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What Mr. Spock Told the Earthlings: The Aims of Political Philosophy, Action-Guidingness and Fact-Dependency

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Abstract: Recently, G. A. Cohen introduced an influential distinction between fact-sensitive and fact-insensitive principles arguing that all basic normative principles are of the latter type. David Miller rejects this claim submitting that the validity of basic normative political principles depends on some general propositions about human nature and societies; for example, that men's generosity is 'confined' and that nature has made 'scanty provision' for his wants. Miller ties this view of the nature of basic political principles to the view that political philosophy ought to guide people engaged in real-world politics and claims plausibly that in order to fulfil this purpose, political philosophy must to be informed by social science. I argue that Miller neither succeeds in showing that basic principles can be fact-sensitive, nor establishes any connection between the Cohen-Miller disagreement on fact-sensitivity and the nature and aims of political philosophy.

Keywords: action-guidance, G. A. Cohen, fact-(in)sensitivity, justice, David Miller, political philosophy.

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Introduction

G. A. Cohen (2008) famously distinguished between normative principles that are fact-independent or, to use another term with an equivalent meaning, fact-insensitive, on the one hand, and normative principles that are fact-dependent or fact-sensitive, on the other hand. A normative principle is ‘a general directive that tells agents what (they ought, or ought not) to do, and a fact is, or corresponds to, any truth, other than (if any principles are truths) a principle’ (Cohen 2008, p. 229). On Cohen’s view, any fact-dependent normative principle must ultimately be grounded in a fact-independent normative principle that explains the relevance of the pertinent non-normative fact (or a relevant, more basic non-normative fact) on which the former principle depends.

In a critique of this view, David Miller argues that, at least in political philosophy, a fundamental normative principle—say, a principle of justice—presupposes certain facts about the human condition—say, limited resources and generosity—the relevance of which we can ‘see directly’ (Miller 2013, p. 27). He ties this critique of Cohen’s so-called Starship Enterprise view of political philosophy—as opposed to Miller’s own Earthling view—to an endorsement of a certain view of the aim of political philosophy; namely, that its (sole?) aim is to propose normative political principles that can successfully guide citizen’s actions. The particular notion of political feasibility, which should inform the pursuit of this aim, locates what is relevantly feasible somewhere between that which ‘can command sufficient political support to be adopted’ and that which is compatible with ‘rock bottom social or psychological laws’ (Miller 2013, p. 37).

Section 2 sets out Miller’s distinction between the Starship Enterprise and the Earthling view of political philosophy along three different dimensions. Section 3 argues that Cohen’s distinction survives Miller’s argument to the effect that

fundamental normative principles can ‘presuppose’ certain facts. Section 4 argues that the Cohenian view of fundamental normative principles does not rule out (which is not to say that it entails) Miller’s view about the aim and practice of political philosophy. Section 5 defends the claim that the Cohenian view of the fact-independence of fundamental normative principles can accommodate any reasonable constraint pertaining to how principles of political philosophy should be action-guiding. Also, by Miller’s own light, Miller’s account of how political philosophy should have practical import renders it ideological. In sum, this article’s overall thesis is that Miller’s critique of the Starship Enterprise view of political philosophy fails to engage its target; that to the extent it does engage it, it fails to refute it; and that, even by Miller’s own lights, the Earthling view of political philosophy is unsatisfactory.

The Starship Enterprise versus the Earthling view of political philosophy

Here is Miller’s most direct statement of the difference between the Earthling view of political philosophy and the Cohenian Starship Enterprise view:

The Starship Enterprise view draws a line between political philosophy proper, which involves defining concepts and setting out principles in an entirely fact-free way, and applied political theory, which takes these concepts and principles and, in the light of empirical evidence, proposes a more concrete set of rules to govern the arrangements of a particular society, or a particular group of societies. In contrast, I want to argue that even the basic concepts and principles of political theory are fact-dependent; their validity depends on the truth of some general empirical propositions about human beings and human societies, such that if these propositions were shown to be

false, the concepts and principles would have to be modified and or abandoned (Miller 2013, p. 18).

Disregarding political concepts—Cohen’s view, which is Miller’s target, is about the relation between non-normative facts and normative *principles*, not about the relation between non-normative facts and *concepts* (Cohen 2008, p. 229)—and assuming that Miller means the same by ‘political philosophy’ and ‘political theory’ in the quoted passage—if he does not, the two views he delineates are about different topics and, thus, compatible unlike what he intends them to be—that ‘political philosophy proper’ is concerned with basic principles, we can state the core difference between the Starship Enterprise and the Earthling views as follows:

The grounding disagreement: According to the Starship Enterprise view, basic normative political principles are not grounded in non-normative facts.

