

A Symbolic Argument against a Symbolic Monarchy

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A *monarchist* believes that, in at least some cases, monarchy can be justified. While monarchies are not what they used to be, monarchism in this permissive sense is still going strong: according to Wildish (2015), two-thirds of the British populace support their monarchy, and, as a host of editorials impress,¹ the royals enjoy even greater enthusiasm State-side. The sort of monarchism this represents, though, is a traditional, symbolic variety, where royalty is treated as nothing much more serious than a national monument—accessories to Windsor Palace rather than bona fide bearers of political power.²

There are of course much stronger forms of monarchism. Contemporary monarchists, to the small extent that they exist, argue for a more robust monarchy. They may think think monarchy is compatible with democracy, or, even stronger, that monarchy is the highest expression of monarchy, e.g. Médaille (2010). A frequent thought is that constitutional monarchies provide an effective check on the excesses of representative or parliamentary governments, e.g. Davis (2014) and Yeager (2011). These defenses are a farcry from the pragmatic absolutism of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* or the scriptural absolutism of Robert Filmer’s

¹For example, Stack (2017) and Alexandra (2017).

²This is not true in the case of the British monarchy, which has considerable political authority that it does, discreetly, exercise. C.f. Booth (2013).

Patriarcha. Which is not to say that monarchists are all liberals of some description, there are certainly anti-democratic monarchists such as von Kuehnelt-Leddin (1952).³ I am here, however, more interested in a modern, quasi-liberal monarchism, one that would appeal to liberal-sounding principles—*checks and balances*, *democracy*, yadda yadda—in its defense.

It is important to note that this an extremely fringe position. A search of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reveals no non-historical discussions of monarchy. Monarchists, no doubt, would see this as just another failure of contemporary, left-wing bias in academia. However, given that serious discussion of eugenics (Agar (2008)) and infanticide (Singer (2013)) are possible in the current climate, this is not a highly plausible explanation. More plausible is that monarchism has no academic standing because it has received no serious defense.⁴ A plausible explanation for this lack of defense is that monarchism is in fact indefensible. Whatever the case, I will assume this is right and that none of the more robust forms of monarchism are correct. Still, mightn't the much more moderate form I led the essay with be right? Couldn't we accept monarchs as mere figureheads?

Monarchism Defined

Before attempting an answer to the questions, I should say what I mean by monarchy. This definition is not meant to remotely capture the ordinary meaning, but it at least resembles it enough to enable discussion. I will say that someone is a *monarch of some society* if she is generally viewed as occupying a privileged, unique position in that society by its members that only people with certain hereditary relations to her can play. A *monarchy* is the collection of all monarchs in some society. I use *royal/royalty* as synonyms for *monarch/monarchy*. I intend to use “hereditary” in a very expansive sense to include things like adoptive or nominative successors — by my lights, the Roman emperors count as a monarchy.

Monarchy Defended

Having said what a monarchy is, what can be said for *symbolic monarchism*? Recall that, under this view, symbolic monarchies — those that have no political power, but have some social, cultural or other special standing — are possibly justified. Are there any good defenses of this position? Ultimately, I will argue

³One could extract another anti-democratic argument for monarchism from Hoppe (1995)’s argument that monarchies are necessarily less “present-oriented” and so more closely approximate the anarcho-capitalist ideal.

⁴I invite the reader to look for themselves and tell me if I have underestimated an argument from one of the cited sources, or if there is a powerful defense I have overlooked.

no: symbolic monarchism is false and none of the *prima facie* plausible arguments for it succeed. But let us first look at the sorts of arguments one can give. I will lay out three in the following sections that, taken together, I think amount to a plausible case for this position. (Keep in mind how weak this claim is; it holds only that a monarchy *could* be justified, leaving open whether any actually are justified.)

I should note that I mean to use “possible” in a quite restricted sense — I mean possible in societies that are at least somewhat like ours. It is after all possible that an alien species comes to earth that will torture everyone to death unless we accept their royal family as the Official Kings of Earth. I assume that, in this situation, it would be best to acquiesce. I mean to, however, include royalties that would be highly attractive: ones where every member was morally outstanding, that had unimpeachable histories, were universally beloved, charitable, net boons to their society, and so on.

