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## Giving Up on Moral Truth Shall Set You Free: Walzer on Relativism, Criticism, and Toleration

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# **Giving Up On Moral Truth Shall Set You Free: Walzer on Relativism, Criticism, and Toleration<sup>1</sup>**

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Morality, Michael Walzer contends, is not singular, objective, and universal, a principle or code applicable to all people at all times independent of whatever they happen to believe. Rather, it is plural, subjective or belief-dependent, and concrete, a multitude of moralities or moral ways of life created over time by the members of distinct historically situated communities.<sup>2</sup> This conventional or culturally relative account of the nature of morality entails that we must abandon the familiar notion of moral truth, according to which at least some claims of the form ‘it is wrong to  $\phi$ ’ are true in virtue of their tracking or reflecting objective and universal moral principles binding on all moral agents as such. Many of Walzer’s critics take this implication to constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* refutation of Walzer’s relativist meta-ethics. But what precisely do we lose if we give up on moral truth so conceived? Not a criterion to use in comparing different moralities or moral ways of life, I argue in the first section of this paper. Nor, as I demonstrate in section II, are we left without a standard for assessing or selecting among competing moral

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 274:4 (2015): 385-398, with a reply from Michael Walzer.

<sup>2</sup> This characterization of Walzer’s meta-ethical position may seem to be at odds with his professed commitment to reiterative universalism. As I argue below, however, the universality to which Walzer refers in his account of reiterative universalism concerns human beings’ nature as moral makers and, to some extent, the circumstances in which moral making takes place. What is universal is the existence of a morality in all human societies, moralities that, to paraphrase Walzer, are plural in their incidence and differentiated in their outcomes – but not wholly differentiated, as if the agents and subjects of all moralities had no common kinship (“Nation and Universe,” reprinted in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 199). What Walzer denies is the existence of an objective and universal moral principle or code binding on all human agents in virtue of their rationality, or being made in God’s image, etc., that need only be combined with factual claims in a deductive argument to generate situation-specific moral conclusions.

arguments, i.e. answers to questions regarding how we ought to live posed at varying levels of specificity. Moreover, I argue in section III that if we give up on the idea of universal and objective moral truth, and so the possibility of justifying the coercive imposition of our moral norms on other moral communities on the grounds that they would accept them if they were rational, impartially benevolent, open to God's wisdom, etc., we will be disposed to tolerate the different ways of life they seek to lead. Unlike the discussion in the first two sections, which aims largely to explicate Walzer's views, the argument set out in this last section differs from what Walzer himself says. Nevertheless, I argue that the case for toleration I offer on his behalf better coheres with Walzer's overall account of the nature of morality than does his own.

#### I.

I begin with a brief description of the central role played by the concept of legitimacy in Walzer's account of the nature of morality and the practice of moral justification. Legitimacy characterizes a relationship between a person and a norm or standard of right conduct, one in which the individual takes the norm in question to provide him with a reason for action. For example, a person who takes as legitimate a law prohibiting some act-type A believes he has a reason not to perform tokens of that act-type simply because the law prohibits it. If we assume for simplicity's sake that this is his only reason not to perform acts of this type, then should he be called upon to justify his refusing to A he will point to its illegality in his defense; that is, as a sufficient reason for refusing to A. On Walzer's conventional account of morality, legitimacy, not truth, provides the standard for assessing the

success of both moral arguments, i.e. attempts at moral justification, and concrete ways of life, i.e. moralities. I explain each of these claims in turn.

Consider the practice of moral justification, of guiding one's conduct according to moral norms, as well as appealing to moral norms to criticize others' conduct and to defend one's own conduct against others' criticisms of it. According to the view Walzer rejects, morality consists of universal and objective principles that are either discovered by revelation or by the exercise of a universal moral sense, or that are constructed by rational agents as such. On this view, moral claims are justified when they are true; that is, when they track or reflect universal and objective moral principles. In contrast, Walzer maintains morality is nothing more than the system of norms a particular community has developed over time to make or mark certain goals as worthy or unworthy of pursuit, and to regulate their interactions with one another (and typically with members of other communities as well). Moral justification, then, always involves reference to and interpretation of a given community's socially constructed ideals. To claim that equal concern requires the performance of certain act-types but not others – to take one of Walzer's favorite examples, the social provision of the care of bodies but not of souls – is to claim that the conception of equal treatment to which those addressed by the argument are committed is best understood to require the social provision of healthcare but not soulcraft. So understood, the success of a moral argument is a matter of its acceptance or uptake by members of that community. What makes a moral argument a good argument is not that it tracks an objective and universal moral principle but that it is an interpretation of a socially constructed ideal that achieves

legitimacy, i.e. that is treated as authoritative by members of the community to whom the argument is directed.

