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Virtue, Obligation, and Politics - Reply

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To the Editor:

On the Rogow principle (APSR [September 1974], p. 1281) two corrections, one on that very page of importance, the other on p. 1001. Does Mr. Miller (p. 1001) have any evidence that fans “became disinterested in baseball because of lack of speed? Nonfans may not have been attracted for that reason, but in good sports towns like Boston and Detroit, has there been disenchantment? One doubts it! The editor should have picked that up.

More seriously, the reference to Einstein on p. 1281 is quite misleading; I don’t know whether the journal in which Einstein’s article appeared had referees, but David Lindsay Watson (Scientists Are Human [London, Watts & Co., 1938]) shows us the theoretical reasons for the extensively documented fact that it can confidently be anticipated that most referees will not evaluate most unconventional articles “on their merits.” Watson leads us to think that in science Admiral Lord Fisher’s aphorism “favoritism is the secret of effectiveness,” applies. Innovative work, for reasons also developed by R. T. LaPiere (Social Change [New York: McGraw Hill, 1965]) is pretty sure, generally speaking, to be turned down by established, conventional referees. It is handicapped not only by its intrinsic unconventionality but by the generally relevant circumstance that most original and innovative writers are “imperfectly socialized” in a profession, and so their style, approach, citations, etc., are ordinarily likely to offend the better established members of that profession. In other words, the implication of what I am saying is that no unconventional writer can get judgment on the merits by normal methods of referee selection—Einsten would hardly ever get by, and even writers who are merely six years ahead or a generation behind the times will have it tough. Look at the experience of Semmelweis, Lister, Lobachevski, or Riemann in the “hard” sciences for pertinent cases—or early reviews of Lasswell or of the later work of Arthur F. Bentley in this journal.

Fortunately, in a society like ours, with plenty of outlets some fortunate concatenation of circumstances may ultimately get two or three referees who will take risks; or with good luck one can get favoritism on merit. This takes persistence, however, which many original people do not have; and this letter is simply a suggestion to people rudely turned down by referees to keep at it.

My statement is based partly on personal experience; I am surely no Einstein or Riemann, but I may have been five or six years ahead in certain ways. For example, the original version of an article of mine called “The Representative and His District,” when finally published, was rejected by this Review with the friendly comment that it was a disgrace to the profession that anyone calling himself a political scientist should submit such an article! Applied Anthropology (Human Organization) later published it, it has been reprinted or I have received requests at any rate to have it republished about twenty-five times, it is one of the better selling Bobbs Merrill reprints, it is widely cited. Similarly, an article entitled “The Politics and Sociology of Stupidity” was rejected by the American Journal of Mental Deficiency with two pages of advice about the serious psychiatric condition which the referee felt I must suffer from; yet it was published in Social Problems, has been widely cited, reprinted, and, I am told, also been influential on several theses and studies.

Of the 80 or so articles I have had published, I believe the modal article has experienced at least six rejections; several have been rejected at least fifteen times (notably “Standards for Representative Selection and Apportionment, “Nomos, volume on Representation— which has been used by several authors in some detail, and assigned in quite a number of classes).

It is important in sociology of knowledge terms to indicate that types of articles are pretty sure to be rejected, precisely because they are unconventional, original contributions. For instance, the typical academic article nowadays is linear in its logic; a implies b, b implies c, d follows from c, etc. But some great writers—Kenneth Burke, Edmund Burke, David Riesman, and, I believe, Richard Hooker—follow a different model; they walk around a set of problems, as though in a circle, looking at the problems now from this standpoint, then from that, etc., etc. Such articles are pretty sure to be turned down; and, I must confess, knowing this, I have weakened some of what I have written, by shifting it from that perspective to the linear approach, to seem more normal.

