

Discussion Questions

Michael Walzer, “Against ‘Realism’”

1. In his historically detailed argument against *political* realism¹, Walzer clearly advances a position of *moral* realism, or *objectivism*,² i.e. that our moral statements genuinely refer to something objective; rendering their ‘core’ meanings more or less stable. Consider some of his claims:

“We don’t have to translate moral talk into interest talk in order to understand it; morality refers in its own way to the real world.” (482)

“[W]e can make moral judgments: moral concepts and strategic concepts reflect the real world in the same way.” (483)

“[O]ur arguments and judgments shape what I call the *moral reality of war*—all those experiences of which moral language is descriptive.” (484)

Do you think his arguments against realism essentially depend on this basic assumption? Can a cultural relativist, subjectivist, or even an emotivist³ argue in the same way he does? Or conversely: Does political realism presuppose subjectivism, or cultural relativism, or emotivism?

2. In his long and interesting historical discussion of Thucydides’ (and Hobbes’ interpretation) Melean dialogues, do you see any parallels with Athenian and present-day U.S. policy? (This question may bear special relevance for those of you who selected topic # 3, in your second writing assignment). Contrary to just war theory and to Thucydides’ presentation, for instance, undoubtedly “the Athenian generals could have woven ‘fair pretenses’” [disingenuously] (481), however such “‘fair pretenses’ [c]over their vile actions.” (479) Consider also Hobbes’ descriptions of the provocation of the Athenian generals “put[ing] [the Meleans] to it.” (478)
3. (Referring to question 1) A consequence of moral objectivism is a refutation of semantic relativism (i.e. that there is no underlying ‘fact of the matter’ concerning the meanings of ethical terms). Do you agree with his analogy with strategy (485-486) that disputes center on *shared understanding* of terms? Consider also his claims:

¹ “The [politically realist] defenders of *silent legis* claim that...what we conventionally call inhumanity is simply humanity under pressure...fearful, self-concerned, driven, murderous...[p]aradoxically, the description is often a kind of apology: yes, our soldiers committed atrocities in the course of the battle, but that’s what war does to people, that’s what war is like.” (Vaughn, 477-478)

² Recall Feb. 1 discussion: **Objectivism**: The meta-ethical position that moral principles are valid for everyone, because moral judgments refer to “some underlying fact of the matter.”

³ Recall Feb. 1: **Cultural Relativism**: The meta-ethical position that moral principles and actions *X* are deemed morally right *because* of one’s cultural perspective (i.e. whether or not cultural standards, norms, etc. approve of *X*). **Subjectivism**: The meta-ethical position that moral principles and actions *X* are deemed morally right *because* of one’s personal perspective (i.e. whether or not the subject’s standards, norms, etc. approve of *X*). **Emotivism**: Moral claims have no truth-content but express emotions or attitudes.

“[N]otions about right conduct are remarkably persistent: the military code survives the death of warrior idealism.” (484) “The clearest evidence for the stability of our values over time is the unchanging character of the lies soldiers and statesmen tell.” (486)

Agree? Disagree?

- Michael Walzer, “*Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses*”
 1. Do you consider the Allied carpet bombing of Dresden and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima terrorist acts? Why or why not?
 2. Do you consider any of the warring militias that ensued in the chaos of the U.S. Revolutionary War or also in the U.S. Civil War classifiable as terrorists? Why or why not?
 3. (Recall Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*). The last point Walzer addresses concerns the symbiosis between oppression and terrorism, that they both “feed on the fears of the brutalized and oppressed people.” (510) Walzer writes further that: “Genuine liberation can come only through a politics that mobilizes the victims of brutality and takes careful aim at its agents, or by a politics that surrenders the hope of victory and domination and deliberately seeks a compromise settlement.” (ibid). Agree? Disagree? Why?
 4. Do you think Leland’s critiques of Walzer (Wed. Apr 30) are apropos (concerning his presumed question-begging regarding the equivocation of the notion of ‘weakness.’)?

Class Discussion

Concerning questions 1. & 3. (pertaining to “Against ‘Realism’”) many in all three sections voiced the objection that Walzer seems to present a false dichotomy (or “either/or” fallacy⁴) between objectivism and “realism.” (**Karuna Panitz §0106, Erin Coco §0103, Daniel Loveland §0103**) For instance, **Karuna** argued that a cultural relativist could still account for the sentiment of guilt felt either by the soldier who may have committed an atrocity in the “fog of war,” or by a politician who knowingly utters “‘fair pretenses’ [to] [c]over ... vile actions” for the simple reason that *cultural norms in civilian life wholly constitute the soldier’s as well as the politician’s moral sensibilities*. Several interesting consequences follow from such a claim: A cultural relativist may side with the kind of just war theory that Walzer advocates in the case of *just in bello*, while at the same time siding with the realist in the case of *jus ad bellum*. That is to say, a cultural relativist’s cultural norms may demand of the soldier to adhere to the standards of i.) benevolent quarantine, ii.) proportionality, iii.) no evil means (i.e. the three basic requirements of *just in bello*) while at the same time agreeing with the realist that a nation *may* declare war for reasons stemming purely from national self-interest (whatever those reasons may turn out to be).

