# BOOK REVIEWS

*Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality.* MICHAEL
WALZER. New York: Basic Books, 1983. xviii, 345 p. Cloth $19.95,
paper $9.95.*

*Spheres of Justice* is Michael Walzer's fourth book in political philo-
sophy, and aims to provide a more systematic account of ideas im-
plicit in his previous work.[1] For beneath Walzer's many shifts of
historical setting (from debates in the Athenian Senate to the My Lai
massacre) and subject matter (from workplace democracy to the
rights of noncombatants) he has consistently come back to two cen-
tral themes.[2]

First, Walzer's substantive views on political issues have commonly
reflected an allegiance to egalitarian and democratic values. Writing
in a socialist tradition, he has drawn on those values in criticizing the
current structure of power and advantage in the United States. Near
the end of *Spheres of Justice* he summarizes his political perspective
this way:

> The appropriate arrangements in our own society are those, I think, of
> a *decentralized democratic socialism* (emphasis added); a strong welfare
> state run, in part at least, by local and amateur officials; a constrained
> market; an open and demystified civil service; independent public
> schools; the sharing of hard work and free time; the protection of reli-
> gious and familial life; a system of public honoring and dishonoring free
> from all considerations of rank and class; workers' control of companies
> and factories; a politics of parties, movements, and public debate (318;
> cf. also *Obligations,* ch. 11; *Radical Principles,* Introduction and chs.
> 15, 17).

The second theme is a "communitarian" conception of ethical
facts and ethical argument. Like other communitarians, Walzer
holds that membership in communities is an important good, that
the *primary subjects* of values are particular historical communities,

[1] The others are *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship*
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970); *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument
with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); *Radical Principles:
Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). Ref-
erences to these earlier books will be included parenthetically in the text, with titles
abbreviated. References to *Spheres of Justice* will include page numbers only.

[2] The two themes that I address do not play a leading role in *Just and Unjust
Wars.* This reflects special features of the topic of that book, not a change of view.

and, what is most important, that there is nothing more to the correctness of values for a particular community than that those values are now embraced by that community. When, for example, he considers what justice requires in the United States, Walzer appeals—or claims to appeal—to values that are already part of the American grain. To determine what justice requires in our own society we must ask, "What choices have we already made in the course of our common life? What understandings do we (really) share?" (5). We must ask this because a society is just iff it is faithful to its traditional values, or, as Walzer puts it, "if its substantive life is lived in a certain way—that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members" (313).

*Spheres of Justice* thus aims to provide a sustained account of social justice supporting critical, democratic principles on communitarian foundations. Walzer is committed to the striking thesis that his conception of a just order is "latent already . . . in our shared understandings of social goods" (xiv). But particularly in those parts of his argument where the democratic socialist themes are strongest —the parts that are most critical of current arrangements—this thesis seems strained and implausible. Critical, democratic substance and communitarian method pull in different directions, and neither is aided or clarified by being mixed with the other. To argue this point in detail (section II), a fuller account of the theory in *Spheres of Justice* is first required.

### I. JUSTICE AS COMPLEX EQUALITY

Walzer calls his account of justice a theory of "complex equality" (hereafter TCE) and contrasts it with "simple" egalitarian conceptions. To understand the motivations of the theory it will help to keep social criticisms of the following sort in mind:

1. It is wrong that the *wealthy* have so much *political power.*

2. Access to quality *education* should not be based on economic or social *status.*

3. *Technical expertise* should not confer *political power.*

In each case, the criticism focuses on the fact that the distribution of one good is determined or, as Walzer puts it, "dominated" by the distribution of another.

A standard *simple* egalitarian view would aim to accommodate these criticisms under a general principle of justice such as: all resources must be equally distributed unless it is for the common advantage to permit a departure from equality.

