Philosophia (2006) 34:233–241
DOI 10.1007/s11406-006-9026-8

THE ISAIAH BERLIN LECTURE 2005

Saving One's Soul or Founding a State: Morality and Politics

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Published online: 21 November 2006

Abstract In his essay, 'The Question of Machiavelli', Isaiah Berlin notes the depth of Machiavelli's pluralism. Taking my cue from Berlin, I argue that much modern liberal political philosophy neglects this deep pluralism and, as a result, misunderstands modern political problems such as the phenomenon of religiously-motivated terrorism.

Keywords Machiavelli · Morality · Pluralism · Terrorism

> *The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need.* (*The Prince*, p. 91)

The quotation from Machiavelli's *The Prince* draws our attention to an ancient question: the question of whether political success is compatible with moral goodness. Or, more generally, the question of what the relationship is between politics and morality. Those who have responded to this question fall (roughly) into three categories: optimists, pessimists, and pluralists. Optimists believe that politics and morality can be reconciled. In particular, they believe that the pursuit of political ends will not require the adoption of morally disreputable means. Thus, Immanuel Kant argues that "the tutelary god of morals does not yield to Jupiter (the god of power) ... but throws enough light everywhere for us to see what we have to do in order to remain on the path of duty" (Kant 1996). And he concludes "One cannot compromise here and devise something intermediate, a pragmatically conditioned right (a cross between right and expediency); instead all politics must bend its knee before right, but in return it can hope to reach, though slowly, the level where it will shine unfailingly" (ibid., p. 347). For Kant, and famously, honesty is not simply the best policy; it is better than any policy, and this is as true for politicians as for anyone else.

The present paper was read at the Isaiah Berlin Lecture 2005, held at the University of Haifa, Center for Democratic Studies on 23 November 2005.

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Pessimists, by contrast, fear that politics is incompatible with moral goodness and requires a willingness to engage in morally disreputable acts. Thus Bernard Williams remarks that "it is a predictable and probable hazard of public life that there will be situations in which something morally disagreeable is clearly required. To refuse on moral grounds ever to do anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot pursue even the moral ends of politics" (Williams et al. 1978, p. 62). And in similar vein, Michael Walzer simply notes the conventional wisdom that politicians are "a good deal worse (morally worse) than the rest of us," and concludes that it is not possible to govern innocently. So, optimists hold that morality and politics can be reconciled – the pursuit of political ends will not (normally) require the adoption of morally disreputable means, while pessimists hold that they cannot be reconciled and that the politician must always be willing to at least consider doing what is morally wrong on pain of becoming politically ineffective.

However, my concern here is not with either the optimists or the pessimists, but with the pluralists, and I take my cue from Isaiah Berlin's famous article "The Question of Machiavelli" (sometimes published as "The Originality of Machiavelli"). Berlin notes the discomfort caused through the ages by Machiavelli's analysis of politics, and urges that only a strongly pluralist understanding of his work can explain this discomfort. He writes:

> Few would deny that Machiavelli's writings have scandalized mankind more deeply and continuously than any other political treatise. The reason for this ... is not the discovery that politics is the play of power – that political relationships between and within independent communities involve the use of force and fraud, and are unrelated to the principles expressed by the player. That knowledge is as old as conscious thought about politics – certainly as old as Thucydides and Plato.... The proposition that crime can pay is nothing new in Western historiography (p. 231).

Rather, and on Berlin's reading, what is discomfiting – and indeed terrifying (*erschreckend*) – about Machiavelli is his claim that the political world is itself a world of value. What we find in his writings is not a contrast between the moral world, and another, amoral or immoral, world – the world of politics. Rather, we find two worlds of value the – the world of (Christian) morality and the world of politics. "Each [of these worlds], says Berlin, has much, indeed everything, to be said for it; but they are two and not one. One must learn to choose between them *and, having chosen, not look back*" (p. 218, emphasis added). On this account, then, what is *erschreckend* about the politician is that he subscribes to values which are at odds with the values of Christian morality but which are, nonetheless, ultimate. Moreover, if Machiavelli is right in this contention then:

> His cardinal achievement is the uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity. It stems from his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error – the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan – but ... as part of the normal human situation (p. 232).

For Berlin's Machiavelli the politician is not someone who must be prepared to act immorally in pursuit of political ends. Rather, he is someone who rejects conventional moral values in favour, not of immorality, but of a different set of values – the values of politics itself.