According to the Earthling view, basic normative political principles are grounded in non-normative facts.

In Miller’s view, this core disagreement connects with another disagreement (on the nature of this connection see note 2 below):

The purpose disagreement: According to the Starship Enterprise view, basic political philosophy; that is, political philosophy that asserts and defends basic normative political principles, is purely speculative and does not seek ‘to have a practical import, that is to say contain ideas that people engaged in real-world politics can take up and act upon when drafting legislation or making

public policy’ (Miller 2013, p. 17; cf. Hall 2013, p. 174). According to the Earthling view, basic political philosophy is not purely speculative, and its aim is, at least in part, to have practical import in the sense indicated in the previous sentence.¹

Why are these two disagreements connected on Miller’s view? This question, which, as far as I can tell, is not addressed directly by Miller, is relevant because it is logically possible for a principle not to be grounded in empirical facts and to have practical import. For instance, for some people, the principle ‘The state must never use capital punishment against persons’ is a principle that does not reflect any non-normative facts; that is, these people would subscribe to the principle whatever the non-normative facts are. Yet, it is a principle with practical import in Miller’s sense. I conjecture that the reason Miller nevertheless thinks that these two disagreements are connected is that he thinks that any *plausible* fact-independent normative political principle is so abstract that it is devoid of concrete, practical import. Perhaps my illustrating principle is not plausible as a fact-independent political principle because it would not be true, say, in a world where we all live in Hell and existence is worse than death and reflects a more basic principle pertaining to harm.

The grounding disagreement implies a third disagreement:

The practical disagreement: According to the Starship Enterprise view, political philosophers ought ‘to be focusing [their] attention more narrowly on

¹ Strictly speaking, this disagreement would exist even if all principles ever proposed by political philosophers subscribing to the Starship Enterprise view happened to have practical import. However, I take it that Miller thinks they have not and that part of the purpose disagreement concerns whether various basic political principles have and should have practical import.

conceptual and normative questions’ (Miller 2013, p. 17). According to the Earthling view, political philosophers ought ‘to be focusing [their] attention more broadly not only on conceptual and normative questions, but also on ‘history and the social sciences’ (Miller 2013, pp. 16-17).

Presumably, this disagreement follows from the two previous disagreements.² On the assumption that history and social sciences deliver non-normative facts about ‘facts of political life’ (Miller 2013, p. 16) and that non-normative facts are irrelevant to which basic normative principles are valid, political philosophers presumably have little need for history and social science. Also, while knowledge about facts of political life is needed to identify valid principles with practical import, they are irrelevant for purely speculative purposes.³

These two views about political philosophy are quite recognizable. Miller submits that while G. A. Cohen is a representative of the Starship Enterprise view, John Rawls and he himself are representatives of the Earthling view.

² Miller explicitly writes that the grounding disagreement implies the practical disagreement: ‘If the claims I have made in this chapter about the fact-dependence of political principles are accepted, what does this imply about how we should go about doing political philosophy?’ (Miller 2013, 35) The rest of the section, in which this question appears, then goes on to set out two implications of Miller’s fact-dependence view for how we should do political philosophy, namely, that 1) political philosophers should be modest ‘in the way they apply [political] principles across time and space’ and 2) that they should respect a certain ‘feasibility constraint’ (Miller 2013, pp. 36-37). To respect the latter constraint, they need to ‘learn from social scientists’. This strongly suggests that Miller thinks the grounding disagreement implies the purpose disagreement. If it did not, then, given the plausible assumption that it is the purpose of political philosophy that determines how ‘we should go about doing political philosophy’, it is hard to see how the former could imply the practical disagreement.

³ Miller’s distinction between the Starship Enterprise and the Earthling views also ranges over the epistemology and scope of basic normative political principles. Since these disagreements are peripheral to my concerns in this article, I set them aside.

Miller on the grounding disagreement

As indicated, Miller takes side with the Earthling view when it comes to the grounding disagreement. What is his argument for the claim that basic normative political principles are grounded in empirical facts? To answer this question, it might be useful to reconstruct Cohen's argument in favour of fact-independence as follows:

- (1) For any principle, P, and any non-normative fact, F, if P is grounded in F, then there exists another principle P₁, which explains why P holds given F.
- (2) If P₁ explains why P holds given F, then P₁ and F entail P.
- (3) Thus, for any principle, P, and any non-normative fact, F, if P is grounded in F, then there exists another principle, P₁, such that P₁ and F entail P.

