

one similar to it involving an accident in a TV transmitter room. We are asked to imagine whether it would be right to stop the TV show for fifteen minutes in order to save the single person from an hour of severe pain, or allow the millions watching TV to continue enjoying themselves. See p. 235 of *What We Owe to Each Other*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WALZER

Winter 2006
Princeton University

Each year The Dualist includes an interview with a modern philosopher chosen by the staff. This year, Michael Walzer graciously agreed to answer questions posed by The Dualist and by the Stanford Philosophy Department. Michael Walzer has written on a wide range of topics in political and moral philosophy, including just war theory, economic justice, nationalism and ethnicity, pluralism, and tolerance. Among his most influential publications are Just and Unjust Wars (Basic Books, 1977), Spheres of Justice (Basic Books, 1983), and Arguing about War (Yale University Press, 2005). He is also editor of the political quarterly Dissent.

Debra Satz:

Whether and how do the arguments in Just and Unjust Wars apply to the “war” on terror?

Michael Walzer:

Insofar as the “war” on terror is mostly police work, they don’t apply: the relevant issues have to do with civil liberty and executive authority, not with justice in the sense that the word has in just war theory. But there are useful comparisons to be made between the “rules of engagement” for soldiers and for police—for example, the rules with regard to innocent bystanders are stricter for police than for soldiers in battle, and it would be interesting to ask why that is so. But when the “war” on terror takes the form of a real war, as in Afghanistan, then all the arguments about just and unjust wars apply.

Satz:

On your theories in Spheres of Justice, what do you think of the recent Supreme Court decision on campaign finance?

Walzer:

I have a mixed view of campaign finance. On the one hand, it is important to make sure that money doesn’t distort the results of democratic elections (as it commonly does), and this clearly requires fairly strict regulation of campaign contributions. On the other hand, the giving of time, energy, and modest amounts of money to a candidate or a party is an important way of registering the intensity of one’s

commitment, and I would not want to shut that down. I don't think that the Supreme Court's decision fits either of these views.

Satz:

As a more general question, I'm interested in your thoughts on the justification of inequality. Where and when in your theory is inequality justified?

Walzer:

I am not bothered by any distributive inequalities within the different spheres of justice so long as these are determined by the appropriate distributive principles and so long as they don't distort distributions in other spheres. But obviously radical inequalities in one sphere, the market especially, do distort other distributions. And then we have to argue about how to deal with the distortions. In the case of the market, blocked exchanges are one way; redistribution through the tax or welfare systems is another. But if someone with a lot of money enjoys only the things that money can rightly buy, his wealth doesn't bother me. Should it? Should I be offended by it? It seems to me that we should be concerned with the uses of inequality, not with inequality itself.

Rob Reich:

The introduction to your best-known book Spheres of Justice says that the book emerged from a course you taught with Robert Nozick at Harvard around the time that Rawls's Theory of Justice was published. What happened at Harvard in the late sixties and early seventies that produced such important and long-lasting political philosophy?

Walzer:

Except for the fact that Rawls happened to be there, I don't think anything happened at Harvard that didn't happen everywhere else. It was the political ferment of those years that caught us all up—even people like Bob Nozick who weren't really "political people" (Bob was much more interested in deep philosophical questions that I could never get my mind around). The course that he and I taught was so exciting because of the intense interest of the students who came—and they were interested not only in the fun of the argument but in the actual issues. It was their interest that drove the two of us to work very hard.

Reich:

You were the doctoral supervisor for Susan Moller Okin, the recently deceased political theorist from Stanford. She credited you with giving her the confidence to write a dissertation on the place of women in western political theory. How

do you assess her legacy? Why were you enthusiastic about her project when so few other people were?

Walzer:

I had a number of excellent women students in those years—Amy Gutmann and Nancy Rosenblum as well as Susan. And I was as supportive of them as I could be because I recognized in them a certain kind of drive, ambition, commitment that wasn't going to be denied. They reminded me of an earlier generation of Jewish men. I wanted to be on their side.

Susan's Women in Western Political Thought, along with Jean Elshtain's Public Man, Private Woman, and Carol Pateman's The Sexual Contract transformed the way the history of political theory is written and the way theory itself is written. The impact was enormous, in large part because there were so many bright, ambitious, and often angry young women just waiting for the breakthrough those three made.

