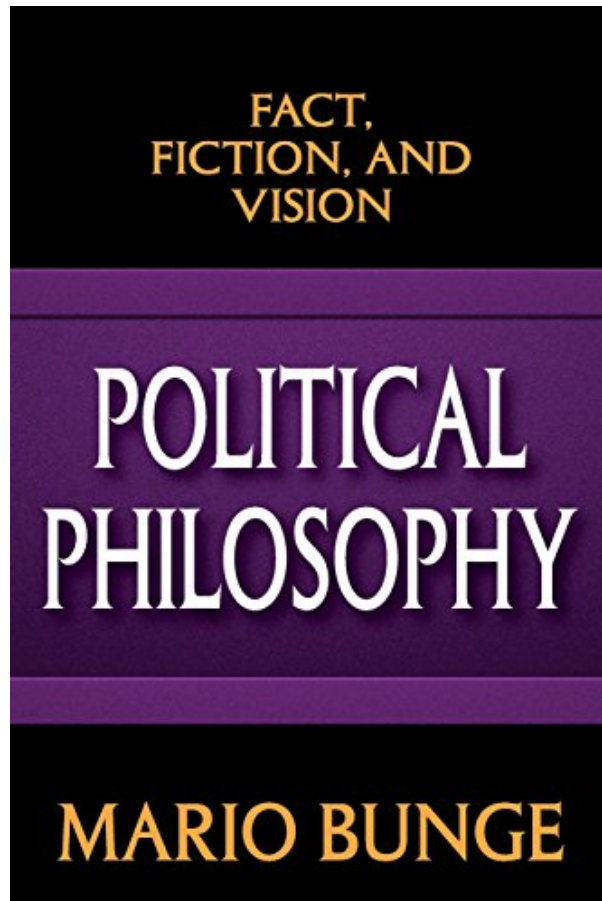


POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: FACT, FICTION, AND VISION BY MARIO BUNGE



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Review

"Four decades ago, I was inspired by Professor Bunge 's incisive insights on Quantum Theory. Today I am equally inspired by his incisive insights on politics. In his book Political Philosophy, Professor Bunge differentiates between thin, weak, formal democracy and strong, substantial, integral democracy. As he shows through his razor sharp analysis combined with the highest of social sensibility, strong democracy is based on participation, participation involves equality, reinforces cohesion, which in turn favors stability, which strengthens democracy. The alternative is what we have-suicidal economies based on dictatorship, which leads to marginalization, integration, disintegration and instability. Steeped as we are in multiple crises, Professor Bunge's ideas and concepts of an integral democracy have become an imperative for freedom and survival. Every concerned citizen and every concerned leader must read Political Philosophy."

—Vandana Shiva, environmental and social activist

"Political Philosophy is the work of a wise and widely learned scholar who has thought deeply about political issues over many decades. . . . The result is a volume that is at once widely learned and admirably humane."

—Nicholas Rescher, University of Pittsburgh

About the Author

Mario Bunge is professor in the philosophy department at McGill University in Montreal and holds sixteen honorary doctorates and four honorary professorships. His works include Treatise on Basic Philosophy, Philosophy of Psychology, Scientific Materialism, Social Science under Debate, and Philosophy of Science.

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Political philosophy is not a well-defined field. It hovers between political theory and classical philosophy. Few early political thinkers could have anticipated the most pressing political issues of our time: the need to stop global warming; the reduction of nuclear armaments; the rise of inequality between individuals and nations; and the struggle against authoritarianism, particularly when it comes disguised as democracy or as socialism. Here, celebrated philosopher Mario Bunge masterfully integrates socio-political theory into a philosophical exploration of power and resource distribution in the world today.

Bunge contends that even recent political thinkers have generally failed to address the political underpinnings of topical issues. Environmental degradation, gender and race discriminations, participative democracy, nationalism, imperialism, the North-South divide, resource wars, and the industrial-military complex have all largely been bypassed in political thinking. Even connections between poverty and environmental degradation, and between inequality and bad health, have escaped the attention of those who would call themselves political thinkers.

Bunge believes that political philosophers should pay more attention to social indicators, such as the standard index of income inequality and the United Nations human development index. It is pointless to write about redistributive policies unless we have a shared understanding of current wealth distribution. This is, in short, a modern treatise on sociopolitical concerns.

