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Review: Relative Justifications

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Book Reviews

RELATIVE JUSTIFICATIONS

Gerald F. Gaus: *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism: Public Reason as a Post-Enlightenment Project*. (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003. Pp. 240. \$32.95.)

Graham Long: *Relativism and the Foundations of Liberalism*. (Exeter, UK and Charlottesville, USA: Imprint Academic, 2004. Pp. 276. \$59.00.)

Recent liberal theories, including John Rawls's political liberalism, have tended to give epistemological issues short shrift. Many liberals undoubtedly view epistemological questions as liable to mire their theories in deep philosophical controversies and thus distract from the main task at hand of securing a shared normative basis for politics. However, not all liberals embrace this strategy of avoidance. Both Gerald Gaus's *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism* (2003) and Graham Long's *Relativism and the Foundations of Liberalism* (2004) make a strong case for viewing epistemological problems as not only relevant, but *central* to the task of working out a theoretical basis for a tolerant and pluralistic liberal regime. Long makes his case by building up a relativist metaethics to ground a principle of toleration; while Gaus makes his case by interpreting the liberal tradition through the conceptual lens of public reason and normative justification.

These two books are not exactly in the same genre: Long's is an elaborate defense of the author's relativist theory of justified belief and its connections to political theory; while Gaus's is a survey of contemporary liberalism informed by the author's own mature grasp of the field, with just one chapter (the final one) devoted to a full exposition of the author's own views. Nevertheless, these books are animated by very similar theoretical and practical convictions: A relativist moral epistemology, though somewhat sublimated, informs Gaus's approach throughout his book, in particular in the final chapter where he proposes his own account of public reason. The significance of Gaus's epistemology for his treatment of liberalism cannot be adequately grasped without reading at least the first two parts of his earlier work, *Justificatory Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 1996), where he spells out and defends in detail an agent-relative theory of justified belief and its application to the political sphere. Gaus and Long are united in affirming four basic propositions: (1) normative justification in general is relative to individual persons' belief systems; (2) it is theoretically viable to develop an account of normative justification that is indifferent to or agnostic about questions of truth and metaphysics; (3) coercive interference with another person must be justifiable to that person in terms that could be persuasive to him or her, *given his or her belief system or rational commitments*; and (4) a morally sound politics of toleration can be built, at least in part, on a relativist account of moral justification. These shared premises constitute the philosophical backbone

of both of these books, and make other substantive differences between the authors shade into insignificance.

Contemporary Theories of Liberalism manages to combine philosophical clarity and rigor with an elegant and digestible prose. It offers a survey of seven “post-Enlightenment” views of public reason: Hobbesian public reason; Berlinian pluralistic public reason; socialized public reason; Habermasian deliberative democracy; epistemic democracy (vote or preference aggregation); and Rawlsian political liberalism. By “post-Enlightenment” views, Gaus means views that have abandoned the Enlightenment assumption that “the free exercise of human reason will ... necessarily lead [reasoners] to a convergence of belief” (p. 9). At first, one might wonder why the book was not called *Contemporary Theories of Public Reason*, since Gaus surveys competing accounts of public reason. However, the broader title seems apt, given that the main contribution of this work is to make a strong case for viewing the concept of public reason—and its underlying epistemology—as central to the whole liberal tradition, going right back to Hobbes and Locke. The book concludes with a summary of Gaus’s own view of liberalism, which both incorporates insights from rival accounts and places the spotlight on the umpiring role of the liberal state in a society characterized by pervasive “reasonable disagreement” on policy questions.

In *Relativism and the Foundations of Liberalism*, Long argues for two basic theses: first, that “metaethical relativism provides a plausible account of moral justification”; and second, that “metaethical relativism is not only consistent with the claims of contemporary liberalism, but underpins those claims” (p. 3). The book is divided into two sections: the first section provides a detailed defense of Long’s distinctive account of the relativist thesis, that “there is no uniquely justified public morality.” The second section deals with the political implications of his relativist thesis, and shows how, combined with a principle requiring the justification of coercive impositions upon others, it can yield a tolerationist political ethos.

Long offers us a carefully crafted defense of metaethical relativism that is both meticulous and broad-ranging in its engagement with contemporary meta-ethical debates. However, it cannot rival Gaus’s *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism* in style, succinctness, or perspicuity, and the argument, for all its systematicity, has an excessively abstract quality that tends to divorce it from the concrete reality of ethical life. For example, Long argues that some moralities are “equally justified” in the sense that they equally satisfy the criterion of (overall) consistency and coherence in “wide reflective equilibrium.” But it is hard to see how even an intellectual “Hercules” could compare the global coherence of belief systems, let alone how ordinary people could assess moral claims using such an abstract and demanding criterion.

Both Gaus and Long want to argue to practical liberal conclusions, including the sparse recourse to coercion, from a certain form of epistemological relativism. Since it is this relativism that is the conceptual engine of both accounts, it is worth spelling out what it entails. According to Gaus’s and Long’s relativist metaethics, the justificatory status of a belief is not a matter of its correspondence to some mind-independent reality, but rather, it is a matter of verifying certain features *internal to the agent’s belief-system*, including substantive beliefs and rules of logic and rationality—a subset of which may be intersubjectively shared, or even, at least on Gaus’s account, conditions of rationality itself. This does not mean that a belief is justified based merely on the opinions or explicit beliefs of the agent; rather,

a belief is justified (or not justified) based on what the agent is rationally committed to, including the logical entailments of his current beliefs. Add to this Gaus's notion of "open justification," whereby a belief is tested in light of exposure to new information or "facts" that are made available to the agent by experience or by other agents. The reason this is not introducing a realist or correspondence theory of justification by stealth is that it is assumed that the agent would, given his current beliefs, be committed to revising his beliefs in light of new facts or information, and it is further assumed that the only "facts" which can fulfil this purpose are such that the agent is doxastically committed to recognizing as "facts," for example, scientific findings if the agent recognizes the authority of science.