Walzer rejects this sort of egalitarianism. Its presumption in favor

of equal distribution is, he thinks, overly abstract. It is manifestly inattentive to the way we understand particular goods and, thus, distorts our actual reasons for judging distributions unjust. What is unjust, for example, about wealth determining political power in our society is that this violates *our* understanding of *power*—what political power is and what it is good for—not that it conflicts with a *general* presumption in favor of an equal distribution of *all goods*. Some people find simple egalitarianism attractive *because* its abstract principles promise to free questions of distributive justice from the prejudices reflected in locally shared understandings. But, Walzer holds, it is just this disengagement that leads simple egalitarianism to offer a mistaken account of our political principles which is disconnected from our motivations. In matters of justice, the particularities of "history, culture, and membership" (5) are not prejudices; they are all there is.

Walzer thinks that TCE can provide a more compelling account of the force of such criticisms as (1)–(3). This theory has two main components: a theory of value and an account of the justification of distributive norms.

The central thesis of the theory of value is a version of communitarianism:

(C) The *subjects* of values are in the first instance *political communities,* and not the individual members of those communities (6–8, 28/9).

Of course, much more needs to be said about this issue, and I will return below to the question of what it is for communities to have values. Here, however, I want to point out that *Spheres of Justice* endorses a form of communitarianism importantly different from Walzer's earlier conception.

As I indicated earlier, Walzer has always held that groups are the bearers of values. But the *political* community was never before their chief bearer. *Obligations,* for example, was centrally concerned with conflicts between the demands of the state and the obligations that individuals incur as members of "secondary associations" (e.g., unions and churches) which are supposed to be subordinate to the state (*Obligations,* esp. chs. 1, 6, 8, and 10). Secondary associations, and the conflicts of obligation they were said to engender, are virtually absent from *Spheres of Justice.* But the differences cut still deeper. In previous work, Walzer often expressed skepticism about whether current political associations are genuine communities *at all* (*Obligations,* ch. 8). In the earlier conception, political community was a social good to aim for and a good whose loss might be lamented (*Radical Principles,* 12/3). It is not at all clear what

motivated these shifts toward the Hegelian view that "the political community is the appropriate setting for this enterprise" (28).

Against the background of this "political-communitarian" theory of value, Walzer makes two more specific claims about actual social values.

(C1) The objects that are socially valued are different for different political communities.

(C2) Communities typically have pluralistic values. That is, they value a variety of social goods—for example, money, political power, education, free time, love—which are *unordered,* in that there is no ranking of their relative value.[3]

The second main element of TCE fits this theory of value into an account of the justification of distributive norms.

(N) Each of the heterogeneous goods in a society is associated with a correct distributive norm, and that distributive norm *is contained in* the socially shared understanding of that good (8/9).

For example, we are said to understand that medical care is a need. It follows, Walzer argues, that we should establish a national health-care system that encourages the distribution of health care according to need (86–91). And our understanding of power requires, according to Walzer, democracy in the factory as well as in the state (291–311).

Several important consequences follow from TCE. First, (C1) and (N) imply that standards of distributive justice are different for different societies: "Just as one can describe a caste system that meets (internal) standards of justice, so one can describe a capitalist system that does the same thing" (315).

Second, (N) and (C2) together imply that the distributive norms of a single society *typically* form an unordered plurality. When they do, there is a set of distinct "spheres of justice," each with its own internal regulative principle. What justice then requires is the "autonomy" of these spheres. That is, it requires that persons' standing with respect to one social good—their standing in one sphere of justice—not be determined by their advantage or disadvantage in other spheres, and rather that it depend only on the principle appropriate to the social good in question. "No social good $x$ should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good $y$ merely because they possess $y$ and without regard to the meaning of $x$" (20).

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[3] As the explication of 'pluralism' indicates, Walzer uses the term in a somewhat unusual way. On his usage, there can be a pluralistic society with no disagreement at all about values.

