Charles Larmore. *What is Political Philosophy?* Princeton University Press 2020. 200 pp. $32.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691179148); $24.9 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691241562).

It might seem odd for an established political philosopher in his early 70s to ask, 'what is political philosophy?' However, the answer that Charles Larmore, W. Duncan MacMillan Family Professor in the Humanities at Brown University, provides to this fundamental question of his field is illuminating and relevant.

Larmore's central contribution to political philosophy (he has also contributed to moral philosophy and the history of philosophy) has been a reformulation of liberalism as 'political liberalism,' a doctrine described as free from any substantive ethical claims such as the 'ethics of individualism' of 'classical liberalism' (10). In that, Larmore has been an ally of the latter John Rawls, notably the Rawls of *Political Liberalism* (Colombia University Press 1993). Not surprisingly, therefore, Rawls is a central reference point in *What Is Political Philosophy?* However, the book owes at least as much to Bernard Williams, one of Rawls's foremost critics and the pioneer of what has been identified as a 'realist turn' (away from Rawls 'ideal theory approach') in political philosophy (cf. Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order,* University of Chicago Press 2021).

All three chapters of *What Is Political Philosophy?* consist of enlarged versions of previously published articles, but they have been interwoven to form a coherent whole. The first chapter sets the stage by positioning the argument on a broader debate within political philosophy. Larmore discusses two approaches to political philosophy, one that treats it as a branch of moral philosophy and another that insists that political philosophy must be seen as a separate discipline with its unique agenda. Larmore sees the former, 'applied ethics', approach most clearly articulated in the writings of G.A. Cohen, while the latter, the realist approach, still owes much to the pioneering work of Bernard Williams. While Larmore sees more truth in the realist view, he finds crucial insights (and flaws) in both.

In the following chapter Larmore discusses his preferred approach – political realism – in more detail. However, as indicated by the chapter's title, *The Truth in Political Realism*, Larmore's sympathy for the realist approach is not unconditional. Hence, the second chapter is an attempt to modify Williams's position in such a way as to become a useful building block of Larmore's own theory. In chapter three, Larmore undertakes a similar attempt with the Rawlsian '*liberal principle of legitimacy*' (145, emphasis in original), which he modifies by more explicitly working out its underlying moral basis (76).

Larmore begins his argument by pointing to the ubiquity of conflict; political life is characterized by conflicting interests, incompatible values, and widespread disagreement. So much so that 'without the institution of law and the exercise of state power no common existence is likely to be possible' (21). It is to liberalism's credit, he points out, that it has distinguished itself from other political doctrines by treating conflict as an inevitable feature of political life. 'As shown by its devotion to the liberal ideal of toleration, liberalism has always been a response to the breath of social disagreement, seeking terms of political association to which people can agree despite all that divides them' (76).

However, liberalism, according to Larmore, has generally not gone far enough. The 'individualist ethic' of classical liberalism, which was meant to serve as a neutral basis everyone could agree to and which could therefore serve as a guiding principle for the establishment of social institutions, 'has itself turned out to be an object of reasonable disagreement' (11). The same holds for Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press 1971), where Rawls develops supposedly neutral moral principles, from which he then seeks to derive the outline for an arrangement of fair social institutions. This, according to Larmore, ignores that 'moral disagreement is likely to be the outcome when reasonable people discuss among themselves the ultimate questions of life (35).

Therefore, Larmore thinks that realists, like Williams, are right to insist that we should keep moral and political philosophy apart. If moral questions are among those that are contested and the object of controversy and conflict in political life, we cannot start by developing moral principles from which we then draw an ideal theory of social institutions. Instead, we have to accept that notwithstanding 'the necessity for people to work together if they are to survive and flourish as a community, their passions, interests, and views about the good and the right often put them at odds, particularly when matters of importance are at stake' (82).