P₁ is itself a principle. Thus, it is either grounded in some non-normative fact, F₁, in which case (1) applies and, thus, P₁ is not a basic principle, or not grounded in any non-normative facts, in which case (1) does not apply and P is a basic principle (cf. Cohen 2008, p. 237). Could there not be a principle that is grounded in some non-normative fact, even though there is no 'credible explanation of why' this fact supports the principle that invokes a more basic principle? Cohen does not demonstrate that there could be no such explanation. However, he challenges his opponent to offer an example of such an explanation and disarms some promising counterexamples.⁴ Basically, Miller takes up Cohen's challenge and offers two

⁴ Surprisingly, Miller sums up his own argument writing that he has 'sought to show that we are not compelled by simple logic to adopt the *Starship Enterprise* view' (Miller 2013, p. 38; cf. Jubb 2009, p. 337). Arguing by way of challenging one's opponent to provide a counterexample is not to claim that some proposition is established by way of 'simple logic'. Cohen explicitly writes that his claim that in order to explain why a certain fact grounds a certain principle, we need a more basic principle, is 'not a move demanded by logic' (Cohen 2008, p. 239; cf. p. 244n21).

counterexamples—counterexamples whose ‘purpose is to show that grounding need not mean entailment’ (Miller 2013, p. 23).

My initial response to Miller’s argument is that on Cohen’s view, entailment is not a grounding relationship.⁵ Suppose the following:

F₁=‘Gandhi believes that we should always keep our promises’;

F₂=‘When and only when promises are always kept can promisees successfully pursue their projects’;

F₃=‘Whatever Gandhi believes is true’;

P=‘We should help people to pursue their projects’.

Both the pair of F₁ and F₃ and the pair of F₂ and P entail that ‘We should always keep our promises’. Yet, they do not ground this principle in the same way. The first pair grounds it, or, more precisely, the holding of it, epistemically, but unlike F₂, it does not answer the Cohenian question of what it is about F₁ that *makes* it the case that we should always keep our promises (cf. Sangiovanni 2015, p. 9). Such grounding could take the form of an entailment, but that form is not the grounding itself. Hence, Miller directs his argument against a target, which is different from Cohen’s view, and accordingly, even if his counterexamples would succeed in showing that there are non-entailment grounding relations, this would not refute Cohen’s claim. Be that as it

⁵ Cohen’s nowhere states—even though my Miller-friendly reconstruction of his argument suggests—that the only admissible form of explanation of how fact-sensitive principles reflect facts are ones where the *explanans* entails the *explanandum*. The fact that his examples of such explanations all involve deductively valid arguments might simply reflect expository desiderata and not ‘an implicit idea of what it means for A to ground B’ (Miller 2013, p. 22).

may, I will set this reply to Miller aside and assess his counterexamples independently of the present general objection.

First, Miller argues that a certain principle can be grounded in a non-normative fact in the sense that if this fact did not obtain, the relevant principle would not apply and, yet, there need not be any underlying principle that, together with the relevant fact, entails the pertinent principle. For instance, Miller believes that any principle of justice presupposes that the Humean circumstances of justice obtain. Moreover, it is not such that there has to be an underlying principle that, together with a statement of these circumstances, entail the relevant normative principle.

Miller admits that the following argument might make explicit certain steps implicit in the claim that principles of justice presuppose the Humean circumstances of justice:

(F) Resources are scarce and readily transferable, while human benevolence is limited.

(F1) If F, humans will suffer if we do not assign resources using principles of justice.

(P1) We should not allow human beings to suffer.

Therefore:

(P) We should assign resources using principles of justice.⁶

⁶ Miller's reconstructed argument does not show that principles of justice presuppose Humean circumstances of justice, because it does not show that if these circumstances do *not* obtain, we should not still assign resources using principles of justice. I set this problem aside, since it is irrelevant to my main line of argument. More generally, circumstances of justice cannot ground principles of justice. Let 'principles of injustice' refer to principles that enjoin the opposite of principles of justice. Suppose that there is one principle of justice and that it enjoins that the worst off be made as well off as possible. In that case, the corresponding principle of injustice says that the worst off should be made as badly off as possible. This principle presupposes

The existence of such an argument might seem to vindicate Cohen's claim. However, while Miller concedes that it is possible to reconstruct the relation between (F) and (P) along the lines just suggested, he adds:

I do want to deny that we need to reconstruct the argument in this way in order to understand how F can ground P... My counterclaim is that we can see directly how a principle depends on the truth of certain claims about the human condition without having to explain the dependency in utilitarian or quasi-utilitarian terms (Miller 2013, p. 27).

