

Politics and Morality by Susan Mendus

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Cila Warncke (University of Glasgow)

Politics and morality is a juicy topic. Any given day one could mine enough raw materials from the headlines to write a lively thesis on the ‘alleged tension between politics and morality’ (p.14). In light of this, it is difficult to understand the vagueness and lack of direction that characterise *Politics and Morality* unless Susan Mendus, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of York, was simply overwhelmed by the embarrassment of topical riches. Part of the problem may be that the book draws heavily on Mendus’ prior publications. Chapter five’s discussion of *Billy Budd* is based on ‘Innocent Before God: Politics, Morality and the Case of Billy Budd’ (2006a) and her analysis of Machiavelli comes from ‘Saving One’s Soul or Founding a State: Morality and Politics’ (2006b). Given the historical and philosophical breadth of the topic, one cannot blame Mendus for mining old work – though it does lend the book a belated feel. The problem is that she does not use these specific cases as the basis for a general argument. *Politics and Morality* never declares what corner it is fighting, and as a result fails to land a punch.

From the outset, *Politics and Morality* avoids defining either of its primary terms. It treats politics and politicians as if they are universally understood and agreed upon quantities, which they are not. For example chapter four, ‘Integrity and Pluralism’, discusses

Machiavelli and refers to his political doctrine as one aimed at serving ‘the interests of the State’ (p.78) but how is the reader to understand ‘the interests of the State’? Or indeed the term ‘state’? Is this a contemporary republic concerned with domestic prosperity? A nation bent on conquest? A colony seeking freedom? Politicians regularly fail to agree on what constitutes the best interests of the state at a given moment (take the cuts-versus-investment arguments currently raging in Britain and America), so to use such terms without definition renders them moot. This is doubly true when dealing with as contentious a term as ‘morality’. Two-thirds of the way through the book there is a reference to ‘Christian morality’ (p.79) but that is the nearest we get to an explanation of what the author means by the word.

Writing about morality is difficult even if it is clearly defined. If it is not, the task is impossible. Take the hypothetical case proffered in the introduction, and referred to throughout the book, of a politician faced with the dilemma of whether to torture a rebel leader to prevent a terrorist attack (p.11). There are clearly multiple moral issues at stake. None of which can be adequately addressed until certain terms and ideas are defined, including ‘rebel’ and ‘terrorist’. Torturing a rebel to save innocent lives might look like the right answer on paper but try and apply it to a real world scenario like apartheid South Africa. If the question dealt with a definite situation, for instance: should the South African government have tortured Nelson Mandela in an attempt to stop the ANC’s terror campaign, the answer suddenly becomes fraught and complex. By failing to define its terms the book refuses to engage with

complexity and what should be an argument collapses into speculation.

Perhaps as a result of this there is a notable hesitation to engage with contemporary events. In order to make the point that integrity, in the sense of being faithful to one's beliefs and purpose, can be a political evil Mendus harks back to Heinrich Himmler, noting that he was

A man who knew what he stood for [...] He was not a crowd-follower, nor was he whimsical or capricious (p.18).

How much more interesting and provocative it would be if those words were applied to a modern paragon of the steadfast man, like Tony Blair. Plus, there is something facile about trotting out a Nazi as an example of political immorality. No one is questioning the awfulness of Nazism, so it adds little to any discussion to merely reiterate its badness. There are repeated instances where the book would have benefited by working from modern politics rather than history. Discussing the Cuban Missile Crisis (p.10) rather than Guantanamo Bay and referencing the invasion of Iraq (p.48) without commenting on its morality demonstrates an overly-delicate approach. It suggests the conclusion of *Politics and Morality* is dependent upon the judgement or endorsement of history.

This fastidiousness ultimately scuppers the book, sinking what could be a zingy debate into a morass of maybes. Rather than starting with a crystalline thesis and marshalling the arguments to serve it, *Politics and Morality* unravels competing strands of scholarly wisdom, dragging its poor reader along with it. What results is glibly

readable, but not very intellectually satisfying. *Politics and Morality* limps to the conclusion that:

Although the question of what it is good to do depends on the set of values and virtues one has embraced, there may, in the end, be no rational way of deciding which set of values one should embrace, and this is because the diverse and conflicting values are [...] “equally ultimate, equally sacred” (p.91).

For anyone with a sense of personal morality that statement is patent nonsense. All values are not ‘equally ultimate, equally sacred’ (p.91). If they were, we would be paralysed, unable to make even the simple choices required of daily life. Yet we do. *Politics and Morality*, however, deliberately avoids taking the basic step of deciding upon, defining, and defending its perception of morality. Thus it becomes academic in the worst sense. While it is understandable that Mendus, as a scholar, would approach such an elephantine subject warily, she needs to commit to and defend a point of view if the book is to be anything more than an investigative excursion. Unfortunately, *Politics and Morality* fails to make a robust argument, leaving the reader adrift in equivocation.

Bibliography

- Mendus, Susan. 2006a. Innocent Before God: Politics, Morality and the Case of Billy Budd. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 81(58). 23.
- Mendus, Susan. 2006b. Saving One's Soul or Founding a State: Morality and Politics. *Philosophia* 34(3). 233-241.