—but they may not know quite how literally that was true. Whether it was an idle threat or a genuine intention, the University of Chicago Press told Barry they would close that then-moribund journal altogether if he did not assume its editorship. "I can't think of a job I'd sooner have," he subsequently said, and (with four of us associate editors and an editorial board of over fifty) he set about turning *Ethics* into a properly refereed journal in a discipline where that was still rare.¹²

Barry built the fabulous political theory group at the University of Chicago that came to include Jon Elster, Russell Hardin, Steve Holmes, Cass Sunstein, and many others. He built a terrific Philosophy Department at CalTech ("humanites" the scientists dubbed us). He sustained a wonderfully eclectic Rational Choice Group meeting monthly in the front room of

his Bloomsbury flat. He cofounded the University of California Press Series on Social Choice and Political Economy. He was at one point on the Editorial Board of pretty nearly everything. Those in his disfavor complained that he exercised way too much power in the profession. But such is ever the way with institution builders. And in any case, with Brian one thing was always certain: very soon, he'd be moving on.

The best remembrance you're likely to read is one Brian Barry wrote himself, recounting how he first got into the business, after flubbing an interview at Princeton Philosophy by assigning philosophy "the role of under-labourer's mate . . . relegated to carrying the tools." He recounts how, as a visiting student at Harvard, he was thrown out of Henry Kissinger's class "for questioning the premises that American national interest was the only criterion of foreign policy making and that the deployment of military force was the only means worth discussing." His reminiscence reprints portions of that failed Princeton job talk, predicting with uncanny accuracy where the discipline would go over the next quarter century (in no small part, because he led it there). It's a tour de force, not least for giving a sense of Brian the person. Here is how he self-describes: "I can't remember any time when I was anything other than an atheist with a soft spot for the Church of England, a socialist exasperated with all sections of the Labour Party and a sympathizer with the tribal version of England *à la* Orwell ('a family with the wrong members in control') slightly suffocated by the reality of it."¹³

That's our Brian. We'll miss you.

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Notes

1. Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965; reissue, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Anthony Quinton, "Introduction," *Political Philosophy*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, ed. Anthony Quinton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

2. Brian Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (London: Collier-Macmillan; 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

3. Brian Barry, "Do Countries Have Moral Obligations? The Case of World Poverty," Tanner Lectures on Human Values delivered at Harvard University, October 27, 1980, www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/barry81.pdf.

4. Brian Barry, *Theories of Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

5. Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001); and *Why Social Justice Matters* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005).

6. I recount that tale in "The British Study of Politics," in *Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, ed. Andrew Gamble, Colin Hay, Matthew Flinders, and Michael Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42-55, the last article I ever discussed with him.

7. Those papers are collected in Brian Barry, *Democracy, Power and Justice* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1989). W. J. M. Mackenzie, *Politics and Social Sciences* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

8. Brian Barry, "Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective," in *Nomos XXIV: Ethics, Economics and the Law*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1982), 219-52.

9. Keith Dowding, Robert E. Goodin, and Carole Pateman, eds., *Democracy & Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

10. Brian Barry, "Review of Anarchy, State and Utopia by Robert Nozick," *Political Theory* 3 (1975): 331-36 at 331-32.

11. Brian Barry, "The Obscurities of Power: A Review of Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*," *Government & Opposition* 10 (1975): 250-54 at 251.

12. "On Editing *Ethics*," *Ethics* 90 (1979): 1-6 at 1.

13. Brian Barry, "The Strange Death of Political Philosophy," *Government & Opposition* 15 (1980): 276-88 at 283, 279, 277.

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