THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOOD AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF EVIL: A REPLY TO MY CRITICS

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I am extremely grateful to all of the contributors to this symposium for taking the time to discuss my research with me and for formulating the extremely interesting, varied and challenging essays collected in this issue. As my argument has been, over the course of the last six months, a work in progress, I am conscious of having presented to my critics something of a 'moving target'. That is to say, I have sought to adjust my argument in order to make it less vulnerable to their telling objections. Whether I have succeeded in that enterprise is for the reader to decide. I would simply say that to the extent I do succeed, it is in no small measure thanks to the generous and constructive criticism of the contributing authors.

I could not hope to do justice to the richness of the foregoing essays in this short reply, and so I will not attempt to address each article in detail. (Of course, this approach has the added benefit of enabling me to overlook those more troubling objections to which I can find no adequate response.) Instead, I seek to clarify and defend my argument against fundamental objections that seem to me to loom large in all of the papers. My reply is organised under three headings. First, I shall address the relationship between aspirational and preventive ethics in my account; secondly, I shall attend to the question of the universality of sovereign evil; and, finally, I shall conclude with some reflections on the ambitions and limits of political theory.

Aspiration and Prevention

In his contribution to this issue, Elvio Baccarini poses the following question: "why does Edyvane think that preventivist theories are preferable to aspirationalist theories?" The short answer to that question is that I do not think preventivist theories preferable to aspirationalist theories. Rather, I think that theories which acknowledge the dualism of aspiration and prevention are preferable to those that elide or conflate it. My intention is not at all to argue *for* the preventive ethic and *against* the aspirational ethic. As I indicated in my introduction to this collection, my intention is rather to posit a fundamental dualism in which both aspiration and prevention have vital roles to play. The public morality of a given society at a given time will always be the product of an uneasy compromise between the rival claims of aspiration and prevention. And, crucially, that is not to say that public morality is composed of a compromise between rival political camps – the 'aspirationalists' and the 'preventivists'. Each and every one of us, on the model I am proposing, is subject to the claims of both aspiration and prevention: the rival public ethics have as their shadow the private interplay of innocence and experience in the mind of the individual.

It is true that I focus primarily in my argument on the preventive ethic. That is partly because it has seemed to me the more neglected side of public morality in the contemporary literature, and also because it has seemed the more pressing in the times of uncertainty in which we live. But none of this is to say that the aspirational ethic is unimportant, much less to be abandoned in favour of a preventive alternative. My claim is rather that the two sides of the dualism stand to one another in what Michael Oakeshott terms a '*concordia discors*' – a discordant harmony (Oakeshott, 1996). The claims of aspiration on one hand and of prevention on the other are normally at odds with each other, but they are also interdependent.

There is a fairly clear sense, I think, in which the aspirational ethic depends upon the preventive ethic. It is not easy to pursue one's aspirations whilst the threat of sovereign evil is imminent. However, there is also a sense in which the preventive ethic depends on the aspirational ethic. It is ultimately only because the expression of human life and liveliness in the formation of ethical aspirations is so important to us that the preventive ethic seems to matter. We prevent evil partly in order to create room for aspiration. In this sense, an acknowledgement of the importance of aspiration is built into the preventive ethic. And just to be clear, note that this is not the same as Michael Walzer's claim, which I challenged in the introduction, that the prevention of some specific evil matters only because of some specific, antecedently acknowledged and matching aspiration. The claim rather is that the preventive ethic matters only because aspiration *as such* is something we recognise as fundamental to the possibility of a decent human existence.

Thus, the idea that we are confronted by any kind of straightforward choice between aspiration and prevention is in my view unintelligible. Consider what Oakeshott has to say about the *concordia discors* of what he terms the 'politics of faith' and the 'politics of scepticism', which I think corresponds quite closely to my distinction between aspiration and prevention:

> If our choice lies (as it does) between one of the two current styles which compose our complex manner of political activity, then it is Hobson's choice: in selecting either we are expecting of it something which it cannot supply. ... Each [pole of political activity], in the abstract, may have the virtue of simplicity; but neither, as we know them, is capable of being by itself a concrete style of political activity. (Oakeshott, 1996: 120)

In this sense we should be wary of those Oakeshott terms the 'simplifiers' who would have us pursue an agenda of 'preventionism' or of 'aspirationalism'. For reasons I have given, any such enterprise is liable to end in confusion at least, and perhaps even disaster.

So, my objection to the Rawlsian overlapping consensus is not that it is exclusively aspirational or utopian in its formulation. I think Baccarini is quite right to suggest that it contains 'preventive and austere elements, as well'. My concern, rather, and as indicated, is with the manner in which it *conflates* the categories of aspiration and prevention, turning the dualism into a monism and supposing that the two are neatly continuous. My worry is that it thereby leaves us with no account of the grounding of the ethical considerations that might be brought to bear on conflicts between those within and those without the overlapping consensus. Indeed, if Rawls is right, then it is very hard to see what grounding those considerations could possibly have.