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Most helpful customer reviews

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Well written book

By Ove

As a former physicist, a system builder in the field of philosophy of science, and using a life time of experience Bunge is well prepared to take on the complex task of addressing political philosophy from a scientific outlook.

Bunge argues for a systematic worldview in general (the world is a system of systems; in contrast with both atomistic and holistic worldviews), and a way to study politics in particular.

Bunge writing style is straight forwarded, to the point, and easy to follow without being simplistic. In his characteristic refreshing style he attacks the views of many other philosophers and scientists (including quite a few Nobel Economic Laureates). He locates weaknesses and argues for a more constructive and promising outlook.

Examples of views that get a good bashing:

- * rational choice models (does not take into account altruism for example)
- * neoclassical microeconomics (most/all axioms of this model are false)
- * laissez-faireism/neoliberalism (naive and simplistic)
- * Marxism (based on obsolete social science, philosophy and ideology)

Examples of what Bunge argues for:

- * rights AND duties (UN bill of rights should be replaced by an UN bill of rights and duties)
- * Ethical maximal principle: live and help live
- * Six values to shape integral democracy: security, justice, equality, fraternity, competence, and liberty
- * a society is a system consists of the biological, economic, political, and cultural subsystems. To avoid simplification we need to consider all four.

The book feels current, as it includes politic issues up to 2008.

You would most likely learn a lot from this book.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Solid, Common Sense Approach, Some Factual Slips, Some Questionable Commitments

By Herbert Gintis

This is a long, wide-ranging volume by a well-known and extremely prolix philosopher. Bunge first lays out his general philosophical commitments, and then applies the resulting framework to the questions: how should we organize the political and economic life of modern societies?

Bunge is best known as a philosopher of science. In *Political Philosophy*, Bunge takes an approach to philosophical problems very close to what a naïve natural scientist might spontaneously presume, without falling into the many traps of naïve scientism. For instance, concerning the nature of truth, Bunge outlines four alternatives: Radical skepticism, Relativism, Pragmatism, Conventionalism, and Realism. He then opts for Realism, on the grounds that "only realism accounts for the fact that we must explore the world to find truths about it." (p. 9)

Bunge is very well read in both political science and economics, and I am flattered to note that he refers to my work on social preferences in several places throughout the book. His appreciation of the social science literature is sophisticated and generally reasonable, but he misunderstands rational choice theory, and therefore is excessively critical of standard economic theory. I do not think this leads his argument in indefensible directions, but it does not serve his audience well, and it does lead him to make arguments that are questionable. Rather than really go through the analytical material in rational decision theory, which he shows no indication of having ever done, he offers platitudinous critiques based on the informal usage of terms that have very explicit meaning in rational decision theory. For instance, he calls subjective probability and subjective utility "fuzzy concepts" (p.37), whereas in fact they have great analytical clarity. He also claims that rational decision theory lacks empirical validation, which is quite untrue. There are many successful applications of the rational actor model, although there are also many cases in which its predictions are incorrect unless the model is extended in substantively new directions.

Bunge also argues that rational decision theory, by modeling individual choice as the maximization of expected utility, presumes that decision-makers are selfish and make choices that are welfare enhancing for them. A most elementary acquaintance with rational decision theory would suffice to convince Bunge that neither is the case. The case of altruism is especially glaring, since he repeatedly cites my work in favor of the notion that individuals often behave altruistically, but he does recall that I make the obvious point that there is nothing irrational about caring about others or having social goals. I similarly assert repeatedly in my work that the rational actor model does not presume that people make choices that are good for them, and indeed, a rational decision-maker could, and often does, wish he had preferences different from his actual preferences (e.g., I may wish I did not smoke cigarettes although I do). Citing me in support of his dismissal of the rational choice model is bizarre and incoherent.

Bunge is in fact a strong critic of the notion that individual behavior is guided by rationality. "in politics," he says, "dumbness is at least as common as rationality. A majority of American voters reelected in 2004 the government that had distinguished itself by slashing social services, invading two countries..." Bunge's analysis is astonishingly heavy-handed on more than one count. First, this has absolutely nothing to do with rational decision theory. Bunge perfectly reveals his ignorance of the theory. Second, he reduces political differences to intelligence and rationality differences. He surely knows better than that. But then, he often makes assertions that reveal his personal politics, and that are out of place in a serious discussion of political philosophy. For instance, "war on terror," he asserts "is a contradiction in disguise, since war is the worst terror." (9) Of course, an unbiased analysis would not treat all war as a form of terrorism.