Lewis Anthony Dexter

Harvard University

To the Editor:

In the March 1974 issue of this Review Stephen G. Salkever (in his “Virtue, Obligation, and Politics,” pp. 78–92) asserts that the examination of the obligation and virtue conceptions of politics “is as important for students of politics and political philosophy as it is for students of ethics and moral philosophy” (p. 78). Salkever thereupon
begins an impressive classificatory account full of historical attributions to the great political philosophers and supporting citations. His aim is to show the prominence that "obligation" and "virtue" have had in the history of political thought: "virtue" being primarily important in ancient political philosophy and "obligation" being of essentially modern significance.

This combination of conceptual analysis, historical examination, and supporting exegesis is standard in contemporary political philosophy. I have no objection to this endeavor provided both the political philosopher, such as Salkever, and his readers are clear on what it actually achieves. To mistake preliminary conceptual and historical concerns for the main task of political philosophy or to consider such preliminaries sufficient by themselves is to miss the major point of political philosophy: to make prescriptive and evaluative political judgments and to justify them rationally.

Salkever begins his discussion by citing several articles in contemporary moral philosophy and claims to apply the distinction made in that field between the ethics of virtue and the ethics of obligation as it was made by the moral philosopher William K. Frankena (whom Salkever cites on p. 78). But Salkever appears to have ignored the essential justificatory element of contemporary moral philosophy emphasized by Frankena himself in his well-known volume *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), which surprisingly is not mentioned by Salkever. In it Frankena states that concern over the meaning of terms such as "virtue" and "obligation" is subordinate in importance, and of instrumental value only, to the justification of ethical judgments (see *Ethics*, pp. 78–79).

We perform conceptual analysis for the purpose of clarifying the quintessential problem of normative discourse: the justification of our judgments. Salkever seems to recognize this point early in his discussion when he says that moral philosophers' concern for clarifying "virtue" and "obligation" "may be able to develop arguments to suggest that one or another ethical language is best equipped to deal with the broadest range of substantive ethical questions" (p. 78, emphasis added). He asserts several times throughout the article, however, that *all* he claims is that one concept ("virtue") be considered as an alternative to the allegedly dominant concept ("obligation") in modern political philosophy. For example, Salkever writes: "I am not here concerned to provide a conclusive showing of the wrongness of these formulations [based on the concept of 'obligation'], but only to show why it seems advisable to think seriously about alternatives" (p. 91, see also pp. 86 and 92).

Thus, Salkever's essay provides neither an argument for a particular political philosophy nor grounds in support of the largely implicit claim that the concept of "virtue" is as good as or superior to "obligation" as a defining concept for politics. At the conclusion of Salkever's discussion the reader is confronted with the following odd remark: "...I have made no effort in this discussion to deal with the epistemological, logical and moral issues which are involved in the question of the justifiability of the paradigm change [from 'virtue' to 'obligation']" (p. 92).

What has Salkever done for us? He has proposed an *admittedly undefended* definition of politics complete with historical lineage as an alternative to the one he claims is widely accepted today. In addition he adds the trivializing claim that "political philosophy can be formulated" (p. 85, emphasis added) according to the prescribed alternative. Now what are we to do? Salkever is revealingly silent and terminates his essay before he even raises, much less attempts to illuminate, the essential problem: which concept—"virtue" or "obligation"—should we accept, and for what reasons should we accept it? In "Virtue, Obligation and Politics" Salkever presents the preliminaries without the main bout. After all, the preliminaries are supposed to lead to the main attraction (the problem of justification) which is their *raison d'être*.

A political theorist who proposes the acceptance of a particular conception of politics is responsible for the defense of this prescription and its preferability to competing conceptions. Salkever admits he does not do this and thereby weakens his claim for our attention. Such definitional exercises as Salkever's (and many more I could cite) have obvious consequences. Political philosophers and political scientists are faced with an overwhelming and confusing array of subject matter or field-defining concepts, exacerbated only by the proposal of still more concepts claimed to be "better." These *linguistic* proposals stand alone and apart from the necessary discussion and defense of the *relationship* between conceptual analysis and the main tasks of normative political philosophy, and empirical political science: justification and explanation, respectively.