But what makes a moral norm legitimate? That is, what justifies members of a given community's belief that they ought to conform to a particular moral norm M that governs the performance of some act-type A, rather than rival norms N or O? Just as the moral objectivist must offer both an account of the nature of moral truth and an account of the features in virtue of which moral claims are true (e.g. being the product of agreement among rational agents), so too the moral relativist must offer an account of the nature of legitimacy and the features in virtue of which particular moral norms achieve legitimacy. Walzer's answer, as noted in the previous paragraph, is that a moral norm achieves legitimacy when (or perhaps more accurately, to the degree that) people in a given community take it to better express the meaning or value of the way of life they lead than do its rivals. Answers to the question "ought I to perform a token of act-type A" must appeal to the particular identity and moral world-view of the person who poses it. Answers that do not, e.g. ones grounded in divine revelation offered to non-believers, will not persuade, and since legitimacy is all an argument for a moral norm can aspire to, arguments that fail to persuade are defective.

In addition to providing a standard of success for moral argument, legitimacy provides a criterion for assessing entire moralities, or social orders. The legitimacy of a system of moral norms that constitutes the moral culture of a given society is a function of three properties: the percentage of members who treat the norms as legitimate, the percentage of the system's norms they treat as legitimate, and the

centrality of the norms treated as legitimate to the way of life constituted by the system as a whole. Speaking roughly, we can say that the more members of the community in question guide their conduct according to the community's moral norms, i.e. take those norms as in themselves reasons for action, the greater the legitimacy of the moral way of life, or social order, constituted by that system of moral norms. As this claim implies, legitimacy is a scalar notion, and the limiting case of a fully legitimate social order may well be an ideal type rather than a state of affairs realizable in practice.

Walzer contrasts a legitimate social order, one whose moral norms are actually shared and that constitute a group's common life, with what he terms radical coercion.<sup>3</sup> As a paradigm of radical coercion he offers "the extorted agreement" between slave and master. The extorted agreement may constitute a social order, in the sense that it provides both the slave and the master with a set of norms they can use to guide their behavior and to form reliable expectations about the behavior of the other. But those norms do not themselves provide the slave with reasons for action; he does not understand adherence to the norm as a matter of respect or concern for the master, or as an expression of who he is. Rather, the slave's only reason for adhering to the norm requiring him to work in the fields is his fear of the harm the master will inflict upon him should he fail to do so.

Walzer maintains that "all socialization is coercive," and that all existing moral systems or ways of life are themselves the product of a process that undoubtedly included the use of coercion. The key point, he contends, is that

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994): 27.

coercion not play: “such a part as to render the agreement spurious, a mere trick of the powerful.”<sup>4</sup> A legitimate social order, then, is not one in which coercion is absent, but one in which members of the society in question generally share an understanding of when coercion is permissible, and what form it may take. Nor does the fact that (some of) a society’s moral norms have their origins in the use of coercion, e.g. that their initial triumph over rival visions of the society’s common life owed in part to its proponents successful use of violence against their opponents, undermine their legitimacy. What matters is the degree to which the continued use of force, or the threat thereof, is essential to the preservation of those moral norms; i.e. to the stability of the social order they constitute.

Like legitimacy, radical coercion characterizes a limiting case and almost certainly an ideal type. Indeed, legitimacy and radical coercion serve as the two endpoints along which all actual societies fall at any particular point in time, and along which they move over time. Walzer defends the possibility of cross-cultural recognition of radically coercive social orders, i.e. of actual social orders that closely approximate the radically coercive ideal type. As with other elements of what he terms the moral minimum, however, this cross-cultural agreement, a shared understanding of what constitutes a radically coercive social order, soon runs out. This is so for two reasons. First, different societies have different conceptions of when coercion is legitimate, as well as the form it ought to take. Second, all societies depend for their stability on a mixture of coercion and legitimacy, on a mixture of appeals to prudence and to morality. In the case of most actual societies, then, it will

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 27.

be difficult to discern the precise extent to which stability is due to the first or the second of these considerations.