His eyes are firmly set on the 'shining vision' of Florence or of Italy: "Romulus could not have founded Rome without killing Remus. Brutus could not have preserved the

Republic if he did not kill his sons. Romulus, Cyrus and the liberators of Athens had to destroy in order to build. Such conduct, so far from being condemned, is held up to admiration by the classical historians and the Bible. Machiavelli is their admirer and faithful spokesman" (p. 221). In short, and according to Berlin, we should not ask about the relationship between morality on the one hand and politics on the other. Rather we should note that political ambition is itself a form of morality, albeit a sometimes terrifying form of morality.

It is not my purpose here to ask whether Berlin's interpretation of Machiavelli is correct. Rather, I will accept the interpretation and investigate its implications for modern political theory and modern politics. In particular, I will suggest that, despite modern political philosophy's near obsession with pluralism, and with problems arising from cultural, racial, and religious difference, there is very little recognition of the *erschreckend* implications of the kind of pluralism identified by Berlin. This neglect, I will argue, serves seriously to undermine our ability even to understand, much less to respond to, the pressing political problems of our times. It serves to distort our understanding of the relationship between morality and politics.

I begin with a brief account of the way in which pluralism is understood in modern liberal political theory, and I contrast that understanding with the understanding offered by Berlin and expressed in the quotations given above. Then, in order to dramatize the differences between the two understandings, I discuss the account of terrorism offered by Michael Ignatieff in his recent book, *The Lesser Evil*. I argue that, in common with many modern liberal political philosophers, Ignatieff ignores the kind of pluralism urged by Berlin and, as a result, provides us with a distorted account of terrorism, one which threatens to mislead us in our attempts to cope with it politically. My central question, then, is not whether politicians can be morally good – that question assumes that there is indeed a single morality. Rather, I shall ask how our understanding of politics generally, and of politicians in particular, would be altered if we were to take seriously the implications of the kind of pluralism urged by Berlin. I begin, therefore, by noting the distinction between that pluralism and the pluralism characteristic of modern liberal political philosophy.

Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement

In his influential book, *The Morals of Modernity*, Charles Larmore asks what is distinctive about modern liberalism. Following John Rawls, he urges that liberalism is characterised by its commitment to the permanence of pluralism, but he takes issue with Rawls' use of the word 'pluralism' in this context, and notes that what Rawls really means is not pluralism but reasonable disagreement. Pluralism, as understood by Berlin and reflected in the quotations given earlier, is a doctrine about the sources of value. It holds that those sources are many and not one and, as such, it stands in opposition to monism, or to a Platonic search for unity. As Larmore points out, pluralism, so understood, is a very controversial doctrine. It is also, he says, a distinctively modern one: "it belongs to a disenchanted vision of the world, which sees itself as having abandoned the comfort of finding in the harmony of the cosmos or in God's providential ordering of the world, one ultimate source of value" (p. 164). But insofar as pluralism holds that values are many and not one; insofar as it rejects the comfort of a providential ordering of the universe, it is denied by many moderns, specifically by those of a religious temperament who believe that there is but one source of value – God.

However, and precisely because religious faith (and the monism it implies) remains very much a part of the modern world, reasonable disagreement is to be expected and indeed forms the foundation of modern liberalism. "The expectation of reasonable disagreement" says Larmore "responds to the idea of a religiously and metaphysically disenchanted world not by affirming it, as pluralism seems to do, but rather by recognizing that like other deep conceptions of value this disenchantment is an idea about which reasonable people are likely to disagree, as indeed they do" (pp. 167–168).

So, to return to my starting point, Berlin's insistence that there are at least 'two worlds' and that 'each has much, indeed everything, to be said for it' expresses a commitment to *value* pluralism; but many people – for instance the theist – deny value pluralism. They believe that the sources of value are not many but one. It is because we live in a world that contains both Berlin and the theist (both the pluralist and the monist) that reasonable disagreement can be expected, and it is this reasonable disagreement that liberalism takes as its starting point. So, since value pluralism is itself one of the matters over which people might reasonably disagree, political liberalism aspires to say nothing about it, and most certainly does not subscribe to it. Berlin tells us that there are many sources of value; the religious believer tells us that there is one source of value (God). Liberal politics aims to side with neither of them. It aims to remain silent on this matter.

