

Interpretation

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In this brief volume, based on lectures originally presented in 1992 and 1993, themselves incorporating previously published essays, but here amplified with a new preface and afterword, liberal political theorist and social critic Michael Walzer aims “to defend a certain kind of left politics, focused on equality at home and a liberal and constrained version of self-determination abroad” (ix). The original text grew out of Walzer’s longer, highly regarded treatises on domestic and international political morality, respectively, *Spheres of Justice* and *Just and Unjust Wars*. As explained in his original introduction, Walzer aimed to apply the argument of the earlier books in the “new political world” marked by “the collapse of the totalitarian [i.e., Communist] project” and the rise of “a pervasive, at least ostensible, commitment to democratic government and an equally pervasive, more actual commitment to cultural autonomy and national independence.” Pointing to the tension between the “near-universal ideology” of democracy and the “intense pursuit of the ‘politics of difference,’” Walzer wishes to endorse the latter while defending “a certain sort of [democratic or protodemocratic] universalism,” one that most importantly “prohibits the brutal repression of both minority and majority groups” (xi–xii). His use of the terms “thick” and “thin” refers to the distinction between discussing “our own history and culture” (thick) and conversing with foreign peoples, having different cultures, about the “thin and universalist morality” we (at least potentially) all share (xi–xiii).

Walzer's opening chapter, elaborating a theme from *Spheres of Justice*, describes the concept of "distributive justice" as a "maximalist" morality, in that it presupposes a broader vision of the *good* life that varies among societies.¹ For instance, Walzer perceptively observes, whereas in medieval Europe the care of souls was a "socialized" affair, in that the church, financed with public funds, was "organized to make repentance and salvation universally available," while the care of bodies, "commonly taken to be less real or less important" (since the extension of earthly life mattered infinitely less than the achievement of eternal life), "was left in private hands," so that those of high rank were more likely to receive it, our contemporary view of what is just is the opposite. That is, whereas in liberal societies, religion is normally a private affair, not receiving any direct governmental support or enforcement, practically nobody would deny that government has a duty to ensure that all citizens receive some basic level of medical care, to whatever extent resources permit. And yet, Walzer observes, standing outside the medieval perspective as we do, we are not in a position to judge its "distributive" policies in this regard to have been unjust (28–31). But his position is not simply relativistic: any system of "distributions," to be legitimate, must meet certain "minimalist" or universalistic criteria: for instance, murder (however defined) is always to be condemned, and the "thick" criteria of justice that regulate a particular society must more generally reflect a shared understanding among those governed by it that is not the result of radical (physical) coercion (26–27).

Further developing the thesis of *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer then enunciates a theory of "complex equality," according to which no one group of claimants "dominates the different distributive processes," but "different goods" are rather "distributed for different reasons among different groups of people." Walzer forthrightly rejects the notion of using the criterion of "simple" equality to govern "the full range of distributions," noting the contradictoriness of efforts "to enforce equality across the board," since its "enforcement would require a radical concentration, and therefore a radically unequal distribution of political power." More generally, however, "the theory of complex equality" exhibits "what is wrong with plutocracy, theocracy, meritocracy, gerontocracy, technocracy, and every other effort to make one good, and the qualities associated with its possession," dominant over all others. Walzer rejects the "totalizing" views of both those on the left who would subordinate all aspects of life to political direction, and those on the

¹ I note that this entails that contrary to John Rawls, the definition of the just is posterior, not prior, to the good.

(economically libertarian) right whose “market imperialism” reduces society to an “exchange system,” in which individuals’ efforts to maximize their utility should be unconstrained by “familial or communal, political or religious interference.” Both such outlooks embody “radically minimalist accounts of the human person,” rather than allow for the “pluralism of social goods and distributive principles and processes” that a fully human life requires (32–39).

While acknowledging the plausibility of much of Walzer’s argument in this chapter, the reviewer poses two questions about it: (1) Is there anyone on the economic “right” who holds that individuals aiming at economic gain should be discouraged from *taking into account* familial, communal, religious, or political considerations as well?² (2) Granted that living a full human life involves the pursuit and enjoyment of a plurality of goods, is it true that, as Walzer maintains, there is *no* “overall hierarchy” to be discerned among the goods we may choose to pursue (32)? (This is not an argument for authoritarian direction of people’s lives, but rather concerns the guidance we offer, especially to young people, about the relative value of different pursuits or goals—especially, in our situation, to those tempted by a life devoted to profit maximization [or even worse, today, video-gaming]. Walzer seems to punt on this issue, remarking simply that “when conflicts [among goods] arise, we will argue about priorities” [32].)