In other words, according to Miller, we can see directly that (P) depends on the truth of (F) and that (F) explains (P). Miller does not deny that the reconstruction, which does involve a deductively valid argument, amounts to an explanation of (P). It is just that such an explanation is superfluous.

Given that Miller concedes that the relevant reconstruction is possible, I have some difficulty in seeing how he thinks he has responded successfully to Cohen's challenge. One possibility is that he thinks that the possibility of 'seeing directly' how (F) grounds (P) renders an explanation unnecessary. Another possibility is that the possibility of 'seeing directly' in itself amounts to an explanation.

Humean circumstances of justice in the same way that Miller thinks principles of justice do. In the absence of these circumstances, applying this principle would have no point, since the worst off would have unlimited resources at their disposal. But if both principles of justice and principles of injustice presuppose, in Miller's sense, circumstances of justice, then these do not explain why one rather than the other applies (cf. Cohen 2008, p. 336).

Consider the first possibility first. Assessing the relevance of this possibility requires that we dwell briefly on Cohen's clarity of mind requirement. Cohen's principle that basic principles of justice are fact-insensitive 'applies to anyone's principles, be they correct or not, so long as she has a clear grasp both of what her principles are and of why she holds them (where "grasping why she holds them" is short for "knowing what she thinks are the grounds of the principles" rather than for "what causes her to hold them")' (Cohen 2008, p. 233). To see how this requirement bears on Miller's putative counterexample, consider the following alternative argument for why justice presupposes Humean circumstances of justice:

(F) Resources are scarce and readily transferable, while human benevolence is limited.

(F1*) If F, human beings will be subjected to the arbitrary wills of others if we do not assign resources using principles of justice.

(P1*) We should not allow human beings to be subjected to the arbitrary wills of others.

Therefore:

(P) We should assign resources using principles of justice.

This argument is not a particularly strange explanation of why Humean circumstances of justice are presupposed by principles of justice. Indeed, the present reconstruction seems more congenial to the contractualist tradition, which Miller has considerable sympathy for, than Miller's own proposed reconstruction. In any case, the question is whether, given the availability of the present as well as Miller's reconstruction, one can say that one 'directly sees' that principles of justice presuppose circumstances of

justice and that this renders an explanation of how they do so unnecessary given Cohen's clarity of mind requirement. I believe the answer is no. If I cannot tell if I think P is grounded in F via Miller's P1 or via my argument's P1*, I do not have a clear grasp of why I accept P. I do not know which aspect of the circumstances of justice—that the absence of enforced rules of justice involves suffering or subjection of people to the arbitrary wills of others—grounds principles of justice in Cohen's sense.

At this point, Miller might respond that the 'clear grasp' requirement is unreasonably demanding if taken to imply a perfect grasp, even though this is what Cohen intends it to imply (Cohen 2008, pp. 245-247). But to mount such a response, one will have to provide an argument for why it is not a task for political philosophy to provide a perfect grasp of which principles we accept and why. Also, Miller would need to explain why we should be particularly interested in basic principles of justice if 'basic' is tied to an acknowledged less than perfect grasp of which principles one accepts and why. What is the significance of the fact that a certain basic principle is fact-sensitive for a person in the relevant sense if it is also the case that, by her own lights, were she to acquire a better grasp of why she accepts the principle, she would see that she does so because of a more basic and fact-insensitive principle to which she subscribes? Is a perfect grasp not better than an imperfect grasp from the point of view of political philosophy?

Consider next the second option that I mentioned above; that Miller thinks that 'seeing directly' how (F) grounds (P) in itself explains how (F) grounds (P). This option is unpromising. The fact that I directly see how (F) grounds (P) can explain the fact that I believe that (F) grounds (P), but not the fact that (F) grounds (P). Consider the following analogy: The fact that I directly see that the car is red can explain the

fact *that I believe that the car is red*, but it does not explain *that the car is red*.

Depending on what is the relevant explanatory purpose, that fact is explained by facts such as the kind of paint that was used to paint the car or the fact that its owner prefers red cars to cars of any other colour, but—perhaps setting aside some very outlandish cases—not by facts about my perceiving the colour of the car. Hence, Miller’s first counterexample is not very powerful. Perhaps his second counterexample of a non-entailment grounding relation is more successful?