This clarification of my position enables me to respond also to a related concern raised by Enes Kulenović. Kulenović imputes to me the assumption that once the distinction is made between contingent evil, which is associated with the aspirational ethic, and sovereign evil, which is associated with the preventive ethic, then 'citizens will always give priority to the latter'. I do not assume that, and the points I have made here may help us to see why. As I have indicated, it is a consequence of my dualistic conception of public morality that citizens are subject to the claims of both the aspirational and the preventive ethics. I see no reason in principle why citizens should prioritise one side or the other. I do think it possible to render intelligible the settled disposition to act on the claims of the preventive ethic, even when those claims involve the betrayal of one's ethical aspirations (see Edyvane, 2012, ch. 7). But I have no account of why that is necessarily the right thing to do; I do not think it possible to demonstrate the priority of sovereign evil over contingent evil. In fact, I think it entirely reasonable that citizens might sometimes see fit to violate the demands of the preventive ethic in the course of seeking to prevent some contingent evil that weighs particularly heavily with them.

The very idea of evil's 'sovereignty' seems to imply, and is intended to imply, a sense of overriding importance. Citizens will quite properly feel that they ought to give priority to the demands of the preventive ethic. However, my central claim is that in the domain of public morality there are *two* sovereign masters – good and evil. Citizens will also, and again quite properly, feel that they ought to give priority to the demands of the aspirational ethic oriented to the sovereign good. This injects an inevitable and unavoidable instability into the very core of public life.

The Universality of Evil

The second objection I wish to address is that, when it comes to the negotiation of deep moral conflict, the preventive ethic fares no better than its aspirational counterpart because conflicts of evil are just as deeply entrenched as conflicts of good. As Krešimir Petković puts it, "it is indeed hard to achieve consensus on political good, but building politics on a consensus on great evils could be an even harder task". Similarly, Baccarini urges that sovereign evils are "more related to people's worldviews" and hence "more contextual" than I have allowed. Kulenović, by contrast, and as I understand him, is willing to accept (for the sake of argument) the *category* of sovereign evil, but questions the likelihood of agreement *within* that category on the nature, origins, ordering and strategies for preventing the various sovereign evils.

These objections rest, or so I believe, on a misinterpretation of my general enterprise. The key aim of my argument is to show why practices of civic virtue remain intelligible in conditions of conflicting ethical aspirations. My thesis is that such practices can be rendered intelligible by appeal to the way in which they prevent sovereign evils, evils upon which there may be consensus even while there is radical disagreement of ethical aspirations. In other words, we are to begin with a picture of a tolerably stable practice of civic virtue among, say, liberals and illiberals. The key question from my point of view is this: what could possibly ground such practices? The problem with prevailing theories of justice is that typically they have at this point nothing to say. As far as such theories are concerned, there is in fact *no* ground for such practices. Evidently that conclusion can easily lead to cynicism and despair, to the sense that anything then is permitted in such contexts and nothing is forbidden. My claim is that we can in fact make sense of these sorts of practices of civic virtue, and that we can do so by appeal to the category of sovereign evil.

Now of course there is a further question here of how *likely* it is that tolerably stable practices of civic virtue will come about in conditions of moral conflict. But that is not the question I am trying to answer. For what it is worth, I share some of the pessimism of my critics here: I do not think it terribly likely that practices of civic virtues will emerge and survive in circumstances of deep moral conflict and hostility, although sometimes they do. In any case, it was never my intention to persuade the reader that everything will turn out for the best after all.

There is one sense in which I think the objection might gain some traction (and a second, less direct sense, to which I'll turn in the next section). If Kulenović's thesis about the plurality of evil is intended as a *metaphysical* thesis, and not just a statement of the fact that it is hard to secure consensus on evil, then it does suggest a problem for my account. My account depends on the idea that it is at least in principle possible for there to be stable moral consensus on sovereign evil; the metaphysical plurality thesis (as I am interpreting it) denies that possibility. But then if that is what lies at the heart of our dispute, it seems to me that we are simply trading metaphysical speculations – mine involving a monistic (or at least a universalist) conception of sovereign basic evil and Kulenović's involving a pluralistic (non-universalist) conception. I am not sure that that is going to be a particularly fruitful dispute for us to pursue.

In order to see why, it might be helpful to consider an example. Kulenović refers to my suggestion that war is among the sovereign evils of human life from which it is the task of preventive politics to protect us. But Kulenović suggests that war is not self-evidently a sovereign evil that would be recognised as such by any 'normally responsive person'. As he puts it, we could expect 'Homeric heroes as well as followers of Nietzsche or Hegel' to see things very differently:[1]

> The reason that today war is perceived as one of those evils that should be prevented is a consequence of the narratives that were introduced after the horrors of WWII. There was nothing inevitable about this process: it was a result of conscious effort to replace the narrative of the warrior ethic with that of war as one of the ultimate evils.