To argue merely that politics *can* be formulated according to this or that concept is of little importance. We must first achieve the crucial epistemological aims of justification and explanation for normative and empirical political discourse. Contrary to Salkever's limited classificatory aim, we must give greater care and thoughtfulness to the very logico-epistemological issues he chooses to omit (see his quote above). The conceptual clarification thus achieved will indeed aid in the making of better political judgments.
This point about carrying the conceptual analysis and linguistic prescription far enough to be significant for political inquiry holds for both empirical and normative political theorizing. In empirical research the proposal of a particular conceptual framework or schema is not by itself an instance of genuine theorizing, but only "taxonomizing," "classifying," or "typologizing" in the words of one author (A. James Gregor, An Introduction to Metapolitics [New York: The Free Press, 1971], p. 171). The proposed framework is useful toward and used to achieve the distinctive aims of empirical discourse: to make and test the claims of description and explanation. Thus, the proposal of a conceptual framework is distinguished from the actual empirical assignments made according to it (see Israel Scheffler, Science and Subjectivity [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967], pp. 36–44).

Only the actual assignments are empirically tested. Then and only then can the preferability of a proposed conceptual recommendation be judged rationally according to how it improves the formulation of empirical claims. In short, the proposal of classificatory schemata per se without claims of explanation and their tests are literally undeterminable and of no actual (as opposed to potential) use to the empirical political scientist.

This crucial empirical process of concept formation and assignment is instructive for normative political inquiry. The mere prescription of a particular concept such as Salkever's discussion of "virtue" is inadequate without reasoned defense of the following: Why should we accept the prescribed concept, and more importantly, precisely how will this concept help us realize the aim of normative political discourse, i.e., to make and justify normative political judgments? So many linguistic recommendations for various concepts go unused because they are undefended and lack adequate grounds for acceptance. To stop at classificatory conceptual analysis and omit this required discussion as Salkever does is to terminate the discussion of political philosophy just where it begins to achieve its point, and is typical of what is wrong with much of contemporary political theorizing: preoccupation with the conceptual preliminaries without ever going on to the main bout of the justification.

I regret to conclude that Salkever's essay makes promises or claims with little or no attempt to fulfill or support them. This occurs because their author is preoccupied with conceptual preliminaries which are only of instrumental value. Works like "Virtue, Obligation, and Politics" lend support to the stereotypical view held by political scientists that contemporary philosophy, including, of course, political philosophy, consists of nothing more than inconsequential word games.

JOEL KASSIOLA
Brooklyn College, City University of New York

TO THE EDITOR:

I understand Mr. Kassiola to be making the following argument:
(1) Salkever is supposed to be doing political philosophy.
(2) Political philosophy is concerned with the formulation and justification of normative judgments, and not with the clarification and classification of normative concepts.
(3) Conceptual clarification is not even useful for justification unless it can show us how to test the validity of normative (evaluative or justificatory) claims, just as a scientific taxonomy is useless unless it can be related to a way of testing descriptive and explanatory claims.
(4) Therefore, contrary to his self-understanding, Salkever is neither doing, nor helping anyone else to do, political philosophy.

I respond:

(1) I do not claim to be doing political philosophy. In my paper I am trying only to show what political philosophy does, and some of the ways in which it does it. I find it difficult to blame myself for the excessive modesty of this attempt, whatever its other shortcomings may be.

(2) Political philosophy is concerned with justification in a way that my paper is not, and of course justification is more important than clarification. Unfortunately, however, what is first by nature is not always first for us, a fact which seems to me to be too little known. I value a good clarification much more highly than a poor justification, at least partly because we do not suffer from a shortage of justifications.

(3) "Virtue, Obligation, and Politics" is neither an attempt to present an abstract taxonomy nor an attempt to establish one mode of evaluation as uniquely entitled to our esteem. What I tried to do was to say what the meaning of two modes of evaluation is, both in terms of the epistemological and ontological (or psychological) foundations of those modes, and in terms of their powers of making moral and political discriminations. It is difficult to see how the attempt to clarify in this sense could be identified with the activity of prescriptive taxonomizing. Perhaps the simplest way of putting the difference would be to say that my intention was reflective and interpretive rather than creative.

