

## Book Review

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### What is Political Philosophy?

CHARLES LARMORE, 2020

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Every so often, as if the mist suddenly clears, a piece of philosophy comes along that communicates in astounding clarity how it understands the aims and purposes of its own subject matter. Charles Larmore's book, *What is Political Philosophy?* achieves this in a way that would be immensely beneficial to any undergraduate, or even early post-graduate, student wishing to gain some conceptual and methodological clarity about political philosophy. The book neatly explains and then also contributes to the, now resurgent, debate about the methodology and proper subject of political philosophy with a political-realist-inclined view and a reaffirming of political liberalism as a theory of legitimacy.

As Larmore (pp. 24–28) sees it, self-reflection is a core aspect of philosophy and consequently of its various domains of inquiry. It is only in reflecting on what it is about and how and why we ought to do it that we can uncover the basic assumptions philosophising involves and fulfil the promise of philosophy to understand reality as a whole, or in the case of political philosophy, to understand the reality of political life as a whole. As such, political philosophy involves not merely what has passed for modern political theory but also reflecting upon 'the central problems it must grapple with and the core concepts it must explore' (p. 3).

Larmore explores those problems and concepts in broadly three steps that match the general structure of the book. Chapter 1 lays out the case for why political philosophy should be seen as autonomous from moral philosophy and why legitimacy, as opposed to justice, is the primary subject matter of political philosophy. Chapter 2 draws out what Larmore sees as his political-realist-inclined view of the conditions of legitimacy. Chapter 3 then rounds out the discussion by engaging in the first-order theorising Larmore sets up by laying out political liberalism as a theory of political legitimacy.

Larmore (pp. 19–21, 28–34) situates his reflection on political philosophy broadly in reference to what he sees as two views about the aims and purposes of political philosophy: an ethics-centered view and a political-realist view. This is insightful for the way it orients the reflection both conceptually and historically. The ethics-centered view harkens back to a premodern approach (e.g. Aristotle) where politics and the ordering of social institutions were seen merely as ways to orient people towards some ethical ideal of the good and right society. This view, ultimately, understands political philosophy as applied moral philosophy. In contrast, the political-realist view involves seeing politics as a way to confront the modern realisation (e.g. Hobbes and Weber) that reasonable people disagree about morality by creating peace and social order amongst them through coercive rules. This view, ultimately, understands political philosophy as

autonomous from moral philosophy in its aims and purposes, given it is about the best way to deal with disagreement about morality itself.

Larmore argues that the historical experience of modernity vindicates the political-realist view because it acknowledges the way morality can push us apart as much as, if not more than, it brings us together. As such, its view of political life as one latent with social conflict leads to legitimacy and not justice as the primary subject of political philosophy. The primary aim of political philosophy must be to work out the conditions that principles and rules must satisfy to be authoritative for a particular people and to be permissibly enforced coercively to ensure social order (p. 42). Whilst Larmore's discussion here is wide ranging, historically insightful, and conceptually clarifying about the difference between justice, authority, and legitimacy, readers may experience some slippage between the various arguments. For instance, at times Larmore seems to slide from a methodological distinction between the ethics-centred and the realist views (e.g. a distinction about the relationship between the moral and the political) and a first-order distinction about the content of their respective political principles. As such, it is not always clear whether it is political realism's approach to politics given the experience of modernity or its actual principles of legitimacy that is supposed to recommend it.

Despite the inclination for the political-realist view, Larmore argues that he can accept it only so far. For instance, Larmore (p. 99, 101) argues that, by looking at Bernard Williams's theory as the most prominent version of political realism, the political-realist view is correct that political legitimacy 'depends on the historical situation'. A certain institutional structure that is legitimate at one time may not be so at another. This is because whether a particular institutional structure can have *de facto* authority (a necessary condition of legitimacy) to ensure social peace and cooperation depends on moral assumptions and views about people and human nature that are historically varying. However, according to Larmore, the realist picture goes wrong when it also states that legitimacy does not involve 'a morality prior to politics' (pp. 89–90). For Larmore, political legitimacy must involve principles with a 'moral character' because ultimately it must show how rules are *authoritative* on particular people and how a state has the *right* to rule them. Larmore's discussion of Williams here will for many prove enlightening and does justice to the recent rediscovery of Williams's contribution to political realism. However, much like in Chapter 1, Larmore's discussion seems to slide between two different distinctions between the ethics-centred view and the political-realist view. For instance, Larmore's remark that a theory of legitimacy 'must be presumed to express morality prior to politics. They have to be understood, that is, as possessing a validity antecedent to the authority the state may exercise, since this is precisely what they serve to justify. Because legitimacy consists in a legitimation story being valid, it must therefore have a moral foundation,' appears to run together a metanormative distinction about the normativity of political principles and a first-order distinction about the content of those political principles (p. 107). Given Larmore's emphasis on this as a point of difference between him and other political realists, it is not quite clear whether his bespoke view differs about the content of a theory of political legitimacy or about the normativity of the principles in such a theory.

The exposition of his realist-inclined view of political philosophy allows Larmore to proceed to the more first-order task of actually theorising about the correct theory of political legitimacy. On this front, Larmore (p. 160) renews his commitment to

political liberalism and Rawls's liberal principle of legitimacy. This is the principle that requires the fundamental principles of political society (e.g. principles of justice) are such that 'all who are subject to them must be able from their perspective to see reason (not necessarily the same reason) to endorse them'. However, what is necessary now, given the self-reflection of the book, is to acknowledge and not shy away from the fact that such a principle has a moral foundation, namely a 'norm of respect for persons' as people with the capacities to be rational and reasonable (p. 155). Larmore's restatement of political liberalism's theory of political legitimacy, responses to objections, and discussion of political liberalism's place within the historical development of liberalism as a whole is instructive about how he sees his view of political philosophy actually being carried out. Whatever one's misgivings about Larmore's view of political philosophy, the book displays a commendable example of practicing what it preaches.

Overall, Larmore's book is a good example of systematic philosophy. One acquires a sketch of how the entirety of political philosophy could hang together and what doing political philosophy would be like in such a picture. Given that holistic theorising is largely out of favour in much of moral and political philosophy, Larmore provides a thoroughly laudable dose of it that is richly rewarding to read.

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