

Minimal Ethics

Hugh Mercer Curtler

Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad by Michael Walzer, *University of Notre Dame Press, 1994. 108 pp. \$16.95.*

Ours is indeed an anxious age, and many of us share "a strong sense of being caught out in a cultural deluge on a globe in convulsions."¹ Intellectual historians have agreed to call it the "post-modern era." This means that the modern era is over, an era committed to Cartesian rationalism, economic expansion, and technological progress, on the one hand, and a concern for universal suffrage and political equality, on the other. We now contemplate a political force that questions the entire European "logocentric" development and stresses the particularity of cultural groups and sub-groups. In their eagerness to embrace the new, however, many zealous members of this movement would jettison what is best in the old.

One example of this can be found in the thought that follows Nietzsche and other "prophets of extremity" towards a complete relativism in ethics that leaves no room for the resolution of moral perplexities except through force. Out of a sincere concern for divergent beliefs and values of people and peoples, this movement insists upon "privileging difference" and de-

nies a common humanity. This is a mistake of serious proportions. Our problem, as Eugene Webb recently noted, is "that of finding an intelligible basis for belief in human universality and common rationality even as we recognize and respect the manifold diversity of human beliefs."² Few seem to be looking and it is difficult to hear amid the clamor of opposing points of view.

In such an atmosphere a book such as Professor Michael Walzer's is a breath of fresh air. Without arrogance, it exposes a serious flaw on the part of post-modern thinkers, especially in the realm of ethics where relativism is all the rage. While Walzer does not go quite far enough, his effort is deserving of high praise. More to the point, he is almost certainly correct in what he says.

Walzer seeks to establish a "thin" or "minimalist" morality that is universal and cuts across cultural boundaries where "thick" or "maximalist" moralities take root. This is an important thesis, because one of the cardinal tenets of post-modernism is the claim that all value judgments are relative to cultures (or sub-cultures) and eventually, it is said, all claims are disguised value judgments—even the claims of the natural sciences.

Thus is relativism total.³

Walzer begins with his own reaction to a film clip from a television news program in 1989 showing the people of Prague marching in the streets carrying signs “some of which say simply ‘Truth’ and others ‘Justice.’ When I saw the picture, I knew immediately what the signs meant—and so did everybody else who saw the same picture.”

What is central to this claim is Walzer’s insistence that “everybody else” knew what the signs meant and not only Walzer or the people of Prague. In other words, the signs reflected a universal, human concern—a critical problem for the cultural relativist, who denies the possibility of universality in moral matters. If these claims can be said to cut across cultural boundaries, the position that such claims are purely a matter of enculturation cannot be maintained. In this regard, Walzer asks, rhetorically:

Is there any recent account, any post-modernist account, of political language that can explain this understanding and acknowledgment? How could I penetrate so quickly and join so unreservedly in the language game or the power play of a distant generation?

Upon this single observation, with its attendant reflections, Walzer builds his case for a minimalist morality—that is, a modest set of moral precepts that must be universally acknowledged. The “must” here is questionable, however, because Walzer is not clear in his own mind just what it is that universality entails. It does not mean, for instance, that everyone will agree that a claim is true; it does mean that everyone *should* agree that the claim is true. He seems unaware, for example, that $2+3=5$ is universal whether or not it is universally acknowledged. Similarly, moral claims such as “Discrimination against minorities is unjust,” if they are univer-

sal, are true whether or not they are acknowledged. Walzer tends to stress *awareness* of universal claims and to ignore the nature of the claims themselves. Assent to universal claims is a question of fact and not principle, whereas universal claims are prescriptive in that all persons ought to acknowledge their truth, whether or not they do so in fact. Walzer is impressed by the universal appeal of the signs in Prague, but he needs to realize that the appeal is warranted by the universality of the claims and not *vice versa*. Walzer is doing cultural anthropology; he needs to do philosophy. This seems to be endemic to much of post-modern thinking.

Relativistic conclusions are to be expected from a viewpoint that substitutes epistemology for ontology. It is characteristic of reductionistic, post-modern thinking to focus attention upon historical *descriptions* rather than historical *events*. But the claim that events and objects are reducible to our perception of them is simplistic. It is not impossible, in principle, that the grounds of our knowledge are prior in the order of being to the knowledge itself. Furthermore, this accords with common sense. In the moral realm, it is reasonable to assert that actions are right or wrong independently of our claims about the worth of those actions. We can both acknowledge the partiality of our grasp of the truth of moral claims and, at the same time, insist that those claims cannot be both true and false—as the relativist insists. Our moral knowledge is corrigible, but it is not mere whimsy.