(4) Justification cannot be understood, much less written, without a thoughtful consideration of the terms involved and the questions asked. While
it might well be argued that the scientific project can proceed very well without such introspection, I would say that political philosophy and its study can not. The problem is that we know too much; we need no one to tell us how "to make and justify normative political judgments." What we need is not assistance in formulating new judgments, but reflection about the significance of the ones we inevitably make.

Stephen Salkever

Bryn Mawr College

TO THE EDITOR:

It is a pleasure to be associated with Walter Dean Burnham, even if we must share the honor of criticism by Philip Converse (September, 1974). In my own defense, let me plead that I do read The American Voter, with the reverence appropriate to a revered text. I seek to avoid following the graven images of straw men, attempt to reconcile disparities in the received wisdom, and fear for my correlations when they transgress the laws of SRC. Nevertheless, like most sacred texts, The American Voter did adopt a tone of proclaiming general, not time-specific truths. Its emphasis on the inherent limitations of the mass public, indeed, largely precludes the possibility of a different paradigm of electoral behavior.

The data for The American Voter were gathered almost two decades ago. That this work is still worth reading is testament to its original quality, but its authors need not insist on its character as holy writ. An earlier American intellectual, Thomas Jefferson, suggested political revolution every twenty years. Surely innovation in political science can be permitted with no lesser frequency.

Gerald M. Pomper

Rutgers University

TO THE EDITOR:

Robert Forster's review (APSR, 68 [June, 1974], 811-12) of my book, Provincial Magistrates and Revolutionary Politics in France, 1789-1795, includes six points on which I want to comment.

(1) "He observes 'the absence of a written cahier does not prove that concern and awareness were lacking' (p. 151). But then, what does it prove? This is the kind of interpretive acrobatics that Dawson is frequently tempted to perform..."

Absence of a written cahier might indicate that, as a tactic, preparation of such a document seemed less promising than some more informal means of influencing local political processes; or, since not every fact proves a significant conclusion and since historians ought to avoid interpretive acrobatics, the absence of a written cahier might indicate nothing in particular.

(2) "Is roll-call analysis not feasible for the magistrates as deputies?"

As I said in my book, the National Assembly majority "rejected the idea of publishing or even preserving lists showing how individuals voted in each roll-call vote" (p. 194, with a footnote giving the date of this decision, 9 July 1789).

(3) "It is again unfortunate that the chapter on the 'magistrates as deputies' is based on the letters (475 of them, to be sure) of only two magistrates from the old province of Maine."

The chapter is also based on 105 letters from a magistrate from Lorraine and a total of 117 letters from five magistrates from various provinces and the journal entries of two other magistrates from Poitou (p. 196, footnotes).

(4) "I remain unconvinced that these magistrates were bound by likemindedness in political matters,..."

Good. As I said (p. 325), "There were a few active opponents of constitutional monarchy, some of whom fought in royalist armies against the republic... Finally, a very small number of former bailliage magistrates were uncompromising, revolutionary republicans."

(5) "... and [unconvinced] that regional variation did not play the role it apparently did among advocates."

Good. As I said (p. 254), "Former magistrates were politically strong in a few places, and notably weak in others..." and (p. 309) "The smaller the town, the greater the likelihood that a former bailliage magistrate might continue as an influential personage or even occupy office" and (p. 313) "An exceptional concatenation of circumstances could, however, send to the guillotine a substantial proportion of the former magistrates of a particular locality."

(6) Among "a host of a broad sociological hypotheses" seemingly to be found in my book is one "about noble vs. commoner."

This characterization comes strangely from a historian who has (convincingly) argued that "whoever won the Revolution, the noble landlord lost."* At all events, that more than 80 per cent of the members of the parlements were noblemen is not a hypothesis but a fact; and that about 90 per cent of the bailliage magistrates were commoners is likewise a fact. That the parlements and the bailliages, in their great majority, were on opposite sides of the political fence in 1789 is also a fact. Causal inferences are always hypothetical, or else false; on this, I suppose, we agree.

Philip Dawson

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