Reich:

You help publish Dissent; Josh Cohen helps publish Boston Review. In your mind, how does Dissent relate to your work as a political philosopher?

Walzer:

They are the same thing (which probably means that I am not much of a philosopher). I write an article about some political question that interests me, and after it's written I decide whether to publish it in *Dissent* or in an academic journal. If I decide for the latter, I have to add notes, references to the academic literature, and perhaps qualify the argument a bit, but I don't do anything more. I write in plain English; I don't like academic jargon; I have no head for abstraction. Writing in *Dissent* is more natural for me, but I can manage *Political Theory* or even *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

Reich:

Woody Allen remarked that the editors of Dissent and Commentary should get together and publish a new magazine. It would be called Dysentery. Any comments on that joke?

Walzer:

It is a good joke. I don't think that it helped our sales much.

Ed Bruera:

The termination of civil wars has become an important issue for social scientists.

The complex empirical and ethnographic issues surrounding this topic have been well examined, yet there has been surprisingly little normative work on the problems that tend to arise from this (for example, on the demobilization of former soldiers, especially child soldiers). What do you think the important ethical and moral considerations are in dealing with failed states and civil wars, as concerned observers and perhaps interveners?

Walzer:

Except with regard to humanitarian intervention, I have not written about these questions, and I am not sure that I have much to say about them. Failed states are obviously moral as well as political disasters, and so they teach us how important the state is: it's the only agency we have that, when it is competent and decent, can defend human rights. It follows that the international community should do everything in its power to avoid state failure. And it should do everything in its power, in the case of failure, to repair political institutions by whatever means are available—including, in extremity, military means. Warlords, child soldiers, rape and terror—you don't need a moral philosopher to explain the wrongness of all that.

Peter Stone:

Professor Walzer, you have argued that when the United Nations proves ineffective at stopping atrocities around the world – as it often does – the United States is justified in intervening unilaterally (presumably in violation of the UN Charter, which forbids unilateral military interventions as tantamount to aggression). But at the same time, few nations in the world are as hostile to the UN as the US. The US vetoes more than any other country, withholds dues, regularly browbeats UN officials, etc. Isn't there a serious moral problem raised when a country obstructs the UN, thereby rendering it ineffective, and then uses that ineffectiveness as a justification for doing what it wants?

Walzer:

No, I haven't argued that the US is justified in intervening unilaterally in cases of mass murder or ethnic cleansing; I have argued that *anyone* is justified in intervening in such cases. The examples that I usually refer to when I defend unilateralism are the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia (to shut down the Khmer Rouge killing fields), the Indian intervention in East Pakistan (to end the terror there and to allow millions of refugees to return), and the Tanzanian intervention in Uganda (to overthrow the murderous regime of Idi Amin). The UN did not authorize intervention in any of those cases; nor would it have done so, had it been asked. Yet all of them seem justified to me. I think that

the US, and other countries too, should be working to create an effective UN, which could deploy military forces capable of acting forcefully (as no UN force has yet done) in parts of the world where such forces are needed. But since a UN of that sort doesn't exist, someone else has to act, when forceful action is necessary. I don't see why the US should be excluded from acting, but I certainly prefer a division of labor, among as many countries as possible.

The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia—my preferred example—certainly fits the UN's definition of aggression—so much the worse for the definition. No one in the world, who knew about the killing fields, would argue that Vietnam was a criminal aggressor. So we need to judge every intervention independently, support some, oppose others. And I don't see how a vote at the UN (even if the US were paying its dues and never using the veto) could possibly determine which ones we should support and which ones we should oppose. Will there ever be a UN whose decisions would be authoritative in that sense? No, we will always be on our own.

Robert Adcock:

How has the institutional and intellectual environment of the Institute of Advanced Study influenced the character and direction of your thought and scholarship since your arrival there in 1980?

Walzer:

My intellectual and political formation was pretty much complete when I came to the IAS. The only new direction that my work has taken since 1980 is toward Jewish studies. The big collaborative project on which I am currently engaged, on the Jewish Political Tradition, required a major educational effort on my part (with help from my friends), which I probably could not have undertaken if I were still teaching at a university. But that was largely a matter of time; it was not determined in any way by the intellectual environment of the Institute. I was already very much engaged with Jewish politics before I came here.