In his second chapter, “Maximalism and the Social Critic,” Walzer defends the principle that “maximalist” social criticism depends on “distributive standards [that] are internal to a culture,” rather than being universal and transcultural, against the charge that it “precludes serious or radical social criticism” (41). He observes that historically, effectual criticisms of regnant political and social systems—from feudal aristocracy to the sixteenth-century Catholic Church to European Communism—typically began with charges that the rulers were not living up to their own professed claims of benefiting their subjects and treating them justly, rather than with the espousal of comprehensive new theories of political legitimacy. (For instance, according to Adam Michnik, the program of the earliest Polish and Czech

² Even Gary Becker’s *Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), which Walzer cites as exemplifying “market imperialism” (35), is represented by its author as an explanation of, not a prescription for, human behavior. Although Becker might attempt to explain acts apparently guided by familial, communal, political, or religious concerns, tautologously, as forms of utility maximization, he does not advise *against* such behavior (nor would his positivistic approach allow for such advice). For the classic treatment of the proper use and limits of economics as a tool for assessing public policy, see Steven Rhoads, *The Economist’s View of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

dissidents whose protests ultimately brought down Communist rule “was a communist, even a Leninist, program that could not have been endorsed by their Western sympathizers” [46].) And given the absence, even today, of a “single, correct, maximalist ideology” that almost everyone can be persuaded to accept, the most effective mode of promoting social reform is likely to be that of “groups like Amnesty International,” which restrict themselves to protesting particular abuses rather than aiming “to impose a complete [new] set of moral principles” on the nations that perpetrate them (49).

As a matter of prudence, Walzer’s (Burkean) advice is undoubtedly sound under *most* circumstances. But granted that most reformist political transformations typically *begin* with “internal” or particularist forms of criticism, Walzer seems to downplay the crucial instances in which the assertion of new universalist principles, initially growing out of such concerns, wound up transforming the political outlook, and hence the institutions and way of life, of large numbers of people. (Consider the Protestant Reformation, to which Walzer alludes at 50–51; the liberal political doctrines enunciated most prominently by Locke and Montesquieu; and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s challenge not only to Marxism but to what he viewed as the excessive materialism that that doctrine shared with twentieth-century Western liberalism.)³ Were Walzer to deny the possibility of such transcultural, transhistorical criticism, or its sometime potentiality for inducing radical political change, he would be vulnerable to the charge of historicism or historical relativism, thereby undercutting even the “minimalist” transcultural criticism that he does explicitly uphold.

Walzer is properly critical of exponents of “maximalist morality” like Martin Luther, who were certain that what they espoused “was the one true morality”: Luther’s dogmatic “universalism,” which demanded that all others comply with his interpretation of Christianity, encouraged his “brutal and intolerant” behavior (50–51). Hence Walzer warns against the “heroic postures” of “philosophical and theological critics,” each of whom “hopes to be the last social critic” (because he will have laid out the principles of the

³ On the philosophic revolution that generated the modern liberal republic, see Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). For Solzhenitsyn, see his 1978 Harvard commencement address, “A World Split Apart.” But neither Locke, Montesquieu, Solzhenitsyn, Aristotle, nor any serious political thinker would claim that his teaching would by itself settle “most of the distributive disputes that arise within a particular society and culture” (49), as opposed to allowing these issues to be resolved by the political process. This is because they were philosophers, not proponents of “maximalist ideology” (49)—a distinction that Walzer fails to make.

perfectly just society) (51). By contrast with such totalizing demands, Walzer espouses a form of “political virtue” that is “tempered by...apolitical virtue,” in such forms as “familial love, professional competence,” and the marketplace (56). In other words, while political legitimacy depends on “the consent of the governed,” a principle which, Walzer observes, “is much older than modern democracy” (53), it does not, indeed should not, entail that politics occupies the center, let alone the whole, of everyone’s life.

Unfortunately, following these sensible observations, Walzer illustrates the possibility of a “thick” critique of American political life by proposing to revise “the internal boundaries” of our society, “exposing” and attacking elements of hierarchy that look “like political power” even though they are “outside the recognized political sphere,” such as “the despotism of factory managers and corporate executives, the autocracy of university presidents, the patriarchal absolutism of male ‘heads of households,’ and so on,” all of which need to be “subjected to democratic rules” (57–58). Like others who make such arguments, Walzer disregards the fundamental distinction between political power, literally understood, and other forms of authority: in a free society, nobody is *forced* to work for a particular boss, teach or study at a particular university, or marry a particular person. Leaving aside the obvious need for criticism of (and legislation to prevent) domestic abuse, the attribution of “despotic” authority to corporate or academic executives seems an invitation to unwise and illiberal intrusion into the private sphere—contrary to Walzer’s earlier warning against attempting to impose “equality” on every aspect of life.