Whereas a legitimate social order consists in a society organized according to the rule of law – not merely positive law, but more broadly a system of moral norms that are understood by members of that society to bind them categorically – a radically coercive social order is a society organized according to the rule of fear and terror.<sup>5</sup> When an entire society is organized on the basis of radical coercion, we have a tyranny. The contrast with tyranny, in this sense, is not any particular form of government, such as democracy, but government in accordance with the rule of law, meaning government in accordance with a system of norms most of which are recognized as legitimate by most members of the society in question.

Walzer's moral relativism entails that we cannot compare different societies in terms of their justice, since there is no single, common, conception of justice all societies ought to strive to realize. However, we can compare different societies in terms of their legitimacy; that is, the extent to which individuals identify with the normative order that structures their lives and view conformity to its norms as expressions of what they believe to be valuable, or right and good. It is self-determination in this sense, one properly contrasted not only with subjugation but also alienation, that Walzer identifies as the formal end at which all human beings collectively aim.

## II.

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<sup>5</sup> See Lon Fuller, "Positivism and Fidelity to Law: A Reply to Professor Hart," *Harvard Law Review* 71(4): 630-672.



Perhaps the most common objections to Walzer's relativist account of the nature of morality and moral justification concern its implications for the practice of moral criticism. In this section and the next I offer a two-pronged response to these worries. First, I contend that Walzer offers ample grounds for criticizing existing moral norms, and places no limits on who may do so. Second, I argue that frustration with the limits on moral criticism that Walzer's relativism does impose reflects the tendency to what Walzer calls universalism, the view that the conception of morality that makes sense of one's own life applies to all human agents as such, and that it is this tendency that is actually the primary source of many of the evils people suffer at each others' hands.

Walzer's meta-ethics offers two distinct grounds for criticizing moral norms and the practices they structure. The first involves an interpretive appeal to certain components of a group's existing morality in order to justify revisions to some other part of it, or to justify particular extensions of one or more of the community's moral norms to novel cases. For example, a person may criticize a particular society's refusal to allow its female members anything more than a rudimentary education on the grounds that it is incompatible with their commitment to living the way of life God commands them to live. Or a society's norms for distributing the costs of educating the young may be criticized on the grounds that they are incompatible with its commitment to equality of opportunity. In each of these cases, criticism takes the form of a vision or interpretation of the norms governing access to education that is alleged to best express fidelity to that society's other moral

commitments. Though criticism may often take certain of those commitments to be fixed, in principle no aspect of a community's morality at any particular point in time is immune to revision. Indeed, history reveals that moral commitments that appear immune to challenge at one point in time may not be so perceived at another.

Though Walzer's meta-ethics restricts the kind of reasons to which a person may appeal when criticizing a society's moral practices, it does not limit the standing to criticize a society's moral practices to members of that society. Foreigners may criticize a community's practice of denying to its female members anything more than a rudimentary education on the grounds that it is incompatible with that community's own socially constructed ideals even when few or none of the female (or male) members themselves accept this interpretation of those ideals. Nevertheless, actual revisions to a given society's system of moral norms, meaning the delegitimizing of some of its old norms and their replacement with new ones now taken to be legitimate, can only be completed by its members, since it is only in virtue of their commitment to guiding their conduct according to particular moral norms that those norms are justified.

Interpretive moral criticism seeks to delegitimize existing moral norms (or existing interpretations of moral norms) and the practices they structure by offering alternative accounts of what is permitted, required, or forbidden by a person's identity as a member of a particular group, or the meaning of his or her life within that community. It constitutes the form of moral criticism that follows from the replacement of truth with legitimacy as the measure of success in moral argument.