Adcock:

How does the audience(s) you would ideally hope to engage compare to the readers you actually get? Has this changed over the course of your career?

Walzer:

No writer gets as many readers as he wants—at least no academic writer does. I have always imagined myself writing for a general audience, for the sort of people who read political magazines, the *New York Review*

of Books, even monthlies like *The Atlantic*. And I have in fact written for that audience, but only intermittently. Mostly, I am read by college students who are assigned a chapter or two from one or another of my books—and then by some fraction of the liberal-left public (the social democratic fraction, maybe).

Adcock:

Would you welcome, reject, or qualify a description of yourself as a “public intellectual”?

Walzer:

It is an honorable name; I am flattered to be called a public intellectual, though I rarely reach a sufficiently sizable public to merit the name. Similarly, I am flattered to be called a social critic, though a real social critic would spend more time than I do criticizing our society (it needs it). There is an old-left image of the intellectual as someone with an all-encompassing theory, with which he/she can address any political issue that arises. I don't have a theory like that; my commentary on public issues, in *Dissent*, for example, is pretty ad hoc. And I probably spend as much time editing other people's comments as I do writing my own. I am a public editor (for a very small public).

From The Dualist Staff

Topic One:

One currently topical problem that relates to two strands of your work involves the intersection between cultural communities' values and just war theory. In traditional just war theory, as you have defined it, soldiers for both the just and unjust sides are equally subject to the requirements of proportionality and decency that disallow the use of disproportionate force, the causing of unnecessary harm, and the torture and rape of enemy soldiers.

However, imagine a case where a force of American soldiers (in present-day Afghanistan, for example) meets a force of devoutly religious Afghan soldiers in battle. Imagine that the Afghan soldiers value their religious purity more than their own lives or bodily integrity – they would rather be raped or tortured than lose this purity. Also, imagine that this religious purity is dependent on some religious object, which is carried along with the Afghan battalion, to not be damaged by the American soldiers. The Afghan soldiers give the American soldiers fair warning of their beliefs, and the religious object is not an essential military objective, though damaging it would be better for the American soldiers because it would demoralize the Afghan soldiers. This example raises two questions:

1. *May the American soldiers damage the religious object without violating the proportionality requirement, even if they know that the Afghan soldiers are more upset by this than by rape or torture, and is it the case that raping or torturing the Afghan soldiers would violate this requirement?*
2. *More broadly, we see a tension between the values of cultural communities and the freedom of soldiers in a just war to do what they need to achieve victory. Are the American soldiers obliged to not engage in certain acts (rape, torture, disguise themselves as aid workers) but permitted to engage in others (damaging religiously important objects, killing religious leaders who are combatants), regardless of the values of the Afghan soldiers? Or, are they obliged to respect whatever the Afghan soldiers believe their own religious integrity consists of, as long as respecting this does not prevent essential military objectives or require the American soldiers to compromise their own deeply-held values?*

Walzer:

For me it is very important to note that in five years of fighting in Afghanistan, to the best of my knowledge, these questions have never arisen. And the reason that they haven't arisen is that rape and torture and the deliberate killing of civilians or prisoners are pretty universally taken to be wrongs—and to be more wrong than damage to religious objects. Even soldiers who rape, torture, and kill are quick to deny that they are doing those things and equally quick to accuse their enemies of doing them. The rules of *jus in bello* are not culturally specific; they can't be, since wars are fought, have always been fought, across cultural boundaries. The answer to the very last of these questions, the one about respect, is yes. But the respect at issue here doesn't follow from just war theory but from ordinary morality. We respect the “religious integrity” of others when we can—but not when it would make us complicit, say, in the burning of Hindu widows or the sexual mutilation of African girls. However that understanding of respect is phrased, it also applies in wartime.