Walzer closes this chapter with a prudent account of how a “democratic idealis[t]” should react when he “sees tyrannical governments in other countries...and people marching” against their rulers to demand “not only ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ but also ‘democracy’”—as was the case with the Chinese protestors at Tiananmen Square in 1989. While supporting their cause on “minimalist” grounds, Walzer would have recognized the need for Chinese reformers to work out the specific meaning of democracy for themselves, in light of their country’s distinctive traditions (59–61). (This is not, I think, an approach that even ardent American advocates of “regime change” in Iraq would have disagreed with.)

Walzer’s fourth chapter is titled “Justice and Tribalism: Minimal Morality in International Politics.” Acknowledging the disinclination of the political Left to accept the persistence of particular national identities, Walzer responds that such “tribal” divisions—in contrast to the “internationalism” of the

Hapsburg and Romanov dynasties—are inevitable, once “the ‘people’” enter political life, “carrying with them their own languages, historical memories, customs, beliefs, and commitments.” Hence, while appreciating the difficulties of applying this principle, Walzer’s moral minimalism dictates acceptance of the (Wilsonian) doctrine of “self-determination” (64–67).

Walzer’s account of what this rule may entail in different circumstances is admirably nuanced. Recognizing the (still not fully resolved) problems resulting (for instance) from the breakup of the artificially created nation of Yugoslavia—the danger that Serbs consigned to inhabit a newly independent Croatia will “live in insecurity,” as would Albanians in Serbia (this was written before the war to secure autonomy for Kosovo)—Walzer rejects the “slippery slope” argument that allowing one self-identifying minority “tribe” to declare independence will inevitably lead to the oppression of smaller tribes within it.⁴ Instead, he considers a variety of possible solutions, depending on circumstances. In “the easiest case,” that of “captive, . . . recently and coercively incorporated nation[s]” such as the Baltic republics, the simple solution is to restore their independence. But even here, complications might arise, if, say, Russian immigrants had come to make up “a majority” (or, I add, even a large minority) of the population of Latvia, or if French colonists came to outnumber the Arabs and Berbers in Algeria. In such situations, either partition of the newly independent nation or “a regime of cultural autonomy instead of . . . political sovereignty” might be required, with a view to finding “the nearest possible arrangement to whatever was *ex ante* just,” while “taking into account” what justice now requires for immigrants, colonists, and their offspring—rather than single-mindedly focusing on trying to compensate for wrongs done in the past. This is even truer for “anciently incorporated nations” like the aboriginal peoples of North America or New Zealand, for whom restoration of anything like “their former independence” is impossible. While such peoples are entitled to “some degree of collective self-rule,” depending on “the residual strength of their own institutions” and “the character of their engagement in the common life of the larger society,” they “cannot claim any absolute protection” of their culture against erosion by the political, social, and economic pressures or temptations of modernity (69–72).⁵

⁴ This was one of Lincoln’s arguments aimed at deterring Southern “secession” from the Union: that it would in turn lead to secessions from the “new confederacy” by other “minorit[ies]” (First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, in *Collected Works*, ed. Roy P. Basler [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953], 4:268–69). But Southern secession, unlike the breakup of Yugoslavia, was not based on historic ethnic or deeply rooted cultural differences among the states.

⁵ On the longstanding mismanagement of American Indian reservations by the federal government, see, however, Naomi Schaefer Riley, *The New Trail of Tears* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

Acknowledging that there is no guarantee that accommodating demands for national self-determination among peoples that *are* capable of self-government will not lead to oppression of minorities within their boundaries, Walzer expresses hope that given nations' increased "entangle[ment] with and dependen[ce] on one another" in comparison with the interwar years, international institutions like the EU, the World Bank, or the UN could effectively condition recognition of the new nations on proper treatment of their minorities. And he emphasizes that the elimination of tribalism, intertwined as it is with people's identities, is in any case impossible.⁶ However, "under conditions of security," individuals will tend to acquire "more complex identit[ies]," dividing rather than fortifying hostile passions (cf. *Federalist*, No. 10). But—in contrast to Alexandre Kojève's aspiration to achieve a "universal homogeneous state"—Walzer affirms that "our common humanity will never make us members of a single universal state," since "the crucial commonality of the human race is particularism" (78–83).⁷ (In other words, as Aristotle put it, man is by nature a political animal—although Aristotle does not identify the polis with the tribe or *ethnē* [*Politics* 1.2].)