Implications of the Distinction between Pluralism and Disagreement

Much has been written about whether this aspiration to silence (or epistemic abstinence, as it is known in the jargon) is realistic. In the first place, and as a number of commentators have pointed out, it seems optimistic to suppose, as Rawls must, that different conceptions of the good will not spill over into (or even arise from) different conceptions of the right. Thus Jeremy Waldron notes that "pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical and moral doctrines is not the only pluralism with which we have to deal in modern democratic society. We also have to deal with justice-pluralism and disagreement about rights. Maybe" he adds "political philosophy should be required to come to terms with that circumstance also" ('Rawls's 1999, pp. 158–159). And in raising this point, he is raising the question of whether political philosophy in general and political liberalism in particular are sufficiently attuned to the realities of political life, where disagreements are not simply disagreements about the highest ideals but also about what justice consists in and requires.

Beyond that, however, we may also wonder whether it is indeed possible for liberalism to remain silent about controversial philosophical positions such as value pluralism. Brian Barry expresses this doubt when he argues that ultimately political liberalism must be justified by reference to scepticism, which is (of course) a controversial doctrine. However, he claims that "there is no way of avoiding the affirmation of a position that is not universally accepted if one is to get anywhere at all" (p. 174) and goes on to insist that the fact of pluralism is itself overwhelming evidence for scepticism understood as lack of certainty springing from one's inability to persuade others. In short, and on Barry's account, the fact of pluralism – the fact of persistent disagreement – is not consistent with abstinence about philosophical views. It tells in favour of some views and against others.

These lines of criticism raise doubts both about the relationship between political liberalism and practical politics, and about the relationship between political liberalism and philosophical theories. They suggest that political liberalism runs the dual risk of failing to remain silent about theories of value and failing to speak to the realities of political life. In

the end, both criticisms amount to a concern that political liberalism does not take seriously the disagreements between people. They amount to the allegation that there is indeed something *erschreckend* about modern political life, and that that something is inaccessible to the forms of liberalism which focus on the fact of pluralism, but aspire to say nothing about value pluralism. Put simply, the claim is that modern liberal political theory underestimates, or ignores, the sheer depth of the disagreements that divide us, and it is the recognition of those depths that characterises both Berlin and Machiavelli before him.

In what follows I want to explore this possibility through an analysis of Michael Ignatieff's discussion of terrorism in his recent book, *The Lesser Evil*. It seems to me that Ignatieff, in common with many modern liberal thinkers, ignores the *erschreckend* possibility identified by Machiavelli and that, in so doing, he fails fully to understand the nature of the political phenomenon with which he (and we) are dealing – in this case, the phenomenon of terrorism.

The Lesser Evil

The problem Ignatieff addresses is set out succinctly on the opening page of his book, where he writes: "when democracies fight terrorism, they are defending the proposition that their political life should be free of violence. But defeating terror requires violence. It may also require coercion, deception, secrecy, and violation of rights. How can democracies resort to these means without destroying the values for which they stand? How can they resort to the lesser evil without succumbing to the greater?" (p. vii). In his subsequent discussions of this question he focuses on different kinds of terrorist activity and indeed on different kinds of terrorist. For my purposes, however, the crucial group are those who, as he puts it, 'believe in too much', and he glosses this: "what I mean is a form of conviction so intense, a devotion so blind, that it becomes impossible to see that violence necessarily betrays the end that conviction seeks to achieve ... these are the true believers. They initiate violence as a sacred and redemptive duty" (p. 123).

Ignatieff's discussion rolls together discrete questions in a manner that is, it seems to me, both confused and confusing. In the passage quoted above, he begins by insisting that the actions of terrorists necessarily betray the end their conviction seeks to achieve. The allegation here appears to be that terrorist acts are instrumentally ineffective – and necessarily so. This is a strong claim and it is not clear to me what, if anything, could justify it. Setting that aside, however, Ignatieff rapidly moves from an allegation of ineffectiveness to a claim that for such people acts of violence are 'sacred and redemptive duties' by which I take him to mean that they are perceived as moral requirements on the believer independent of whether they achieve any further political end. The language of political efficacy and the language of moral duty are elided, and that fact is instructive for an assessment of Ignatieff's overall position.

His question, to recall, is "how can democracies resort to the lesser evil without succumbing to the greater?" but in framing the problem in these terms, he ignores precisely the possibility that Berlin's Machiavelli puts before us – the possibility that there are two worlds, that each has much, if not everything to be said for it, and that having chosen one should not look back. In short, he ignores the possibility that the terrorist who 'believes too much' acts from a distinct set of values, ones that cannot adequately be accommodated by a form of liberalism that recognises only disagreement and not value pluralism. To see the force of this, consider the following passage from Berlin's discussion of *The Prince*:

> Once you embark on a plan for the transformation of society you must carry it through no matter at what cost: to fumble, to retreat, to be overcome by scruples is to betray your chosen cause. To be a physician is to be a professional, ready to burn, to cauterize, to amputate; if that is what the disease requires, then to stop half way because of personal qualms, or some rule unrelated to your art and its technique, is a sign of muddle and weakness, and will always give you the worst of both worlds' (p. 218).

