

Review of:

Charles Larmore, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 181 pages.¹

“[T]he pursuit of justice”, Charles Larmore tells us, “needs to be weighed against the importance of there being cooperation at all” (p. 80). And cooperation is not easy to come by. Disagreements about justice and the nature of a flourishing society, even among reasonable and well-intentioned interlocutors, is a pervasive feature of political association. While moral philosophers are free to explore their own conception of the good to its logical conclusions, the distinctive burden of political philosophy is to accept, and to work under, the shadow of possible non-cooperation. The proper business of political philosophy, therefore, ought to be that of securing cooperation in a legitimate fashion. So, it is legitimacy and not justice (distributive or otherwise), that should be the central concern for political philosophers. This is more or less how Larmore answers his titular question.

Although the ‘*What is X?*’ title might suggest a gentle and avuncular introduction to the greatest hits, Larmore’s book is not especially aimed at the beginner. To get the most out of the book, a reader will need some familiarity with political philosophy and a degree of philosophical nous. (It might work as an effective conversation-starter for an advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar). Nor is Larmore’s short monograph laser-focused on a small selection of issues. Indeed, it ranges over the difference between political and moral philosophy, the history of political philosophy—nicely supplementing the standard diet of Enlightenment thought with reflection on the political legacy of the Romantic era, on ancient philosophy, on the role of religion—while still finding time to discuss the nitty-gritty of contemporary political liberalism, the nature of moral principles, and the epistemology of peer-disagreement. As such, the book is a sort of manifesto for Larmore’s political philosophy: tracing its intellectual provenance, comparing his political liberalism to other liberalisms, and articulating where he thinks his work qua political philosopher fits in compared to other normative enterprises.

To orient his own view, Larmore begins by setting out two polar conceptions of political philosophy. The first is a broadly Aristotelian view, one which subsumes political philosophy under the province of moral philosophy. Under this approach, we are guided by the aim of working out how political association can enable us to live the sort of life that is best for us to live. The second is a broadly Hobbesian view that begins from the realist perspective of the actual nature of political life. According

¹ Forthcoming in the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

to this conception, the central project of political philosophy is answering the question: ‘How can we secure peace and order (Hobbes: “a common power to keep them all in awe” *Leviathan* I.xiii.8) in light of fact that humans are naturally riven with conflicting interests and beliefs?’ Larmore’s sympathies lie decidedly with Hobbes rather than Aristotle. However, this does not mean, for Larmore, that political and moral philosophy fail to intersect. Rather, he argues that the relative autonomy of political philosophy is limited by the fact that the conditions of political society must be legitimate. Political legitimacy—distinct from authority, or mere perceived legitimacy—stands in need of a solid moral foundation in order to justify the use of coercive power.

Given that Larmore gives a legitimacy-first statement of what political philosophy *is*, how should we categorise putative works of political philosophy that focus centrally on justice—or other conceptions of the good—rather than legitimacy? Are these not works of political philosophy after all? Larmore prefers to say that such approaches are simply no longer appropriate given what we now know about the prevalence of reasonable disagreement. Under conditions of free and open discussion—and without the homogenising influence of oppression—Larmore thinks experience has shown (contrary to what Aristotle may have claimed) that disagreements about the good are not simply artefacts of deficient exercise of reason. Larmore thus compares perfectionist approaches which have failed to learn this lesson to “the practice of medicine before the discovery of the germ theory of disease” (p. 41).

Larmore broadly accepts the later Rawlsian principle of legitimacy, which he boils down to holding that “political arrangements [at least those concerning the fundamental principles of society] are legitimate provided there are reasons that people can (not necessarily do) all see from their perspective to endorse them” (p. 146). Where Larmore seeks to extend this framework is by making explicit and clarifying the moral foundations of this principle. He does so with recourse to the notion of *respect for persons*. Respects for persons, on Larmore’s view, is why we seek to achieve the reasonable agreement characteristic of liberal legitimacy in the first place. The search for common ground—unlike mere threat or coercion—engages the distinctive capacity for reflection we have as persons. In this sense, Larmore claims that the political liberal respects those to whom she seeks to justify coercive political power and treats them as ends rather than as means. Of course, this does not mean that legitimacy requires actual agreement of everyone who is subjected to political power. While the search for a theory of legitimation that fails to exclude anyone is quixotic, Larmore suggests that political liberalism is “unique among forms of political exclusion” (p. 169). This is because it only excludes viewpoints which—and only to the extent that they—reject the centrality of respect for persons, while seeking to include those who endorse all manner of diverse ethical views. The role of respect is more or less taken to be axiomatic for Larmore’s political liberal: the exclusion of

perspectives which reject the centrality of respect for persons “is a fundamental kind of exclusion [that] is not regrettable but rather necessary” (p. 168).

The scope of the project means that Larmore sometimes paints with broad brushstrokes, but his synoptic vision is refreshing. A variety of important topics are discussed as Larmore articulates his political liberalism. The use of Bernard Williams’ posthumous essays on political philosophy (*In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton 2005) as a foil was particularly interesting and fresh. For example, Williams’ suggestion that it is wrongheaded to “imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur” (10, *ibid.*) prompts a fascinating discussion of the *historicity* of political legitimacy. Many pre-modern states were based on fundamentally unjust and oppressive social arrangements: for instance, the acceptance of chattel slavery. Were these states legitimate? If not, have there been *any* legitimate states in the pre-modern era? Larmore might be a little hasty in calling ‘silly’ the urge to regard such states as illegitimate, but his ensuing discussion is insightful. Arguing that it is a “very important, though neglected truth” that legitimacy comes in degrees (p. 119), Larmore explores the contours of how the conditions of possible social and economic cooperation have changed over time. As legitimacy is tightly linked to securing the bases of cooperation, variability in the types of cooperation that are feasible (and have been perceived feasible) entails that the standards of legitimacy are themselves variable. This argument, to Larmore’s mind, lends weight to Bernard Williams’ rejection of ‘political moralism’ and underscores the relevance of historical circumstance to questions of political legitimacy. Another important question considered is the relevance of epistemological literature on peer disagreement to political philosophy. Some epistemologists urge that belief-revision is the appropriate response to finding out that you disagree with reasonable interlocutors—how does this square, Larmore wonders, with the supposed intractability of disagreement used to motivate political liberalism? Larmore’s way to defuse this puzzle is one which would be (putting it mildly) surprising to contemporary epistemologists—namely that “the proper object of justification is thus not belief itself, but changes in belief” (p. 138)—but it is admirable that he takes this epistemological work seriously in the first place.

Larmore begins his conclusion by asserting: “This has not been an optimistic book” (p. 172). This pessimism is found not only in the weight placed on the intractability of disagreement, but in ominous warnings about ‘impending catastrophe’ brought on by environmental destruction, capitalist excess, and the resurgence of authoritarianism. These emphases made me think that the mirror-image of the insight that historical circumstance determines the proper business of political philosophy is that the circumstances of the future will be equally determinative. If this is so, one wonders whether the comparison between perfectionist political philosophy and medicine before the advent of germ theory is inapt—can political circumstance not change so that the extent to which distributive justice

comprises the proper focus of political philosophy waxes and wanes? While it is easy to suppose that we live in uniquely troubled times—remember that *A Theory of Justice*, the canonical defence of the centrality of distributive justice to political philosophy, was published under the spectre of nuclear war—it is hard not to see Larmore’s claim for the priority of legitimacy at the expense of distributive justice as a dark reflection of the contemporary moment. Even if this is so, we will need some reading material for the end times. Larmore should be applauded for providing us with an elegant and penetrating conception of the nature of political philosophy.

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