In other words, alternative positions exist: It is not just a simple “either/or” question that Walzer seems to present. A cultural relativist can adopt a “qualified just war theory” position

⁴ Recall **Feb. 8 Notes**

without contradiction. Among other things, this entails no distinction between notions like *shame* versus *guilt*.⁵

For different reasons (not necessarily related to the issue of cultural relativism per se) **Erin Coco §0103** questioned the analogy that Walzer makes concerning ethics and strategy: Military strategists clearly hold fast to *non-moral values* like efficacy and efficiency, while ethicists engaged in issues concerning either *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello* obviously appeal to *moral* values. Erin's point here was not to question Walzer's objectivism per se (that moral terms ultimately harbor some core meaning referring to some objective state of affairs) but rather to illustrate the significant differences in *methodology*. Whether or not you believe that such methodological distinctions are important hinges on the degree of how much you buy into Walzer's particular rendition of moral objectivism. Once again, for instance, a cultural relativist might be content to consider such domains like military strategy versus military ethics as mutually exclusive domains, without, however, buying into the realists' (like Hobbes') claims that military ethics is reducible to talk consisting solely of interest. Echoing this sentiment, **Bryan Channas §0107** advanced the notion that a cultural relativist can claim that those *within* a particular culture *can* appraise more "objectively" the conduct of a particular member or segment of that culture, than those outside of that culture; for reasons dealing essentially with issues concerning communal self-interest and intimacy.⁶

Regarding the issue of terrorism, most expressed skepticism in my first two questions concerning Walzer's second article. For one, there is the obvious distinction between a "legitimate authority" (which the governments of the Allies clearly were) versus aggressive acts conducted by illegitimate ones comprising the terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, discussions among **Corey Levine §0106** and others were drawn along the act-utilitarian versus rule utilitarian distinction: On the one hand, a rule utilitarian might side with Truman's argument (for example) concerning the necessity of dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki insofar as *in the long run*, (perhaps) fewer lives were lost because the dropping of the atomic bombs guaranteed a speedier end of the bloodshed of the Pacific Theatre in WWII. Nevertheless, an *act utilitarian* might respond to the contrary: such actions were classifiable as terrorist (regardless if they were carried out by "legitimate" governments) insofar as at the very least they clearly violate the discrimination, evil means and proportionality requirements (in other words, all three requirements) of *jus in bello*. Aside from that, as suggested by the military term "demoralization of the enemy civilian population" such acts have deliberately targeted innocent civilians/noncombatants and hence share at least one aspect of terrorists' tactics, as they aim to spread chaos, fear, and intimidation in the civilian "sector" of the enemy's "infrastructure."

⁵ Moral psychologists typically draw such a distinction to distinguish between a *private* sentiment (guilt), which is typically thought to represent something "innate" (therefore beyond culture) versus a *public* sentiment (shame), which is typically ascribed to be a reaction-response to perceived transgression of communal norms. Obviously, a cultural relativist wouldn't view the distinctions as legitimate, as *all* moral sense is fundamentally constituted by communal standards.

⁶ Consider, for example, familial disputes: family members can judge one another candidly and often harshly, yet would take offense should a stranger to the family adopt a similar stance to one of the family's members. Is this inconsistent, representative of mere "tribal" loyalties? Not necessarily: The cultural relativist can argue that one's *allegiance* and *vested interest* can lead to more serious moral appraisal of its members on the one hand as well as seducing the selfsame into blind loyalty on the other: If I have a vested interest and have invested my particular identity in variously concrete ways within a particular culture or community (be it a family, extended family, intentional community like a church, or general community like a town, municipality, or nation) I can become even more sensitive in my (constructively) critical faculties since I stake a claim in this community and want to see it flourish and succeed, just as much as I can turn a blind eye to its flaws.

Nevertheless, others objected to answering in the affirmative to questions 1. and 2. in the following manner: **Ashley Mondestin §0106** pointed out that such attacks targeting civilian centers (as the bombing of Dresden, and the A-bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima) were made *during wartime*. Whereas terrorist attacks (especially recently) tend to occur *during peacetime* (in the sense that the victims of such attacks weren't necessarily in a state of war with the cultures representing the terrorists' interests). For example, certainly the U.S. wasn't at war with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan when the attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. Nevertheless, there *are* of course plenty of terrorist attacks that occur *during wartime* or (more generally) in a general climate of siege or oppression/occupation. What distinguishes such acts deemed "terrorist" from acts of "insurgency?" (**Cassie Wilson §0107**) Some answer suggested by many in all three sections centered on the *nature of terrorists' motives and how they go about seeking to achieve such*. Typical acts of insurrections usually have some element of "the greater good" involved (even if such acts—like terrorist acts—are guilty of "end-justifying-means" reasoning) while terrorists' goals appear to be particularly *narrow*. But even more importantly, terrorists often deliberately *at the outset create an environment of havoc and anarchy* (echoing Walzer's points) to achieve their agendas "by hook or by crook," i.e. "hijack" ordinary means of negotiation and distribution of power, whereas insurrectionists often have broader revolutionary goals in mind (encompassing specifically the wishes of those who may not necessarily be active participants in such activities—either by choice or necessity⁷). Nevertheless, all said and done, the distinction between "revolutionary insurrectionist" and "terrorist" is a blurry and problematic one: certainly cultural relativists may argue that the distinction is in the eye of the beholder (**Rikki Studley §0103**)

⁷ On the other hand, terrorists often primarily target former comrades who disagree with their methods.