The substitution of legitimacy for truth as a standard for comparing moralities, or moral ways of life, provides the basis for a second type of criticism that can be leveled against particular moral practices, namely that their stability relies too heavily upon coercion. Criticism in this case is not premised on any particular conception of the right way to live; rather, it condemns certain practices within a community on the grounds that it denies the self-determination of some of its members. That is, it denies them the opportunity to develop and live autonomous or authentic ways of life with which they identify, lives composed of norm governed practices they view as expressive of who they are or of what they value, rather than as alien and oppressive.

The possibility of this second kind of criticism stands in need of defense, however. If a claim regarding the source of a given social practice's stability is to count as a criticism, an argument for reform and not simply an observation or explanation, then it seems we must postulate something like a right to self-determination for all human beings. Yet postulating such a universal right, as Walzer does, is at odds with a relativist meta-ethics. I propose a resolution to this conflict in the next section.

### III

"... We must meet the requirements of our moral occasions. We must explain and defend ourselves, ground our complaints, justify our claims, situate ourselves within the moral world, and contribute as best we can to its construction and reconstruction. But we do all these things among ourselves, in some particular here-and-now, working with a local set of concepts and values.

Reiterative universalism operates mostly within the limits of ours and theirs – not of reason with a capital “R” but of our reason and their reason. It requires respect for the others, who are just as much moral makers as we are.” (“Nation,” 198-99).

The two quotations set out above present us with an apparent paradox. On the one hand, Walzer claims that moral justification is always relative to the moral norms of particular, historically situated, moral communities. The reasons we offer when we defend our own conduct or criticize that of others are the moral norms that define and give meaning to our way of life; hence “our reason.” On the other hand, Walzer appears to assert the existence of a universal moral principle, one that binds all moral agents as such, namely a requirement of respect for others as moral makers. Assuming that Walzer takes moral making to be generally, and perhaps even necessarily, a collective undertaking, a universal principle of respect for others as moral makers is equivalent to a universal principle of toleration for communal self-determination. The claim that such a principle exists, however, appears impossible to reconcile with Walzer’s relativist meta-ethics.

Of course, Walzer maintains that moral justification operates *mostly* within the limits of particular moral communities; perhaps, then, a principle of toleration is an exception (indeed, the only exception), a principle that operates within Reason with a capital “R” and so binds all rational or moral agents as such. The existence of any such principle seems difficult to reconcile with Walzer’s account of the nature of morality and moral justification, however. Though Walzer acknowledges the

existence of a moral minimum, a small set of moral norms binding on all human agents, the universal scope of these norms consists solely in the fact that they constitute the set of norms instantiated in all human societies.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion that all human agents are bound by the rules that make up this set is arrived at inductively, rather than being deduced from Reason. Individuals are bound by norms prohibiting, say, murder and theft because the moral norms that constitute the shared way of life they live with other members of a particular community include a norm prohibiting such conduct, not because they are rational, or children of God, or because of any other property shared universally by all human beings.<sup>7</sup>

Nor does Walzer's conception of reiterative universalism undergird a universal principle of toleration, though he seems to think that it does.<sup>8</sup> The universality in reiterative universalism refers to a fundamental fact about all human beings, a fundamental feature of human nature, namely that we are moral makers.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., "Nation," 195; *Thick and Thin*, Ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover we should be careful not to exaggerate the commonality, and so a kind of universality, instantiated by the moral minimum. As Walzer writes, when we consult the anthropological literature we find "an overlapping plurality of sets, each of which bears a family resemblance to the others. Hence we will know them (all) to be principles of justice, and we may well be led, by the interactions of states and peoples, say, to interpret them in ways that emphasize their common features. But our interpretations can do no more than suggest the *differentiated commonalities* of justice – for the common features are always incorporated within a particular cultural system and elaborated in highly specific ways" ("Nation," 194). Though we can "abstract from the differences to a universal code, something like H. L. A. Hart's "minimum natural law"" ("Nation," 194) that abstraction is not itself a moral code or morality, but an incomplete outline of a morality created by overlaying the (more complete, or concrete) actual moralities. Put another way, the moral minimum does not encompass a single prohibition on murder instantiated in all societies; rather, the moralities of all actual societies include a prohibition on killing the innocent that overlap to some degree with respect to the act-tokens they prohibit, though they also differ to some degree on the basis of different understandings of innocence, killing, the relevance of intention, and so on. Hence the moral minimum consists in differentiated commonalities.