This general requirement of the autonomy of spheres leads back to the illustrative criticisms from which I started. It is wrong that the distribution of, for example, wealth determines the distribution of, for example, political power, because this distribution violates our shared understanding of the goods of wealth and power. This explanation may seem too shallow. It says that the distribution of wealth should not determine the distribution of power because of the difference between our understanding of the value of wealth and of the value of power. It lacks the (apparent) depth that comes from standing back from our values and wondering whether they are themselves reasonable. But on Walzer's view this concern for depth is a sure sign that philosophy has gone "on holiday." "[I]n matters of morality, argument simply is the appeal to common meanings" (29). There is no perspective that a philosopher—or anyone else—can adopt apart from the values of a particular community, and still hope to engage the concerns and aspirations of any actual community.

## II. CONSENT, CRITICISM, AND THE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY

Several aspects of Walzer's view merit more critical attention than I can give them here. For example, the plurality of goods and principles suggests the need for a way to adjudicate conflicts among principles. But no proposals are made. And not nearly enough is said about just how one argues from shared understandings of goods to distributive principles. Here, however, I want to focus on the communitarian foundations. I choose this focus in part because of its evident importance in Walzer's view and in part because philosophers attracted to communitarian ideas are commonly more attentive to familiar problems with alternative approaches than they are to the equally familiar difficulties with their own. After first presenting Walzer's view about community and shared values, I will raise two such difficulties, the first concerning consent, the second concerning criticism.[4]

Ongoing societies are characterized by a variety of institutions and practices which determine the distribution of goods. Those societies may be said to *embody values* when one can describe a set of values to which the institutions and practices broadly conform. A set of values and an institutional scheme *conform* when it is the case that someone who understands and endorses the values and knows how the institutions work would approve of the scheme of institutions. For example, a society that relies extensively on the market as an allocative

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[4] There is very little explication of the notions of community and shared values in *Spheres of Justice*. As a result, I am not certain that I have Walzer exactly right. My remarks are, however, supported by his comments in a letter to *The New York Review of Books*, July 21, 1983.

mechanism might be said to embody individualist values, in contrast with a society in which all allocative decisions are centrally made. The enterprise of characterizing the values embedded in a society's practices is sometimes called "value interpretation."

A second feature of ongoing societies is that their members typically act in conformity to the requirements of the social order. Although there are, of course, frequent disagreements and conflicts, these do not challenge the existing institutional framework except during revolutionary periods. By conforming to social norms, the members might be said to *share the values* embodied in that framework. And it might further be said that those shared values can be discovered through interpretation of institutions and practices, and not (just) by introspection or by examining ethical intuitions. Shared values, on this view, do not exist in a collective mind *separate from* institutionalized social action, nor do they exist simply in the separate minds of individual agents. Rather they exist in an ongoing way of life.

1. *Consent and Community.* The first issue about communitarianism that I want to consider concerns the conception of consent implicit in Walzer's view. For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume that the values *embodied* in a society's institutions are clear and determinate.

The account I gave just above of what is involved in sharing values was intentionally overgeneral. In particular, I did not say anything about *why* people comply with institutional requirements. In fact, there are many reasons. Consent to a political order can reflect a commitment to preserving and advancing the way of life of that order. But it can also result from combinations of fear, disinterest, narrow self-interest, a restricted sense of alternatives, or a strategic judgment about how to advance values not now embodied in the political community. Only in the case of commitment does it seem right to say that the members share the values embodied in the society. And even in this case one would want to know something about the history of that commitment before treating it as authoritative statement of their values.[5]

Like communitarian accounts generally, however, Walzer's account of actual societies tends to disregard the variety of sources of consent. He tends, rather, to identify the values embodied in institutions and practices with the values of the members: "Every particular measure is pushed through by some coalition of particular interests.

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[5] Walzer acknowledges this last point in a footnote (on p. 9), but the acknowledgment is not integrated into the view as a whole.

*But the ultimate appeal in these conflicts* is not to the particular interests, not even to a public interest conceived as their sum, but to collective values, shared understandings of membership, health, food and shelter, work and leisure. The conflicts themselves are often focused, at least overtly, on questions of fact; *the understandings are assumed"* (82, emphases added).