There are two points to be made here. The first is a matter of detail, albeit a rather important one: I would not want to suggest that war in and of itself is a sovereign evil. My claim rather is that the *mutilations of war* constitute a sovereign evil. Even so, it is still possible I think for Kulenović to press his objection here. Even if we are talking about the mutilations of war and not war itself, there is still a long tradition, bound up with the 'warrior ethic', that interprets killing and dying in war as the supreme honour. Kulenović suggests that views have changed considerably since the 1940s, but only because we have successfully replaced the old narrative of the warrior ethic with a new narrative according to which the mutilations of war are a very great evil.

This is an entirely coherent and plausible speculation, but it is a speculation nevertheless and I would want to tell a different story about the same historical trajectory. In so far as the Homeric heroes did not recognise the sovereign evil of the mutilations of war, I would indeed want to suggest that they were not responding normally (where 'normally' is to be interpreted as meaning something close to 'naturally'). I would suggest that they had in fact been distracted from natural feeling by a set of beliefs, religious and political, that functioned to explain away their immediate aesthetic revulsion at the prospect of killing and dying. And I would contend that what we have seen in the twentieth century is not the substitution of one narrative (death in war is the supreme honour) for another narrative (death in war is the supreme evil), but rather a shocking recall to natural feelings otherwise suppressed by what Wilfred Owen called the 'old lie': *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (Owen, 1994: 29). I believe that my story also constitutes a coherent and plausible speculation. There is no decisive argument to be offered on either side here. My argument for the universality of sovereign evil is not intended to be decisive, but is rather meant to provide a metaethical speculation that is coherent and that offers a broadly persuasive account of the darker reaches of human ethical experience.

Conclusion: The Ambitions and Limits of Political Theory

I suspect that what are really at stake in most of the disagreements that emerge here are two rather different perspectives on the ambitions and limits of political theory. My critics interpret my enterprise as a work of normative theory that aspires to be action-guiding. They suppose that I am proposing preventive politics as a worthy solution to our current predicament, and accordingly they object that it is unrealistic to think that it could so rescue us. Thus, and as Petković puts it, if we are serious about building a political theory of preventive morality, then we need to "develop a clear theoretical picture of evil's functioning in order to form a theoretical basis for policies to tackle it, within the framework of adequate political morality".

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[1] If I were being uncharitable, I would note at this point that the Homeric heroes, Nietzsche and Hegel are not often invoked as exemplars of 'normally responsive' personhood, but I shall suspend that doubt in what follows.

But, as I have indicated, I do not see my enterprise in those terms. I see it as something closer to a form of 'explanatory theory' the aim of which is to *make sense* of public morality and to demonstrate the *intelligibility* of practices of civic virtue in conditions of conflict. I have no intention of telling anyone what they ought politically to be pursuing, or how they should go about 'tackling' evil, or whether such endeavours have any chance whatsoever of ending in success. All of those questions fall almost entirely outside of the scope of my inquiry. In fact, I am inclined to say that they fall largely beyond the limits of political theory as such. They are not, to my mind, properly philosophical questions. Or at least they are questions to which philosophy will never be able to provide satisfactory answers.

Consequently, I suspect that I have a rather more limited view of the proper ambitions of political theory than my critics do, and that perhaps they credit me with a more ambitious project than I have actually undertaken. But in so far as that is the case, it leads into the second way I mentioned above in which the objection to my account of the universality of sovereign evil might gain traction. It might be said that my account is far too *unambitious*, and that it fails to address the actual problems of politics that we face. And so, as Baccarini suggests, it scarcely matters whether or not a sound metaphysical case for the universality of evil can be made, for when it comes to conflict negotiation and the avoidance of anarchy in the real world, "we must focus on what people [actually] feel or think as being of primary importance". In this way, Petković turns my own criticism of the aspirational theorists against me – perhaps I, too, am guilty of "fiddling while Rome burns".

I shall end here on a more concessive note, for I am not without sympathy for this objection. I would like, though, to make two final points in response. The first is to emphasise that my account does carry some implications for political action. As I have stressed throughout, I would wish to maintain that my argument serves to resist the 'counsel of despair' which contends that there is no stable basis for public morality in conditions of moral conflict and so there is no point in even trying to uphold any sort of ethical standard in such circumstances. I would like to think that I have made some contribution to the case for civic virtue, even in the most desperate of circumstances. I would also like to think that my account of the dualistic structure of public morality could potentially help us better to understand practices of civic virtue and thus provide a resource for those seeking to foster such practices, especially by revealing some of the less apparent possibilities and limits of their endeavours. Nevertheless, I accept that my account does not deliver (or even imply) the sort of comprehensive programme of political action that my critics and others might want to see. In so far as that sort of comprehensive programme *is* what we should like to see, however – and this is my second response – I suspect that we political philosophers are in the wrong line of business.

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