<sup>8</sup> "We act immorally whenever we deny to other people the warrant for what I will now call the rights of reiteration, that is, the right to act autonomously and the right to form attachments in accordance with a particular understanding of the good life" ("Nation," 201). Likewise: "...the experience of reiteration makes it possible, at least, for people to acknowledge the diversity of claims. ... [I]t is a moral act to recognize otherness in this way" ("Nation," 195).

It is a fundamental fact about human beings that we wish to be treated, and to treat others, only in ways we believe to be justified; that is, in accordance with norms (moral or otherwise) we take to be authoritative or categorical.<sup>9</sup> The systems of justification – moralities, or ways of life – that human beings have constructed vary greatly, “but there is something singular and universal about [our] creativity, some brute fact of agency captured... by the claim that all human agents have been created in the image of a creator God. Justice is the tribute we have learned to pay to the brute fact and the divine image.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the fact that human beings feel compelled to live a just life, one in which they are treated and treat others justly, and so are constantly engaged in the reiterative process of creating and revising conceptions of justice, only explains why all human societies have moralities. Other commonalities, both of human nature and material circumstances, explain the overlap in these moralities that Walzer labels the moral minimum.<sup>11</sup> But insofar as reiterative universalism is a descriptive/explanatory theory of morality, an account of why the universe contains a multitude of diverse and sometimes conflicting moralities grounded in a brute fact of human nature, it cannot provide a basis for a normative principle requiring toleration, or respect for communal self-determination.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most compelling evidence for this claim comes from the great and torturous lengths that perpetrators of injustice frequently go to offer putative justifications for their wrongdoing, a fact Walzer has repeatedly emphasized over the years.

<sup>10</sup> “Nation,” 192.

<sup>11</sup> “The experiences that make for moral making have to do most often with lordship and bondage, that is, with oppression, vulnerability, and fear, and pervasively, the exercise of power – experiences that require us to justify ourselves and to appeal for help to one another. We respond to the requirement creatively, which is to say, differently, though most often, perhaps, with the misplaced confidence that ours is the only legitimate response. What the historical record suggests, however, is that there is a wide range of possible responses and a significant number of actual responses that are legitimate at least in this sense, that they fit the experiences; they meet their requirement of their occasions” (“Nation,” 196).

This is not to deny the obvious, namely that the moralities of particular historically situated communities may include a principle of toleration for communal self-determination. Indeed, one virtue of Walzer's approach to moral theorizing is that it shifts attention away from efforts to formulate a single principle of toleration that ought to inform or be applied in all pluralistic human societies and towards a more empirically informed historical and sociological account of the different forms that toleration takes, one sensitive to the virtues and limits of each form, and the normative and material factors that strengthen or weaken their legitimacy. This change in orientation does not preclude normative argument; rather, it simply highlights the fact that normative arguments regarding demands for more or less interference in a given community's way of life must be made "in some particular here and now, working with a local set of concepts and values."<sup>12</sup> The claim that a person ought to tolerate certain moral practices partially constitutive of another community's way of life will provide her with a reason to do so only insofar as she can be persuaded that such conduct better realizes or expresses than does intolerance some socially constructed ideal to which she is already committed. Those ideals might reference liberal values such as autonomy or self-government, or romantic values such as authenticity and originality, or religious values of universal love. In each case, though, it will be the morality that a particular community has made, and that it continues to revise or reiterate, rather than the fact that human beings are moral makers that justifies the claim that tolerance is required, permitted, or forbidden.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 199.