Little need be said here of Walzer's fifth chapter, "The Divided Self," wherein he offers an account of the self, in lieu of "a theory of human nature," designed to be consistent with his principle of "complex equality" (xii–xiii). His political conclusion is simply that his (and others') "many-sided self... requires a thickly differentiated society in which to express my different capacities and talents, my different senses of who I am" (102–3). (In other words, like most of us, he would not be happy in ancient Sparta or medieval

⁶ One wishes that Walzer had applied his reflections on self-determination to the problem of the Kurds, probably the world's most important stateless people, still maintaining a distinct identity despite having arbitrarily been denied their promised nationhood in Britain's 1922 "settlement of the Middle Eastern question"; see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 560. For a more thorough treatment of the complexities involved in trying to apply the principle of political self-determination, see Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), chap. 17. Hazony cites Wilson's own statement of regret, in a 1919 meeting with advocates of Irish independence, over his suggestion at the Versailles peace conference that *all* peoples have a right to self-determination, owing to his ignorance of the number of "nationalities" that might come forth to claim that right, and the disappointed "hopes" it inevitably aroused among "many millions of people" (270).

⁷ Here Walzer's conclusion harmonizes with Pierre Manent's defense of the existence of sovereign nation-states against the overextension of international institutions such as the European Union: *Democracy without Nations? The Fate of Self-Government in Europe*, trans. Paul Seaton (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), as well as with Hazony's defense of nationalism, properly understood, in *The Virtue of Nationalism*.

France.) He recognizes that such a society requires the protection “that sovereignty alone provides in the modern world,” albeit buttressed by such principles as “religious toleration, cultural autonomy, [and] individual rights” (103)—again apparently recognizing that human beings could not flourish in the sort of world-state to which many contemporary liberals aspire.

In his 2019 afterword, Walzer adds only that whereas *Thick and Thin* had originally been composed when “the Soviet Union was breaking up,” along with the former Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet satellites were enjoying their “very new independence,” making it “natural” for him “to take the arguments for self-determination” enunciated in chapter 4 “as a key example of moral minimalism,” he now, “tak[ing] in a broader swath of history,” regards “the rules of war” as best exemplifying minimal morality. While granting the difficulties that arise in translating such rules as noncombatant immunity into specifics, those rules are universally understandable because they derive from the elemental rights to life and self-defense. Hence, even when the “hard questions” that arise in applying them “are answered differently,” the answers themselves “come in a language that is culturally non-specific, translatable across all boundaries” (107).

While it is likely that the law of war as it has developed over time transcends cultural boundaries, and Walzer (who treats the subject at greater length in *Just and Unjust Wars*) acknowledges the self-interested motives that originally underlay such rules as not killing POWs (108; consider also the reasons for abandoning the use of poison gas), his endeavor to demonstrate the potential universality of such rules leads him to be far too generous, in his concluding pages, to some of their most egregious violators. He cites Mao Zedung’s “Eight Points for Attention”—a tactical guide for his “People’s Liberation Army” originally issued in 1942 and containing such precepts as “speak politely,” “pay fairly for everything you buy,” and “don’t mistreat captives”—as derivative “from Confucian ethics,” ignoring the future tyrant’s use of mass terror, torture, and dishonesty both en route to, and after his attainment of, power.⁸ While citing the criticism of the “minimalist rules of war...by national liberation militants who claim that the rules work to support the status quo,” and “defend terrorism” by saying “that they have to kill innocent people for the sake of a brighter tomorrow,” Walzer takes solace in the fact “that there are always some” militants who oppose terrorism as ultimately self-defeating. Finally, he cites the “maximalist” argument made by

⁸ See, for instance, the numerous entries under “torture and punishment methods” in the index to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005).

Marxists like Leon Trotsky to the effect that terrorism “is an elitist activity,” as opposed to the “hard work of organizing and raising the consciousness of the working class or the nation” so as to inspire violent revolution. Walzer would like to believe that within the Marxists’ “thick critique of terrorism lies a recognition of the value of each member of ‘the people’” (108–9)—from the utterly ruthless and bloodthirsty Trotsky, no less.

Taken as a whole, *Thick and Thin* makes a valuable contribution to advancing moral debate that is realistic and tolerant rather than dogmatic and self-righteous. It is regrettable that Walzer sometimes falls victim to a curious partisanship that leads him to denounce Western factory managers as despots while suggesting a humanitarian side to murderous Marxists. But these occasional slips do not deprive the book of value for morally serious readers, whether liberal or conservative.