

Political Norms and Moral Values

Robert Jubb | University of Leicester | rj138@leicester.ac.uk

Department of Politics & International Relations | University Road | LE1 7RH | U.K.

Enzo Rossi | University of Amsterdam | e.rossi@uva.nl

Department of Political Science | OZ Achterburgwal 237 | 1012DL | Netherlands

Is genuinely normative political theory necessarily informed by distinctively moral values? Eva Erman and Niklas Möller (2013) answer that question affirmatively, and highlight its centrality in the debate on the prospects of political realism, which explicitly eschews pre-political moral foundations. In this comment we defend the emerging realist current. After briefly presenting Erman and Möller's position, we (i) observe that freedom and equality are not obviously moral values in the way they assume, and (ii) argue that a non-moral distinction between politics and sheer domination can give us a distinctively political normativity. The two points are related but freestanding.

Against realism, Erman and Möller claim that “all coherent and plausible conceptions of political legitimacy must hold onto the ethics first premise” and so begin with foundational moral claims (p. 2). Realists cannot consistently insist on the priority of politics to morality and criticize views that invert that relation if it is impossible for them to find some distinctively political normative ground to explain why some orders are legitimate and others not. Erman and Möller also argue that allowing some distinctively moral claim to ground the appropriateness of a political order does not have to reduce politics to the implementation of moral claims; that is, they admit there are sources of practical normativity apart from morality, and that these may be

politically relevant (“the political domain includes institutional aspects and practical concerns that do not follow from the moral justificatory basis”: p. 15)¹. The autonomy of the political is compatible with adopting an ‘ethics first’ view. Realism has been disarmed.

The central question here is whether realists can avoid holding an ‘ethics first’ view. Is the ideal of free(ish) and equal(ish) agreement to a political order they use as a criterion of legitimacy inevitably morally grounded? Erman and Möller rightly point out that orders do not have to be freely and equally agreed upon to be stable, since the most oppressive tyrannies can be stable. If mere stability is the realists’ only distinctively political virtue, an ideal of free and equal agreement is not immanent in it. That does not show that they must have an ‘ethics first’ view though. To show realists must have an ‘ethics first’ view, we need to show both that freedom and equality are always distinctively moral values and that realists’ distinctive virtue is mere stability.

Erman and Möller see morality as “about how we, as individuals, ought to live our lives” (pp. 9-10). The question is then whether this obviously contains the values of freedom and equality that realists need. Erman and Möller say very little about why we should see freedom and equality as moral values, more or less assuming that since they are not political in the sense of being related to mere stability, they must be moral. Is our experience of everyday life and the appropriate forms of interaction with others in it somehow committed to the elimination of hierarchy and individual autonomy, though? Judgments of character, desert, and of duties to family and friends often seem both to bind us without our consent and to draw distinctions between those who have claims on us and those who lack standing. Neither being bound to others involuntarily nor erecting hierarchies of concern seem particularly egalitarian or sensitive to freedom. Given that Erman and Möller admit that there are other sources of normativity, why must realists’ invocation of the values of freedom and equality be moralistic? To assert that freedom and equality must be moral values is to straightforwardly beg the question

¹ It is worth noting that we agree with Erman and Möller that some realists (e.g. Raymond Geuss) incorrectly accuse Rawls of ignoring all or most relevant empirical and contextual information. G.A. Cohen and Robert Nozick are clearer exemplars of political moralism. For a brief discussion of the genesis of their moralistic methodology and its relation to Rawls’ see Rossi (2014). Arguably moral values play less of a foundational role in Rawls’ theory of legitimacy (1993), as opposed to his theory of justice (1971). For a realist-friendly reading of *Political Liberalism* see Sangiovanni (2008), Gledhill (2012), and Jubb (forthcoming).

against realists, particularly when much of morality does not seem to be egalitarian or liberal.

We can firm up that point by illuminating the potential sources of political, non-moralistic values that realists can appeal to that go beyond stability in a minimal sense. The challenge for realists is to individuate normative principles that do not have to be grounded in pre-political moral claims. Bernard Williams' claim that his 'Basic Legitimation Demand' does not "represent a morality which is prior to politics" but is instead "inherent in there being such a thing as politics" indicates how this is possible. (2005, p. 5). The thought is that morality is not required to add a normative dimension to our understanding of politics, because there is a *conceptual* distinction between politics and sheer domination – both 'thick' evaluative concepts, in Williams' parlance.² In other words, we don't need to draw on pre-political moral beliefs in order to know that might is not right and so have a non-moral foundation for our political theorising. Realists will tend to maintain that right requires might; but that isn't to say that they are one and the same. Realist political normativity can then be carved out by interpreting the practice of politics in a given context. So realists have at least a two-stage process through which they can question the exercise of coercive power. They ask: what is the point and purpose of political authority here and now? And is this specific exercise of power in line with our best answer to the first question? Note how those questions aren't merely descriptive. Though they have a factual component, and so the basis for a discussion which can move beyond countering one moral intuition with another, they also leave room for the normative task of interpretation.³ To be sure, moral values may inform interpretation, but any moral values realism invokes are filtered through of the role of politics in providing an order for creatures like us. *Contra* Erman and Möller, realists do not need an 'ethics *first*' view.

Erman and Möller may wish to resist the conceptual distinction between politics and sheer domination, but it is not clear that such resistance would be compatible with their defence of the role of morality in normative political theory. Two considerations are in order here. First, if there is no distinction between politics and sheer domination, then

2 The rough point being that, for thick concepts, normative valence and meaning are closely related – one cannot understand such a concept without agreeing on the appropriateness of its use in a given context. See Williams 1985, p. 140-142.

3 Cf. Walzer 1987.

an 'ethics first' view would have to think of itself as the justification of brute force through that force's realization of certain moral ends. Can justice and mutual respect really be achieved through naked coercion though?⁴ That leads to our second consideration. Typically, the view that all orders are unmitigated domination is suspicious of moral thought in those orders, seeing it necessarily tainted by the circumstances of its production, at best false and more often a justification for and part of the very apparatus of oppression moralists hope to hold up to its standards. If "ethics is usually dead politics" (Geuss 2008, p. 42) moralists' hopes for escaping brute power will be chimerical.

Indeed, in a sense realists seem to be less cynical than moralists. They believe our politics, if far from perfect, is not straightforwardly tyrannical, and hope to use its combination of coercion and consent to generate norms to govern it. Moralists on the other hand demand that politics accord with their private moral views and tend to see it as an arena of brute force when it does not, denying that the act of providing an order itself has a normativity.

References

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4 Some liberal moralists may claim that, thanks to public justification, their theories of legitimacy don't envisage morally salient coercion. Whatever public justification's merits, its importance must rest on that of freedom and equality, whose character as distinctly moral values we have cast doubt on. Conversely, a self-professed moralist like Col. Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (say) won't see a tension between his moral values and brute coercion – hardly an appealing position.

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