It is important to be clear about the status of the claim made here. For sure, it can be read in instrumental terms. It can be read as the claim that hesitancy will defeat your wider purpose. But the whole point of Berlin's analysis of Machiavelli is to insist that this instrumental reading is mistaken. What Machiavelli urges, according to Berlin, is that the world of the physician is a world that contains its own moral imperatives, and that they are such that if the physician refuses to burn or cauterize when that is necessary, he does not simply make a technical error; he fails in a moral duty. He betrays the values of his chosen world. Similarly, we may think, with the terrorist understood as the man who 'believes too much.' He has 'sacred duties' and should he fail to fulfil them, his failure is not – or not simply – a failure to secure the ends aimed at. It is the much more serious failure to live up to the values of his chosen world. Ignatieff's conceptualisation of the terrorist as someone who persists even when the political end aimed at cannot be attained assumes precisely what is at stake – namely that we have here a failure of strategy, rather than a deep difference about the ultimate sources of value.

Moreover, and throughout his discussion of the case, Ignatieff supposes that we are (and must be) dealing with political ends. His complaint against the terrorist is that his actions cannot attain the political ends he desires. As noted above, it is questionable whether this is true. Beneath that question, however, lies another, which is whether and why political ends must be supreme. Of course, they are so for those who inhabit a liberal democracy but, without further explanation, it is question-begging to suppose that they must be for all others, and dangerous to suppose that they must be for those who are (self-confessedly) the enemies of liberal democracy. To be clear, I am not here suggesting that the activities of terrorists are morally defensible. What I am suggesting is that, if we are thinking about how to respond to their behaviour, we must first understand it. Now, it is not, in my view, true that to understand all is to forgive all. It is, however, true that a mistaken understanding is potentially very dangerous – dangerous to liberal democracy itself, and dangerous to the politicians who are its custodians.

In order to make good this claim, I want to pursue it across three dimensions: the nature of value, the significance of description, and the priority of the political. I begin with the nature of value.

I have so far said nothing about the fact that in discussing terrorism we face a serious initial problem about how to define it. In her book *Terror in the Name of God* Jessica Stern notes that "the student of terrorism is confronted with hundreds of definitions in the literature" (p. xx). However, she concludes that "only two characteristics of terrorism are critical for distinguishing it from other forms of violence. First, terrorism is aimed at non-combatants... Second, terrorists use violence for dramatic purpose: instilling fear in the target audience is often more important than the physical result." Within this broad definition, she then focuses on terrorists who claim to be seeking religious goals and of them she says "what is so deeply painful about [such] terrorism is that our enemies, whom we see as evil, view themselves as saints and martyrs ... although we see them as evil, religious terrorists know themselves to be perfectly good" (p. xxviii). This claim seems to me to strike at the heart of the issue. It is an insight that is foreshadowed in Berlin's

Machiavelli, but it is one that is almost entirely ignored by Ignatieff and indeed by liberal political philosophy generally. It provides us with a sense of what is *erschreckend* that remains undiscovered in Ignatieff's account, and that sense of what is *erschreckend* comes, I suggest, precisely from taking seriously the motivations and values of terrorists themselves. In saying this, I am not claiming to have a clear idea (or any idea at all) of what actually motivates actual terrorists. That would involve a psychological enquiry for which I am unfitted. Rather, what I am doing is asking how politics would look if we suppose terrorists to be motivated in the way implied by Berlin's Machiavelli rather than motivated in the way implied by Ignatieff. Ignatieff refers to religious terrorists as people who are prepared to pursue a strategy even when they see that it will not achieve the political ends they desire. But it is contentious to suppose that they are indeed pursuing a strategy, much less that they are pursuing the strategy Ignatieff attributes to them. What is more likely is that they embrace entirely different values. They are saving souls, not founding a state.