With a relativist account of justified belief in hand, Gaus and Long introduce one additional premise in order to get them to a norm of political toleration or limited coercion: namely, that it is morally unacceptable, or disrespectful, to coerce somebody if the act of coercion cannot be justified to the person in question. For example, Long adds to relativism the premise that "[i]t is wrong to impose one's views on another person unless one can justify them to him or her" (p. 182); while Gaus adopts the premise that "Alf's interference with Betty is legitimate only if there exists a justification for it that Betty may reasonably be expected to endorse" (p. 208). Once we accept a principle limiting coercion to whatever can be justified to the coerced, we will find that a broad range of coercive interventions—namely, those unjustified by intersubjective reasons—are ruled out.

In the space remaining, I would like to raise a couple of doubts about the relativist liberalism Gaus and Long hold in common. Metaethical relativism seems implausible both as an account of moral experience, and as a foundation for tolerationist political norms. Metaethical relativism as defended by Gaus and Long is committed to at least two theses: (a) one can develop an adequate account of moral justification while remaining agnostic on metaphysical questions or questions of truth and falsehood; and (b) in order to justify proposition P to Sam, Sam must already be committed, by his peculiar belief set, to accepting P. Consider first how claim (a) stands up to moral experience: even if we grant that I cannot be convinced of P without finding reasons within my belief system to embrace P, how can I consider P justified without considering P's relation to some mind-independent reality? To put it somewhat differently, surely P's likelihood to converge upon "the fact of the matter" or "the way things really are" at least partly feeds into the agent's willingness to deem P "justified"? It is hardly accidental that people routinely refer to propositions as "true" and "false" and readily exchange those terms for "justified," "correct," "right" etc. Even if we cannot give a fully satisfactory account of the relation between propositions and reality or facts, it seems implausible to suggest that one can isolate the concept of *justified belief* from the concepts of *truth and falsehood*, or treat the process of justifying a belief independently from some order of reality external to the agent's (or community's) belief-system. Here, I would side with Raz and say that a reason for a belief or action, while it may sometimes be another belief, is often a state of affairs or fact of the matter *independent of one's mental state or beliefs*.

This leads me to my second concern with the relativism Gaus and Long have in common: it is not at all clear to me how a relativistic account of justified belief—even one constrained by norms of logic and perhaps some minimal requirements of rationality—can ground a principle of toleration. First of all, according to the relativist account, the precept of toleration itself can only be

justified to those who have the epistemic resources to support it. There is no reason to assume that the vast majority of citizens will converge upon a liberal precept of toleration anything as robust as Gaus's, which requires convergence on the general principles being enforced in order to justify interference—many may well find that competing ethical considerations override the “presumption of liberty” in a host of cases (*e.g.*, drug abuse, pornography, same-sex marriage, etc.). Thus, privileging toleration over non-toleration will often look arbitrary in the face of (subjectively) “justified” dissent. In other words, attempting to ground toleration in a relativist account of justification inevitably robs toleration of its legitimacy for “justified” dissenters, since they simply have “no reason” to comply with the policy. Liberal principles, and indeed moral principles in general, only provide *justifying reasons* for the constituency of people who are already doxastically committed to them. The relativist liberal lacks the philosophical resources to honestly say to the nonliberal, “you have reason to comply with liberal principles even if your belief system indicates otherwise.”

Gaus and Long both do us no small service in demonstrating that political philosophy is inevitably informed at the deepest level by an epistemology, and that epistemological controversy comes with the territory of political theory. However, in pretending that an account of moral and political justification can somehow swing free from how we conceive of reality and truth, Gaus and Long fall prey to a fallacy that resembles that of their political liberal adversaries: they artificially cut off one domain of inquiry from another domain by which it is inevitably informed. For just as political philosophy is heavily informed by one or another set of epistemological assumptions, so too epistemology itself depends upon some view of how human agents relate to the world and to other human agents, and indeed, how human agents themselves are constituted. To say that a proposition can be justified without taking a view of its relation to reality is already to take a controversial metaphysical position: namely, that mind-independent reality, even if it exists, does not necessarily have any essential bearing on the justificatory status of belief. But what is much more worrying than the concealed metaphysical “partiality” of relativist liberalism is its tendency to perpetuate moral disagreements by characterizing them as diverging belief-systems rather than diverging experiences and perceptions of reality. For surely ideological partisanship thrives in an environment in which beliefs may be “justified” intuitively and without any interest in their connection with a reality that transcends them.

—David Thunder

SECURITY OVER GLORY

Vickie B. Sullivan: *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp.x, 284. \$75.00.)

Sullivan takes sharp aim. The target is the almost hegemonic republican thesis that grew out of J. G. A. Pocock's reading of the Machiavellian “moment.” That is the thesis that tied Machiavelli to an ancient republicanism which Pocock argued made its way to the English republican authors. Their writings