But the diversity of sources of consent suggests that in some cases "the understandings are assumed" in that all members are committed to an order that embodies the understandings, whereas in other cases that "assumption" consists simply in compliance with an order that embodies them. In the latter cases there may well be a variety of interests and aspirations that are not embodied in the political order —nonfeudal aspirations in feudal societies, interests in peace in militaristic societies, or for that matter simple egalitarian ideals in simply inegalitarian systems. In such cases, even if it is perfectly clear what values the existing order embodies, it is hard to see why the embodied values provide the only point of departure for political philosophy that claims to be rooted in actual aspirations. Political philosophy can, rather, adopt a perspective that is "internal" to the society, even if it is "external" to its institutions and values.

2. *Criticism and Community.* Walzer holds that TCE provides a critical perspective by being attentive to current values without being beholden to current practices (26–28). The strategy is to show that *actual* distributions, and even common beliefs about just distributions, sometimes do not conform to the distributive norms that follow from shared understandings.

But, on closer examination, this strategy appears to be seriously flawed. Consider first the way Walzer applies it to historical cases. In all these cases the values of the political community *are identified through its practices.* The existence of an examination system for the imperial Chinese bureaucracy tells us what understanding was shared of the good of office (139–143). And the fact that Athenians subsidized drama festivals and attendance at the Assembly manifests their shared conception of human needs (69/70). The existing practices serve as evidence—in fact as the only evidence—for the account of the "collective consciousness."

This method of fitting values to practices is what I described above as "value interpretation." As it is usually understood, value interpretation aims to provide a coherent and unified description of the practices of a society in terms of a set of values. But this suggests a dilemma for the theorist who appeals to shared community values as a critical perspective. If the values of a community are identified through its current distributive practices, then the distributive

norms subsequently "derived" from those values will not serve as
criticisms of existing practices. For example, if we determine what
goods a community understands as needs by considering what goods
the community now distributes according to need, then we will never
be in a position to judge that a community ought to distribute a good
according to need, but does not. On the other hand, if we identify
values apart from practices, with a view to assessing the conformity
of practices to those values, what evidence will there be that we have
the values right? Thus, if a good is not distributed according to need,
then in what sense is it true that the community recognizes it as a
need? I will call this the "simple communitarian dilemma (SCD)." It
states, but oversimplifies, the reason for believing that communitar-
ian views are intrinsically conservative.

To see the force of the SCD, consider the more contemporary
examples in *Spheres of Justice*. Here Walzer is critical of current
practices. But just because of this, the SCD leads us to expect an
arbitrary and tendentious description of "our" values. For, in order
to be critical, Walzer must regard significant elements of current
practices as not indicative of *our* values. So we can expect that only
*some* current practices will be said to embody our values. But we can
also expect to be perplexed by the principle of selection. And in fact
this a priori suspicion is confirmed by a number of examples:

a. Walzer defends a national health care system for the United
States on the ground that we understand that medical care is a need,
and that goods we recognize as satisfying needs should be distributed
according to need (86–91). Our recognition that medical care is a
need is shown by the commitment of public funds to its provision:
"Now, even the pattern of medical provision in the United States,
though it stops far short of a national health service, is intended to
provide minimally decent care to all who need it. *Once public funds
are committed, public officials can hardly intend anything less*"
(88, emphasis added). But surely the facts that health care is largely
privately, and very unequally, provided are also data for an interpre-
tation of "our" conception of health care. It is not at all clear how
Walzer's interpretation fits these data, and, if it does not, why it is
legitimate to disregard them.