Consider, by way of analogy, the case of the seventeenth century preacher, John Bunyan. In 1661 Bunyan was imprisoned as a dangerous agitator. He spent 12 years in Bedford Gaol, was released for three years, and then imprisoned again. Commenting on the case, the historian Christopher Hill writes:

> When Bunyan faced the Bedfordshire justices in 1661 he thought he was refusing to give up his God-given vocation of preaching: they thought he was a dangerous agitator who was stirring up class hostility in the very delicate situation of post-Restoration England, just recovering from a revolution in which the revolutionaries had spoken on behalf of the poor, as Bunyan did. The issues are not clear-cut, not pure, for two quite different politico-religious systems of value were in conflict. The Bedfordshire gentry believed it to be their duty to prevent disorder, and in particular to prevent any revival of the revolutionary activities of the forties and fifties. Bunyan's motives were religious, not political, not revolutionary. Nonetheless, they led him to take actions which the Bedfordshire justices could not but regard as seditious (p. 31).

In addition to noting that Bunyan was indeed pursuing values very different from those of his political opponents, Hill's analysis also suggests – and this is my second point – that our ability to recognize this depends in some part on description. Bunyan saw himself as refusing to give up his God-given vocation of preaching (he was saving his soul); the magistrates thought he was a dangerous agitator who was stirring up class hostility (they thought he was destroying a state). He acted under one description; they perceived his actions under another. We do not need to defend the actions of the terrorists, but we do (I submit) need to see that the description of them as pursuing a political end, much less a political end which they cannot secure, may be a contentious and misleading one. Certainly, it is not neutral and arguably it does not reflect their own understanding of what they are doing.

So far, I have mentioned two sets of considerations which aim to clarify exactly how Machiavelli's account differs from that offered by Ignatieff and by modern liberalism more generally: firstly, that whether an action is political is dependent on the values of the agent; secondly, and connectedly, that actions may fall under different descriptions and that whether an action counts as political depends, in part, on the description under which it is performed. Thirdly, however, it is in any case a matter for dispute whether political values (however construed) should take priority over other values. For some, political ends should be pursued only when they are compatible with the will of God or with the dictates of

morality. Such was the force of Kant's discussion of the relationship between politics and right. For Kant, recall, politics must always 'bend the knee' to morality. Others, however, including modern liberals, take politics to be primary, but the priority of the political, though a working assumption of political liberalism, is far from being an obvious or incontestable truth. In fact, and ironically, by invoking the priority of the political, political liberalism covertly announces its assumption that there is indeed one supreme source of value – the value of politics itself. It assumes that when faced with a choice between saving one's soul and founding a state, we (especially the politician) must always choose the state.

Conclusion

My aim has been to take seriously Berlin's interpretation of Machiavelli and, in particular, his identification of Machiavelli's thought as containing within it a commitment to pluralism that is *erschreckend.* In pursuing this aim I have noted the differences between Machiavelli's pluralism (Berlin's pluralism) and the pluralism advocated by modern liberal political theory. Taking Michael Ignatieff's account as an example of the liberal approach, I have noted that the denial (or neglect) of value pluralism threatens to distort our understanding of religious terrorism in at least three ways: first, by ignoring value pluralism – by ignoring the fact that there are at least two worlds and each has something, indeed everything, to be said for it. It does so in the second place by ignoring the significance of description – by ignoring the fact that what counts as political subversion under one description may be a sacred duty under another. And it does so in the third place by assuming that the political (however understood) must take priority over all other considerations. But whether that is so is our question and it cannot, therefore, be our answer.

However, and famously, although Berlin recognises, and modern liberal political theory frequently ignores, the *erschreckend* implications of pluralism, he also identifies cause for limited optimism. In the final section of his article on Machiavelli, he notes that "toleration is historically the product of the realization of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of the complete victory of one over the other" (p. 235). In other words, it was the recognition of *value* pluralism that gave us toleration. But if that is so, then modern liberalism and modern politics ignore that pluralism at their (and our) peril. The form of liberalism, and the kind of politician, we now need is not one which aspires to remain silent about the source of value, but one which takes seriously the many and different sources of values.

In his biography of Isaiah Berlin Ignatieff writes: "What made Berlin unusual was that he deliberately moved out beyond the well-lit playing area of academic liberalism, where John Rawls, Herbert Hart, and Ronald Dworkin were re-fashioning the heritage of Kant and Mill to fit the modern age, into the dark undergrowth of modern irrationalism. Berlin was the only liberal thinker of real consequence to take the trouble to enter the mental worlds of liberalism's sworn enemies" (p. 249). In the world as we now have it, this is what the politician must also do. He must not try to be politically effective in disregard of what is morally right, nor yet cling to what is morally right even if that jeopardises the political order. Rather, the role of the politician is to enter the mental world of liberalism's worn enemies and to see how things look from their point of view. This is a truly *erschreckend* task, but as Berlin (almost uniquely) points out, it is a necessary precondition for the development of anything worth the name of toleration.

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