A Consequentialist Argument

Though royal families have quite the upkeep, it seems empirically plausible that a symbolic monarchy can do more good than harm. Indeed, given that royalty are often tourist attractions, they need not cost their country anything (c.f. Khazan (2013)), and, given the popularity of events like the royal wedding or royal births, they plausibly bring substantial enjoyment to a wide number of people. Some grouches, like myself, may despair at the slightest mention of the royals, but if it wasn’t them, it’d be some other thing. We can at least imagine, in any case, that the overall wellbeing (however we are to understand it) that comes along with a monarchy could at least be well in the black. If this is so, if in some sense symbolic monarchs can make the world a better case, wouldn’t we have good reason to keep them around? This seems eminently plausible and so suggests the following argument.

1. Maintaining a monarchy can improve overall wellbeing.
2. If an arrangement improves overall wellbeing, then that arrangement is morally justified.
3. Therefore, the existence of a monarchy can be morally justified.

I call this a “consequentialist argument,” because the second premise is the sort of claim a consequentialist might make. I would note that there are close cousins of this argument that need not assume consequentialism. For the sake of simplicity, I omit discussion of them.

A Democratic Argument

One fact I mentioned in the introduction was that countries with symbolic monarchism can enjoy strong, even overwhelming public support for keeping

their monarchies around. Their desires should count for something; especially in the case where the monarchy is not doing anyone any harm, or as above are doing some good, it seems like it would be unjust to ignore their desire. The proviso that the monarchs cause no harm is an important one as one can multiply indefinitely cases where immoral arrangements enjoyed popular support. This limits the dialectical power of this argument as we must already believe that monarchies can be morally acceptable for the public support to count for anything. But the idea would be that, without any power, what harm could the monarchy be doing really? Putting this argument into the numbered format that boring people like myself enjoy, we get.

1. It is possible that maintaining a monarchy be popularly supported and morally acceptable.
2. If an arrangement is popularly supported and morally acceptable, that arrangement is morally justified.
3. Therefore, it is possible that maintaining a monarchy is morally justified.

A Symbolic Argument

One line that is popular among the more serious defenders of monarchism is that the monarchy embodies or exemplifies cultural traditions or values. The idea is that the royal line can have symbolic connections to venerable institutions and, at least when well-behaved, exemplify the values of the society they represent. Exactly how this is supposed to work and what's so good about it can be a little vague. If the idea is just that royals can serve as role models or inspire fuzzy feelings about one's country's glorious (?) past, this collapses into the consequentialist argument. A distinctive variant of this argument is that the monarchy itself is a form of symbolic speech. But if this so, who is speaking and what are they saying? Possibly, the maintenance of a monarchy is an expression of the members of a society of their endorsement of things like the value of their institutions and their pride in their history. Making something like this clear would involve us in thorny philosophical issues like collective intentionality and agency as well as making sense of symbolic speech (c.f. Berckmans (1997)). However, I think we have a reasonable intuitive grasp of what it is for a collection like a society or government to engage in symbolic speech. On this way of putting things, monarchs can be worth having because they can say things worth saying. Put in a numbered form.

1. Maintaining a monarchy can express moral values while otherwise being morally acceptable.
2. If an arrangement expresses moral values and is morally acceptable, then that arrangement is morally justified.
3. Therefore, it is possible that maintaining a monarchy is morally justified.

Taking Stock

If any of the above three arguments are sound, then it is at least possible that we have reason to maintain a monarchy. Of course the principles behind the argument can be brought in defense of specific monarchies — one could, and people do, argue that the British monarchy should be kept because it makes money, is popular, represents the splendor of British civilization, and so on. But even if no actual monarchy makes the cut, the overall case the above arguments represent is reasonably strong: symbolic monarchism seems on good footing.

Monarchism Attacked

Though I am ignoring other arguments for other forms of monarchism, the argument I will run afflicts all forms of monarchism. That is, though the conclusion will be that symbolic monarchism is false, since symbolic monarchism is the weakest form of monarchism, if it is false, all monarchisms are false. Anyways, here's the argument.

1. Necessarily (in our restricted sense of possibility), maintaining a monarchy expresses moral disvalues without leading to substantial improvement in well-being.
2. If an arrangement expresses moral disvalues without leading to substantial improvements in well-being, then that arrangement is not morally justified.
3. Therefore, it is not possible that maintaining a monarchy is morally justified.

Before actually defending the argument, let's explain and motivate it. By "expressing moral disvalue," I mean to refer to symbolic speech that endorses actions or claims that are morally objectionable. So the KKK burning crosses expresses moral disvalue because it endorses racist beliefs. I will leave it vague how much improvement it takes to get "substantial" improvement.

The intuition behind this argument is the following: that some act expresses something morally objectionable is a strong reason not to do it. Moreover, the wrongness of

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