b. Walzer thinks that quotas violate rights. By contrast, he holds
that programs involving "a significant redistribution of wealth and
resources (for the sake, say, of a national commitment to full em-
ployment)" would be "in line with the social understandings that
shape the welfare state." Unlike quotas, such measures "build on,
rather than challenge, understandings of the social world shared by
the great majority of Americans" (153/4). I agree with Walzer about

the importance of full employment and redistribution, and disagree about quotas. But, focusing for now just on the interpretation of shared values, I do not see how full employment and redistribution express the "the social understandings that shape the welfare state," at least in the American case. In the postwar American welfare state, only warfare has brought unemployment below 4 per cent, and there has been no redistribution of wealth and resources. In fact, an *exceedingly generous* "reading" of the welfare state is that it represents a way to respond to the interests of poor and working-class Americans, in the *absence* of any socially shared commitment to full employment and income redistribution.

c. Walzer defends workplace democracy in terms of our understanding of power. Here his arguments depend on sustained criticism of the received understanding that work and politics belong to different social spheres and that a defense of democracy in the political sphere will, therefore, not carry over into the sphere of work. In fact, Walzer's discussion of workplace democracy interestingly challenges familiar and socially embedded distinctions. But as an interpretation of existing understandings it is virtually without support from current practices.

I have suggested that Walzer's account of our shared understandings is arbitrary and tendentious and that this is the result of his use of communitarian foundations for critical ends. There is a ready reply to this objection. But, as we will see, this reply in fact points to a way of deepening the objection.

The response is that the scd grossly misdescribes the situation of the interpreter of social values. Social institutions and practices are the result not of legislative design by a single agent acting on behalf of a coherent system of values, but of conflicts among individuals and groups acting on behalf of diverse values and ambitions. And, unlike the product of a supreme legislative design, the outcomes of such a history are not likely to be a set of coherent social practices that completely conform to any single scheme of values. Different aspects of the practices of a society will support different and conflicting interpretations, and some will support interpretations with critical consequences for other aspects of the order. For example, Medicare and Medicaid support the need interpretation of our understanding of health care. This interpretation can then be used to criticize those aspects of the medical-care system which are insensitive to needs. Thus the problem raised by the scd derives from too simple a picture of the relationship between values and practices.

These points about the SCD are correct. Social institutions do have complex histories and different value interpretations will fit

different aspects of a single society. But what conclusions are supported by these observations? I can imagine three answers to this question:

a. The existence of conflicting values might be taken to show that there is really no political community, since there are no coherent shared values. But TCE requires shared values to defend distributive norms. In the absence of such values, it says nothing about what justice requires.[6]

b. A second alternative is to acknowledge that we have conflicting values, but to hold that only some of those values are correct and those are the values we ought to adhere to. This response is not available to Walzer, since on Walzer's view there is no force to saying that values are correct beyond that they are ours.

c. This leaves a third possibility, the one that seems to fit Walzer's arguments best: different interpretations can be made to fit our practices, but only one of those interpretations is correct. That is, only one captures the values that we *really* share. But Walzer gives no *content* to the claim that one member of a set of competing interpretations, each of which fits our institutions and practices, might still be the right one. Beyond fitting the way of life in our community, there are no further constraints to be satisfied. This response, therefore, reduces to the first.

The communitarian tells us that justice consists in following our shared values, that a "given society is just if its substantial life is lived in a certain way—that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members" (313). I have suggested that this recommendation is either conservative or empty. When social practices support a particular, coherent value interpretation—that is, when we have determinate values—it is conservative. When our practices do not support such an interpretation, it gives conflicting advice and, as a result, no advice at all. Since different aspects of our actual practices are, I believe, subject to importantly divergent interpretations, this argument gives the conservative communitarian nothing to cheer about. But Walzer's use of communitarianism as a foundation for critical democratic principles is in trouble in either case.

### III. CONCLUSION
To conclude, I want very briefly to put the main points of this reivew in a more general light.

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[6] Walzer notes (parenthetically) that when there are disagreements, "justice requires that the society be faithful to the disagreements, providing institutional channels for their expression, adjudicative mechanisms, and alternative distributions" (313). Unfortunately, Walzer offers this remark in his final chapter and gives no indication of how it might be incorporated into the rest of his view.