Bunge's analysis of individualism vs. holism in modeling the relationship between individual action and

social structure is very nicely done. He effectively criticizes both, and argues that society is a "system of systems," so that there are movements in both directions from social structure to individual and collective action. In dealing with freedom/coercion and equality/inequality, he presents a plodding but persuasive analysis of Democratic Socialism, Classical Liberalism, Soviet Communism, and Fascism. He comes out in favor of Democratic Socialism, by which he means a system with market economy, private property, and a more or less interventionist state.

Bunge's analysis of values is marred by his lack of understanding of rational decision theory and behavioral game theory. He suggests that the classical liberal recognizes only individual values concerning well-being and privacy, but ignores biosocial values such as security and solidarity and social values such as justice and peace. This is of course quite off-base when he processed to characterize all of "fashionable social science" as committed to neoclassical microeconomics, which denies all but the individual values. I can't think of a single individual who as dealt with these problems who has declared the unimportance of biosocial values and social justice. Moreover, behavioral experimental using game theory and the rational actor model have shown that individual values include such social preferences as an concern for the environment and egalitarian distributions, so Bunge's taxonomy is faulty.

There are many more issues worthy of discussion raised by Bunge's work, but I will content myself with just one. Towards the end of the book Bunge declares himself in favor of market socialism in which firms are owned predominantly by their workers. Bunge's description of the current state of worker ownership in the world economy is detailed and highly informative. Moreover, he correctly lists most of the shortcomings of worker ownership that render this form of work organization limited in its ability to compete with traditional individual and shareholder owned firms. He does not appear to know why worker-owned firms are so limited, however. In fact, there is a single overarching problem with the worker-owned firm: this institution forces workers to hold all of their assets in a single firm---where they work---while the traditional capitalist firm allows owners to distribute their portfolio of assets over many firms, thus limiting their personal risk. Of course, a worker-owned firm could borrow its capital, but it would still be outperformed by capitalist firms that use both borrowing and issuing shares to finance their operations.

Bunge's Political Philosophy is a very worthy book whose author is very knowledgeable and widely read. However, he understanding of modern economics and behavioral game theory is not deep enough to make his overall argument completely convincing. He, or someone, should offer us a revision that corrects Bunge's errors and biases.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Mario Bunge, a brilliant writer

By Antonio A. Martino

Political Philosophy of Mario Bunge is a volume of 439 pages that worth its weight. Being one of the greatest living philosophers of science, the author succeeds in the first part, by putting an order in the mixed up and crowded terminology of the subject. This is in part because of some analytical authors, also for the result of the worst French culture in recent years, that has been devoted to create words offending Occam, the matter appears to the reader, even as a specialized, like a gibberish. Bunge puts order and gives an overview. He describes each of the problems from the citizens until politics and reflects the diversity and unity that is at the same time. He Takes care of the individual values and their role in the calculation of arrowsiana social memory. Both, Arrows and Buchanan books, originally written for economy, made an enormous gap in science and political philosophy. The author takes the philosophies and ideals that move across this area since - with forgiveness of Marx and his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach - it's necessary to know the world for then transform it, but there is no author of political philosophy that does not adhere to these two parts of philosophy (and even of political science) not philosophies below current knowledge of

science, do not forget that the ultimate function is known to transform, here the normative dimension which they cannot escape - as Bobbio said - not even the metaphilosophers, as is Bunge's book.

The book has a quality that is undeniable: It is clear. It is very clear when he describes, and if you are in disagreement, you can falsify it. It is clear when he shows his trends and preferences; and you may not like them, all you have to do is discuss them, argue against.

You cannot ignore a clear work, in the descriptive as prescriptive part. Or an ideal work like this, because there is a vision of an integral democracy which is the lighthouse where political science is going in quality of democracy.

The book takes into account the scientific and technological inputs that are transforming the society and hence political philosophy through negotiation which is the inalienable part of the politic (the other two are to convince the enemy or kill him) and takes into account most pressing public policy to which humanity is faced with a dramatic last-sea: food, overpopulation, energy, distribution of power and sources of power (wealth, prestige, power, etc.)

The bibliographic references are in themselves a significant value.

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