Topic Two:

In Just and Unjust Wars, in answer to the question “Is there a particular understanding (and then a particular distribution) of social goods that is good simply?” you write that, “That is not a question that I have addressed in this book. As a singular conception, the idea of the good does not control our arguments about justice” (312). This suggests that justice does not need to say anything about how a particular social good ought to be understood. In defense of this idea, you give the example of an Indian village where a grain of heap is divided significantly unequally between the villagers, as a result of “a long series of other inequalities... justified by customary rules and an

overarching religious doctrine” (313). You argue that justice “does not rule out the inequality of the portions; it cannot require a radical redesign of the village against the shared understandings of the members. If it did, justice itself would be tyrannical” (313). I have two questions related to this:

1. *It seems that there are times when justice should have a say in determining what the social meaning of a particular social good is. First, it seems that some social meanings lead to methods of distribution that are unjust regardless of whether or not the distributions are in line with the social meanings. For instance, if the social meaning of political power entails that political power should be distributed according to ethnic background or skin color, then it seems as if the method of distributing political power would be unjust. It seems that it would be unjust even if those who lost political power on account of their race/ethnicity shared that understanding of the meaning of political power and even if distributions were made perfectly in accordance with that shared meaning. There are many real-world examples of such situations. Would you say that such practices are simply the result of short-sighted cultural bias, or is there more to it?*

There is a second reason why it seems as if justice must sometimes have a say in determining what the social meaning of a particular social good is. From your discussion of shared meanings and justice, it seems that any just society would have to have some provisions for making sure that everyone’s understanding of the meaning of a social good is taken into account in the distribution of that good. But in order for that to be possible in a society, certain shared understandings about the meaning of legitimate social power (for lack of a better phrase) would already have to be in place: there would have to be the agreement that each person ought to be given equal influence in determining the ‘shared meaning’ of goods and thus in the distribution of goods. Thus, at least in this case (in the case of the meaning of ‘legitimate social power’), justice could not remain neutral with regard to the content of shared meanings.

2. *If, as you say, tyranny is the opposite of complex equality and that justice requires complex equality, what would it mean for justice to be tyrannical?*

Walzer:

These questions are really one question, and I shall answer them together. Number 4 follows from a misreading of the line quoted from *Spheres*: “If it did, justice itself would be tyrannical.” I mean: justice itself wouldn’t be just, though it might be called that. But what about the Indian village example, which is probably the most frequently cited and criticized passage in the book? It seems obvious to my critics that distributions according to some hierarchical principle are unjust; they also believe that hierarchical principles have often been fully

accepted, even by the people at the bottom (“There are many real world examples...”), and so, they conclude, shared meanings cannot play a part in our understanding of distributive justice. We require a prior theory of what is just.

My own view, expressed in the uncited paragraph that follows the one from which the quote is taken (and in subsequent pieces), is that genuinely oppressive and unjust hierarchies are not likely to be accepted by the people they oppress. The happy slave is a feature of the ideology of slaveowners, and philosophers, at a minimum, should be skeptical about that kind of happiness. Some theory of false consciousness lies behind the lack of skepticism, and behind that lies a theory of objective interests. I am sure that some people have strange ideas about their interests. And it may be true that some people, in masochistic fashion, embrace their oppression. But I don’t think that can ever be the case for the larger number of oppressed people. Hence the social meanings that undergird oppressive practices are never in fact shared.

It is also important to recognize that some idealized view of hierarchy is often used to criticize the actual practices of hierarchical superiors. You claim to protect us, medieval peasants say to their feudal lords, and if you did your authority would be justifiable, but you don’t protect us; instead you are the greatest threat to our well-being. You claim to mediate our relation to God, say the Christian faithful to their priests, but you serve only yourselves, at our expense. In these cases, there might well be widespread acceptance of hierarchy in theory, but there is also criticism of and resistance to the way it works in the world.

Notice the disagreement among feminist historians and theorists about whether to stress the oppression of women or the resistance of women to their oppression. I prefer the latter, not only because it is more uplifting but also because I think it provides a more accurate picture of women’s “hearts and minds.”

Finally, does my argument require that each person be given equal influence in determining social meanings? If it did, then you wouldn’t need anything else; the rest of the argument would be superfluous. The only just society would be some kind of radical social democracy. That is in fact my own preferred version of justice, but I don’t want to impose it on everyone else, not in theory and not in practice. So it is enough if social meanings are determined by the normal social processes, in which many people participate, in different ways, over long periods of time. Take a look at my favorite example in *Spheres*—the history of the cure of souls and the cure of bodies. That is the kind of history of consciousness to which I am committed.