Though Walzer's rejection of what he calls covering-law universalism in favor of reiterative universalism precludes a deductive argument for a universally binding principle of toleration, it remains possible to argue inductively for such a conclusion. Yet toleration, even when understood in its weakest sense to involve "simply a resigned acceptance of difference [i.e. different moralities] for the sake of peace" clearly does not characterize all human societies, and so a principle of toleration cannot be part of the moral minimum as Walzer understands it.<sup>13</sup> That is, toleration is not a principle that binds all human agents because all human communities necessarily include such a principle in their specific moralities. Consider, however, a weaker claim of necessity, one that holds only that human history necessarily involves progress toward a world in which all human societies practice toleration, even if variations in the concrete forms tolerance takes in different societies are never wholly eliminated. If true, this progressive account of history entails that one day all human beings will be bound by a principle of toleration, albeit not exactly the same principle and not in virtue of a property that all possess, such as being rational or a moral maker. Walzer shies away from claims of this type, however.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, our low rate of success at predicting major political and economic changes such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 2008 global recession, as well as trends such as the spread and increasing power of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East (and elsewhere), should greatly

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Difference: Statehood and Toleration in a Multicultural World," reprinted in *Thinking Politically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 169.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., his claim in an interview with David Miller that no one knows whether, given a certain path of historical development, the ideal of human rights might disappear from the landscape of international justice. (*Thinking Politically*, 303).



weaken any confidence we have in an inductive case for this vision of human history.<sup>15</sup> Of course, a conception of human history as progress toward (recognition of) a universal morality or way of life need not be arrived at inductively, but Walzer rejects the alternative sources, such as divine revelation or a priori deduction from principles of rationality imminent in that part of human history that has already passed.

Thus far I have maintained that there is no route from Walzer's characterization of human beings as moral makers to his apparent assertion of a universally binding principle of toleration. I now want to explore a different approach to linking Walzer's account of morality with the practice of toleration. As suggested by the reference to the practice, rather than a principle, of toleration, this approach is empirical rather than normative, in the following sense: it hypothesizes that given our nature as moral makers, the rejection of universalism, of a belief in a single universal and objective morality binding on all moral agents, will usually dispose human beings to tolerate the practices of other moral communities. If so, then moral theory can play a practical role in promoting the practice of toleration by undercutting those beliefs or world views that typically motivate intolerance, rather than by demonstrating that all human agents as such are required to respect others as moral makers.

Though Walzer grounds his reiterative universalism in the fact that human beings are moral makers, this fact about us reflects an even more fundamental

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<sup>15</sup> The claim here is not that human history will not lead to a world in which all human societies practice toleration, but only that we currently have insufficient grounds to attach any probability to the occurrence of this outcome.

feature of human nature he also identifies, namely our desire to treat others and to be treated by them only in ways we take to be justified. Moral making is a response to this fact of human nature; it consists in our efforts to work out with those with whom we interact mutually agreeable terms on which to do so. Crucially, for a moral conventionalist like Walzer the “agreement” in question here must be an actual one. One person’s treatment of another is morally justifiable if and only if it conforms to an understanding of some standard of right conduct viewed by both people as legitimate.<sup>16</sup> In the absence of such an understanding regarding some type of conduct, the person who performs a token of that type will not be able to justify doing so to the person his conduct affects. If we seek to act only in ways we believe to be justifiable, then our inability to justify performing a token of the act-type in question to those who will be affected by it, i.e. to justify it on terms those people accept, will dispose us to refrain from performing it. Or in other words, the deep discomfort human beings experience when they treat others in ways they do not believe to be justifiable will dispose people to tolerate the practices of members of other moral communities.

Of course, people often do not default to toleration in the face of their inability to arrive at a shared understanding of a common moral norm. Rather, the far more common response to an encounter with difference is the attempt to impose

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<sup>16</sup> As I argued in the previous section, working out this actual “agreement” may, and often does, involve interpretive criticism aimed at persuading others to reconceive their moral commitments; e.g. the demands of political equality or the divine instructions set out in a holy text. That is, it need not consist solely of bargaining between parties whose goals are taken to be fixed, though as Walzer emphasizes bargaining and coalition building – in a word, politics – is also essential to forging consensus vis-à-vis the legitimacy of a particular norm or set of norms. See “Deliberation, and What Else?” in *Thinking Politically*.

