



BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan Floyd (2017). *Is Political Philosophy Impossible? Thoughts and Behavior in Normative Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Daniil I. Kokin

Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Jonathan Floyd holds a position of Senior lecturer in Political theory at the University of Bristol. In 2011, he co-edited (in collaboration with Marc Stears) a book *Political Philosophy versus History*. In this book, Floyd first proposed his original approach called normative behaviorism. The reviewed book in its turn is his first monograph and the most comprehensive statement of the approach. It is worth attention and careful reading for two reasons. First, it considers the deepest question of the discipline. Second, it is an exemplary work in analytic political philosophy. In this review, I will try to summarize main ideas presented in the book and explain, why, despite all its merits, it did not make a breakthrough in the field.

The main purpose of the book is to introduce a new way of doing political philosophy. Thus, Floyd claims that it is about (and of) political philosophy, particularly its deepest foundational principles. In the first part, *Symptom*, the author argues that debates in contemporary political philosophy are rationally interminable. He explains it by the fact that the discipline must be understood in terms of organizing question (OQ) – how should we live? Examining contemporary political philosophers' works and ideas, Floyd realizes that they "have failed to provide a *convincing* and *meaningful* answer to this question" (p. 98). Besides this, Floyd distinguishes two more questions: foundational question (Why should we live that way and not another?) and guiding question (Is it possible to provide a convincing and meaningful answer to OQ?). He comes to the ambiguous conclusion that political philosophy is impossible to do and impossible to avoid doing. It is impossible to do because we cannot provide a decisive answer to the OQ. It is impossible to avoid doing just because people anyway live within certain political system based on the existing principles and answers. This is what Floyd calls the impossibility thesis. It is the first of his main ideas presented in the book.

The part *Diagnosis* is devoted to the idea of mentalism, the second main idea of the book. In his effort to find the cause of political philosophy's interminability, Floyd states that it is mentalist paradigm. It means that "political philosophers attempt to discover and then apply whatever set of normative political principles is already implicitly expressed within our existing normative thought" (p. 100). The author argues that it is the dominant method of political philosophy. Surprisingly, the author claims that these normative principles derived from our vision of how the world should be are inconsistent and thus impossible. Thus, Floyd identifies six mentalist techniques. It brings him to the conclusion that there are no comprehensive normative positions in contemporary political philosophy.

The third and the most important idea, normative behaviorism, is developed in the third part *Cure*. Floyd claims that this is a new model of political philosophy that is able to give a convincing and meaningful answer to OQ and solve the dilemma of interminability. The author claims that the idea of normative behaviorism holds "hat rather than trying to convert patterns in human thought into convincing and meaningful political principles, we should try to do the same with patterns in human behavior" (p. 3). This approach focuses mostly on two phenomena: crime and insurrection. Thus, the most suitable political system is the one that produces less of this behavior. And the best developed so far, according to normative behaviorism, is social liberal democracy.

As was already noted, this is an exemplary book of analytic political philosophy. It is comprehensible and easy to read. Moreover, the way of developing ideas in this book is like doctor's activity, where Floyd assesses the symptoms, determines a diagnosis and recommends a cure for ailing political philosophy. It is worth mentioning that this cure is elaborated by Floyd himself. These steps are reflected in the book structure. The author uses simple language and employs clear structure without any intrigue or sophisticated tricks. Moreover, Floyd often tries to keep in touch with a reader by asking, explaining and clarifying his arguments.

In spite of its merits, Floyd's book did not make a breakthrough within the discipline. Moreover, it raises more questions than it succeeds in answering. The problem arises already at the starting point. Why exactly this question defines the essence of political philosophy? Isn't it more suitable for ethics? The organizing question of political philosophy Floyd proposes seems both too broad and too specific. It seems too broad because political philosophy is unable to tell people how they should live in general. It touches only upon political aspect of their existence. It seems too specific because political philosophy tries to answer a number of other questions, which are not related to human way of life.

The size of the book is traditional for the discipline, but makes the reader to wonder why a large part of it is given to reiterations and re-phrasings of what was already said. I believe the argument could be more concise. Even Floyd himself in the introduction points out that one can skip some parts depending on the reasons one reads it for.

Finally, does normative behaviorism really solve the problem? Fighting against pluralism of universalist approaches, Floyd comes to the same dead-end: Floyd

repudiates the existing approaches while the only one deemed correct is his own. This conclusion seems yet another variant of existing criticisms of preceding political thought, it emphasizing particular aspects such as political realism and diagnostic practice. But leaves these aspects insufficiently justified, for one could ask if all people behave in the same way? Although trying to change rules of the game by reinventing the ground for establishing political principles, Floyd arrives to the homely widespread conclusion: the best way of living is social liberal democracy. This seems highly ideological.

Regardless of these observations, this book is an important contribution to the discipline because there are too few works that examine the foundations of political philosophy. It is relevant to the current debates as well, for political philosophers today are mostly concerned with methodological issues of the field. It also encourages us to look at the current political situation and study political behavior, which is to be oriented to the current state of affairs. However, this book needs a professional reader with a serious background and critical attitude. If one needs another argument for social liberal democracy as the best political system one can live in, one can try to struggle through this reading.