While Larmore follows Williams in drawing a strict boundary between moral and political philosophy, he rejects the idea 'that political philosophy ought to avoid appealing to,' as Williams has it, 'a morality prior to politics' (78). The point for Larmore is not to keep political philosophy free from any moral considerations – that, he holds, cannot be done – but to understand the 'defining problems of the political realm, which are the exercise of power and the need for authority' (20). Considering that moral issues are among those that regularly give rise to political conflicts, political philosophy should not try to uncover basic moral principles that everyone can agree to, which will then serve as a normative standard for designing a framework of binding rules and institutions. At the same time, people cannot do without binding rules and institutions if they do not want to risk the collapse of social order and thus the basis for social cooperation.

If, on the one hand, enforceable rules are indispensable, while, on the other, an ideal, consensual model of society is not a valid option, a new task arises for political philosophy. It should primarily be concerned with working out those principles that 'must have as their primary object the essentially political problem of determining the conditions under which enforceable rules of social life may justifiably be instituted' (46).

Therefore, Larmore insists that political philosophy should begin with the problem of legitimacy rather than the question of distributive justice (as Rawls has it), a position he shares with realism. However, he diverts from Williams's political realism by insisting that there is also a moral question to be answered because 'every conception of political legitimacy has to have some moral foundation … The question is whether this moral foundation consists in a broad religious or ethical vision of the human good and the just society or whether instead it focuses strictly on the problem of justifying the exercise of political power' (12). The point then is not to keep political philosophy free from moral questions but to include them in the right way. Political philosophers' primary task, therefore, is to explore what principle the necessary exercise of power *ought* to be based on.

In Larmore's view, the most convincing bases is a particular idea of '*respect for persons'* (148, emphasis in original).

In developing his principle of legitimacy, Larmore operates in the framework of liberalism and takes Rawls as his starting point. As Larmore makes clear, the 'characteristic claim of a liberal order has always been that its legitimacy in imposing coercive rules of political association stems from its citizens being able to see reason to accept these rules' (151-52). But what, Larmore asks, is the deeper moral conviction that makes it seem imperative to form rules in ways that people can see reason to accept? Larmore starts with an anthropological observation: human beings are unique in their ability to not only act based on reasons but in being capable of critically reflecting on whether what they (first) see as reasons also constitute good reasons (152). Since this is so, it is a matter of '*respect*' (153, emphasis in original) on the part of those imposing the rules that people can, upon reflection, see good reasons to accept those coercive rules that are needed for a functioning social order: 'Respect for persons in this sense forms, then, the ultimate moral basis of the liberal conception of political legitimacy' (155).

One of the remarkable features of *What is Political Philosophy?* is that it contains a detailed account of the crucial idea of 'reasonable disagreement,' a term often used without sufficient attention to its intended meaning. For Larmore, reasonable disagreement describes the observable fact that reasonable people, by which he means people 'reasoning in good faith and to the best of their abilities' (4), are likely to disagree, especially if matters of importance are at stake and if they are ready to look beyond shared commonplaces. Why is that so? Do we not have reason to expect that a serious discussion of, for example, how one ought to live will bring parties together, each leaving the exchange a little wiser? No, says Larmore. While it can and does happen that people develop a position they can each agree to, it is often the case that such an exchange reveals unbridgeable differences. We need to see that 'people, exercising their general capacities of reason on ethical questions as best as they can and in good faith, tend to come to different conclusions – not through any defect of reason, but instead because of their different backgrounds, their different senses of what is salient, and their different ways of weighting disparate considerations' (36). Given the widespread polarization of many of today's liberal democracies, this seems to be a realistic account. This by itself should make *What is Political Philosophy?* a rewarding read for everyone interested in democracy and its theories. Moreover, Larmore's strong and well-elaborated position on what politics is, and therefore what political philosophy should be, will challenge both so-called 'moralism' and self-defined 'political realism' and thereby help to reinvigorate the vital debate on the field's identity-forming questions and approaches.

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