one's own morality or way of life on the other. This does not disprove the argument set out in the previous paragraph, however, since those who respond this way do not abandon their fundamental commitment as human agents to treating others justifiably. Rather, they substitute for an actual consensus regarding the forms of treatment they owe to others and others owe to them some standard of the right and the good to which all moral agents ought to conform but that only they, and not their enemies (or victims), have discerned. This tendency to universalism takes many forms, from sacred revelation to agreement among rational agents in a fair bargaining situation to the dictates of an impartially benevolent spectator. What unites these forms of moral justification, however, is that they render persuading others to share one's conception of morality unnecessary (and so, at best, a policy to be followed only pragmatically). The belief that we have identified objective and universal moral truths binding on all moral agents as such satisfies our natural desire to treat others only in ways we take to be justifiable, and so enables us to sustain our efforts to impose upon them our particular moral way of life even in the face of their persistent and, oftentimes, violent resistance to it. As Walzer points out, "justification is always moral in character, and the justification of evil is no exception."<sup>17</sup>

Given our deep commitment to treating others justifiably and the centrality of (our) morality to who we are and what we care about, universalism's seductiveness should not surprise us.<sup>18</sup> "The central problem of moral creativity is

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<sup>17</sup> "Nation," 201.

<sup>18</sup> Universalism's attractiveness is further enhanced when the conduct it sanctions as right is also advantageous.

that it encompasses and justifies evil action,” Walzer writes.<sup>19</sup> It does so not because it is deployed to elaborate or make theories of immorality that people seek to put into practice, but through its elaboration of universal claims that sanction evil in the guise of justice. When exercised in this manner moral creativity becomes pathological; a condition that not only systematically distorts our understanding of the world we inhabit but that all too often inspires us to inflict terrible suffering upon the members of other communities and to deny them the self-determination that we enjoy and that, as moral makers, they also naturally seek. Once conceived of in these terms, we can see that universalism and the intolerance it often breeds calls not for another universalism - a principle of toleration - which can never be had, but a cure, a treatment that can combat the tendency of our moral creativity to metastasize in ways that encompass and justify evil.<sup>20</sup>

The foregoing argument implies that efforts to unmask the universalizing tendencies apparently endemic to human beings ought to figure centrally in our efforts to promote toleration. Walzer has been engaged in such an effort for many decades, of course. Examples include his criticism of those who argue for the in-principle permissibility of armed intervention in support of substantive moralities

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Walzer writes that “we act immorally whenever we deny to other people the warrant for what I will now call the rights of reiteration, that is, the right to act autonomously and the right to form attachments in accordance with a particular understanding of the good life” (“Nation,” 201). For the reasons canvassed in the main text, I think this description inapt. The actual exercise of self-determination, or of moral making, is a pre-condition for the claim that an act is immoral. That is, only in virtue of a community having made certain conduct impermissible, perhaps (but not necessarily) by conferring certain rights upon its members, or foreigners, or both, is it possible to act wrongly or immorally by performing that conduct; e.g. violating those rights. What is universally true of actions that deny others self-determination, such as the use of coercion to suppress a group’s attempts at reiterative moral making, is that they necessarily lack justification. The absence of justification in this case (non-justification?) is neither synonymous with nor does it entail that one’s conduct is unjustified in the sense synonymous with wrong or immoral.

(e.g. maximal respect for individual rights, or democratic governance), and his diagnosis of the tendency of national liberation movements to fall prey to the same universalizing tendencies, and the oppressive practices they sanction, of which members of that nation were recently victims.<sup>21</sup> In the context of discussing the latter point, Walzer identifies as a particularly nice example of the kind of argument that can contribute to the practice of toleration Martin Buber's response to his fellow-Zionists who thought Arab nationalism artificial (and so took themselves to be justified in dismissing claims grounded in it): "We know that... we have genuine national unity and a real nationalist movement; why should we assume that these do not exist among the Arabs?" In other words, resist the urge to substitute a universal, world-historical, justification for one's proposed conduct, one that renders unnecessary the agreement of those one's conduct will affect, for actual engagement with others aimed at realizing some combination of consensus and toleration; i.e. a shared vision of a culturally diverse political community, be it a single state or the international community. Liberated from the pathology of universalism, our natural disposition to treat others justifiably, and so only in ways that they actually take to be justified, will produce the toleration of communal self-determination and the full flowering of human creativity that Walzer aspires to promote. Giving up on moral truth shall set us free.

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<sup>21</sup> See "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics" and "Nation and Universe," respectively, both reprinted in *Thinking Politically*.