While building his case for universality, then, Walzer hedges his bet by insisting that these “thin” precepts are merely abstract and without content. It is at this point that his argument begins to falter. We can best see this by looking more carefully at the distinction he makes between “thick” and “thin” morality.

Take the case of distributive justice, which, unlike the justice that was demanded in Prague, is a thick principle. The features of thick morality are fairly clear. "It will be idiomatic in its language, particularist in its cultural reference, and circumstantial in the two senses of that word: historically dependent and factually detailed." The thin principles are not so clear, but Walzer lists, in addition to "justice" and "truth," "non-coercion" and national "self-determination." Unfortunately Walzer commits the same error Meno commits in his dialogue with Socrates: instead of defining thin morality, he merely enumerates several examples. What can we make out?

Walzer seems to be saying that the idea of justice, minimally understood, is what allows us to sympathize with the marchers in Prague and to recognize blatant acts of injustice whenever and wherever they occur. He says, in fact, that

Minimalism...is a simplified and singleminded morality. It works with an elementary and undifferentiated understanding of society and self, abstracted from all the actual and elaborated understandings. A minimalist view is a view from a distance or a view in a crisis, so that we can recognize injustice [say] only in the large.

Unfortunately, these metaphors tend to diminish the minimalist idea to little more than a gut feeling or an intuition—which must, of course, vie with the intuitions and gut feelings that run counter to our own. Walzer's unwillingness to flesh out his notion of thin morality proves troublesome, indeed, though we can perhaps understand his reluctance to sever completely his ties with the dominant orthodoxy of our times. This reluctance can be seen most clearly in a passage in the fourth chapter where Walzer tells us that

Songs and stories are the expression of a thick moral and political culture, to whose protagonists we are likely to be sympathetic (as in the Czech example that shaped my first chapter) for thin or minimalist reasons; because we oppose the oppression, deceit, and torture that accompanied totalitarian rule. These reasons cannot be made to generate an alternative totality—the empire of reason, say.

Walzer insists that moral minimalism, "while reasonable enough and universal enough, has no imperialistic tendencies; it doesn't aspire to global rule." Walzer is clearly waffling on a fundamental issue: he wants to have his cake without removing it from the mouths of other post-modern thinkers with whom he is not entirely in agreement. What Walzer apparently fears is the subtle, but commonplace, move from objectivism to absolutism. It is the latter he fears—in the form of "imperialism"—but he hesitates to embrace the former because he suspects it has "imperialistic" tendencies. Objectivism, however, differs from absolutism in important respects. The claim that a specific action is wrong for specific reasons, for example, is a claim that can be supported by rational argument and neutral evidence. Ultimately, appeal is made to objective standards and principles, though our grasp of these principles is always corrigible. Simply stated, this is the thesis of objectivism. Such a view does not entail the "imperialistic" claim that we are certain that such an action is always wrong and ought to be stomped out wherever it is found. The values that ground our moral judgments may be absolute, but our grasp of those values is always partial.

Even in the face of his fear of the "imperialistic" tendencies of thin morality, however, Walzer will allow that "A society or political regime [like that of the Czech communists] that violated the minimal standards would be a deficient society. In this sense,

minimalism provides a critical perspective." Further, there are times "when it is morally justified to send armed men and women across a border—and minimalism alone (ultramini-
malism?) defines the time and fixes the limits." The parenthetical phrase is instructive: Walzer knows that in certain respects some societies (including our own) are "deficient," and that action, even violent action, may be required. But he fears these consequences, and rightly so. Thus he invents the term "ultra-minimalism" to create a narrow base from which to launch cross cultural value judgments and order armies into action. That he provides a base at all is remarkable. But, despite our uncertainty in these matters, Walzer shouldn't be quite so fearful of universal moral claims in the face of man's inhumanity to man in all cultures, including our own. Some of the things that men do to one another are plainly wrong. As he viewed the marchers in Prague his feelings were testimony of refined moral sensibilities: Walzer should follow the argument to where it leads.

Walzer's problem is that he has failed to ground his minimalist morality on anything firmer than human feelings, which are notoriously unreliable and variable. Consequently his ground seems to shift just when he is about to make a firm stand. We must ask the key question: "How does one *know* that injustice, untruth, and coercion are wrong?" Walzer doesn't have an answer to this question, he just knows. But this will not do. Walzer must push his analysis further and enter the realm of ontology. If he isn't willing to do so, we must do so for him.