In the Preface to *Spheres of Justice,* Walzer distinguishes two ways of approaching issues in political philosophy:

> One way *to begin the philosophical enterprise*—perhaps the original way—is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for oneself (what can never be fashioned for ordinary men and women) an objective and universal standpoint. Then one describes the terrain of everyday life from far away, so that it loses its particular contours and takes on a general shape. But I mean to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground (xiv, emphasis added).

There are certainly serious disagreements about the enterprise of political philosophy. But it is wrong to say that they are importantly about where "to *begin* the philosophical enterprise." Plato began with such local and particular ethical opinions as that justice is "truth and returning what one takes," and argued that one could be led to philosophy by the contradictions in these common opinions. Kant took "common human reason" as his point of departure. He argued that it is "impelled to go outside its sphere and to take a step into the field of practical philosophy" and that it must do this "in order to escape from the perplexity of opposing claims and to avoid the danger of losing all genuine moral principles through the equivocation in which it is easily involved."[7] And Henry Sidgwick held that inconsistencies, equivocations, and ad hoc qualifications within common-sense morality indicate the need for a more systematic and coherent moral conception. For the deficiencies of common-sense morality render it inadequate as a guide to action in particular cases, but "such particular questions are, after all, those to which we naturally expect answers from the moralist."[8]

So Walzer does not really disagree with Plato or Kant or Sidgwick about where "to *begin* the philosophical enterprise." Rather, when he tells us that his argument is "radically particularistic" (xiv) or that "every substantive account of justice is a local account" (314), he is in fact advancing a view about where that enterprise *must end up.* For Walzer, the notions of community and shared values mark the *limits* of practical reason, not its point of departure.

I have suggested that those limiting notions are seriously flawed. But this conclusion is not surprising in light of the important theme in the history of ethics and political philosophy underscored by Plato, Kant, and Sidgwick. As each argues, the pressure to consider the reasonableness of conventional norms and values—to move "outside" more local and particularistic ethical conceptions—comes

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[7] *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Lewis White Beck, trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), p. 22.
[8] *The Methods of Ethics,* 7th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1907), p. 215.

from "inside" those conceptions themselves. In fact, whatever the merits of their own substantive ethical theories, their arguments undermine the dogma that there *is* a clear and sharp boundary between what is "inside" and what is "outside," between community norms and critical standards, between common-sense morality and philosophical ethics. Walzer has given us no good reason to disagree with Plato, Kant, and Sidgwick on this central point. There still is no plausible way to fix the limits of practical reason.

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*Goods and Virtues.* MICHAEL SLOTE. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 148 p. $19.95.

Despite the author's claim that "the unity of the present work is no greater, but also no less, than what one would expect to find, say, in an article that attempted to show that a certain philosophical analysis was in some respects too broad and in others too narrow" (1), it is best read as a provocative series of essays, loosely connected by themes and methodology.

First, themes: Chapter I argues in support of the rationality of two sorts of time preference: (a) that how much something contributes to the over-all goodness of one's life depends, in part, on when it occurs; and (b) that the goals and successes characteristic of certain periods of one's life are more important for one's life over all than others. Chapter II maintains that certain traits of character count as virtues only under certain contingent conditions, in particular, that having a life-plan is not a virtue at every time of life, that achieving one's valued ends may require one to abdicate active pursuit of them, and that rationality is a virtue only relative to certain contingent features of the world. Chapter III contains a subtle analysis of the value of certain virtues—humility, conscientiousness, trust, sympathy, civility, community—as dependent on the presence of further virtues that may or may not underlie them. Chapter IV aims to show that there are character traits that inherently dispose the agent to act wrongly and are nevertheless admirable, through an extended discussion of Gauguin's decision to abandon his family to go off to the South Seas to paint. Presumably Slote intends Gauguin's example to persuade us of this independently of the extraordinary value we accord Gauguin's works themselves and their consequent power to morally exonerate or justify such a decision in his particular circumstances. Chapter V contains the carefully argued thesis that inher-