To put it simply, injustice is wrong (as are lying and coercion) because it involves a violation of the respect that is owed to persons. To be sure, as Walzer would also insist, this is a "thick" prin-

ciple, at least as it has been elaborated by Western philosophers from the time of Kant. But embedded within it is a thin precept universal in scope and binding on all human communities.

Justice, truth, non-coercion, and self-determination are derivative notions. They are logically dependent upon the concept of respect for persons—however that concept may be elaborated within particular cultures, whether or not the precept happens to be acknowledged by a particular culture at the moment. It is because persons are "ends in themselves," as Kant would have it, and not to be treated merely as means, that deception, injustice, and coercion are wrong. Walzer's belief that these things are wrong is most certainly correct, but he needs to press the point by noting that these things are wrong *because they are done by one person to another who shares with him or her a common humanity*. This is what "respect" means. It is because we all belong to a human community that we ought to be moral. Walzer comes close to acknowledging this when he says that thin, or minimalist, morality constitutes "the necessary character of any human society: universal because it is human, particular because it is society." Unfortunately, he does not follow this line of thought.

As noted above, Walzer would almost certainly insist that the concept of "respect for persons" is too sophisticated to be regarded as a thin concept. He argues, as we have seen, that thin concepts are universal and abstract. Thin morality "is everyone's morality because it is no one's morality in particular. Subjective interest and cultural expression have been avoided or cut away." As it happens, however, the concept of "respect for persons" meets Walzer's criteria for thin moral principles (such as they are). It is abstract and devoid of con-

tent and is consistent with our strongest feelings about what is right and wrong. Furthermore, it is basic in that it is not derived from other precepts. To be sure, the process of particularizing the precept endows it with thick layers of cultural meanings—centering around the issue of who is and who is not a “person.” Our Western tradition struggled with this question for centuries as the concept of “person” became increasingly inclusive. But the basic premise remained the same throughout this struggle: persons (whoever they might be) are deserving of respect. They ought not to be harmed and they should be treated as we would have them treat us. This thin concept that is “embedded” (Walzer’s term) at the center of our thick Western concept is what ultimately informs most, if not all, of our moral judgments. If it does not in fact, then it should.

One suspects that Walzer fears ontology, and because of his postmodernist predilections he hesitates to go too far in the direction of allowing universality in moral discourse. Although Walzer sees the possibilities of grounding a moral critique on universal claims, he maintains that these claims have to be thin and devoid of content. Any real critique must fall back on the thick concepts of our particular moral perspective. As he puts it, “Minimalism makes for a certain limited, though important and heartening solidarity. It doesn’t make for a full-blooded universal doctrine.” In fact, if Walzer had asked himself how he knows that injustice, deception, and coercion are wrong he would have arrived at firmer ground upon which to base a “universal doctrine.” It does not follow that this doctrine would lead to narrowness and intolerance, since the claims we make for it are unavoidably perspectival and any elaboration of the doctrine would necessarily draw on particularistic, thick moral precepts. But it would be

a doctrine that would allow its advocates to avoid whimsy and logical inconsistency. Walzer is on to something, but his thin morality is somewhat emaciated and needs to have some meat on its bones.

In the end, Walzer’s is an important book. It provides a foot in the door of reductionistic post-modern relativism. Once it is acknowledged that there are universal moral principles—even if these are thin principles—it is possible to adjudicate differences rationally and resolve moral perplexities morally, within and across cultural boundaries. We are in Walzer’s debt, even though he was unable (or unwilling) to open the door and see what was within.

1. Janus, “Januarian Manifesto,” *The Gallatin Review* (volume 12, number 1), 141. 2. Eugene Webb, “The Epochal Particularism of Modernity,” *The Gallatin Review* (*op. cit.*), 88. 3. See, for example, Foucault’s discussion of “power-knowledge” as it is explained by Allan Megill. “Foucault [as contrasted with Marx] holds that there is no such thing as objective science. In Foucault’s perspective, every ‘science’ is in fact an ‘ideology,’ not in the strict sense of its being a reflection of some particular class but in the broader sense that it is irremediably caught up within relations of power.” (Megill: *Prophets of Extremity*, Berkeley, 1985, 249.)

Dialogue with Tradition

CHARLES BAMBACH

The Six Great Themes of Western Metaphysics and the End of the Middle Ages, by Heinz Heimsoeth; translated by Ramon Betanzos, *Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994. 272pp. \$39.95 (paper \$18.95).*

When Aristotle began his inquiry into the causes and principles of philosophical