Miller’s second counterexample is less developed than his first. His second example involves:

‘evidential grounding’, where a fact support a conclusion, not by entailing it, but just by providing evidence that makes it likely to hold. So ‘that is a small bird with an orange breast and a white wing-bar’ grounds ‘that is a chaffinch’ because, given the context (we are sitting in an English garden), a bird meeting the former description is very likely indeed to be a chaffinch, even though there exists no entailment (there exists other birds fitting the description that are not chaffinches) (Miller 2013, p. 22).

This counterexample is no more successful than the previous one.⁷ First, it is vulnerable to a challenge that is analogous to the one involving the clarity of mind requirement that I just developed in response to the counterexample involving presupposition. Someone who has a perfect grasp of why she accepts ‘that is a

⁷ In fact, it is less successful. One form that evidential grounding might take, viz., my Gandhi example, is the form of an entailment. In contrasting evidential grounding (as opposed to metaphysical grounding) with entailment grounding (as opposed to, say, inductive or abductive grounding), Miller runs together two different distinctions.

chaffinch’ also accepts that, in the relevant context, ‘if something is a small bird with an orange breast and a white wing-bar, then it is a chaffinch’ and that conditional together with the relevant fact entails ‘that is a chaffinch’.

However, there is a second and more fundamental reason why Miller’s second counterexample fails. The reason is that the sort of grounding relation that Cohen’s fact-insensitivity thesis concerns is not epistemic grounding. Cohen’s thesis concerns not what justifies us in accepting certain principles as valid, but what makes certain principles valid (cf. Jubb 2009, p. 337). Hence, even if Miller were right about evidential grounding, this would be compatible with the truth of Cohen’s fact-sensitivity claim. I conclude that Miller fails to show that there could be a principle that is grounded in some non-normative fact and according to which there could be a ‘credible explanation of why some F supports some P invokes or implies no such more ultimate principle’. The Starship Enterprise view on the grounding disagreement stands unrefuted by Miller’s argument.⁸

The aim and practice of political philosophy

An integral part of Miller’s contrast between the Starship Enterprise and the Earthling view of political philosophy is that, according to the latter, the purpose of political philosophy is ‘to have a practical import, that is to say contain ideas that people engaged in real-world politics can take up and act upon when drafting legislation or making public policy’, whereas the former sees political philosophy as purely

⁸ Even if both of Miller’s counterexamples were successful, all they would establish is that there are, or could be, some basic political principles—to wit, principles of justice—that are fact-sensitive; not that they all are, which is what Miller contends in the long Miller quote in paragraph one, section two.

speculative and, thus, deny that its purpose is ‘to have a practical import’.⁹ I want to resist this contrast in two ways.

First, in what follows ‘that is to say’ in the quoted passage, Miller narrows down the scope of what it is for political philosophy to have practical import in a way that is problematic and, in any case, not premised on any particular view about the grounding disagreement. Consider Cohen’s critique of incentives-based inequalities. According to Cohen, citizens in a just, Rawlsian society cannot simply rely on legislation and public policy when it comes to making the worst off as well off as possible. Rather, such a society must be permeated by an egalitarian ethos that leads talented people not to insist on incentives in order to work longer hours to make the worst off as well off as possible. Cohen’s critique of incentives-based inequalities might indirectly have practical import for desirable ‘legislation’ and ‘public policy’, since, here, the state might be able to promote an egalitarian ethos through legislation and public policy. Suppose, however, that it is not. His critique of incentives would still have practical import in a way that renders it different from purely speculative theories—it says something about what people ought to do in their daily lives. Moreover, the disagreement between those who, like Cohen, think that the ‘personal is political’ and those who do not, intuitively, is a disagreement *within* political philosophy and, indeed, is a disagreement that could take place between different political philosophers, who all subscribe to a denial of the fact-insensitivity thesis. Accordingly, it is best to say that the aim of political philosophy is to have practical

⁹ Much here hangs on what it is to ‘take up and act upon [an idea] when drafting legislation or making practical policy’. If one ‘takes up and acts upon’ a principle if one adopts a policy that will reduce the distance between the desirable aim specified by the principle, but still brings us nowhere near achieving it—nothing we can do will ensure this—it is hard to think of a normative principle that is not action-guiding. Accordingly, Miller must have a more demanding notion in mind, even though it is not clear what exactly it is.

import—or, at any rate, better to say that than to say what Miller says—and then leave open exactly what sort of practical import is required. It suffices that it aims to present ideas that *some* agents—be they states, citizens or simply people—can act upon.

However, I have a second and more basic disagreement with the way in which Miller contrasts the Starship Enterprise and the Earthling view of political philosophy. This disagreement comes out in the following pair of questions: (1) Can fact-insensitive principles have practical import? (2) Can fact-sensitive principles have no practical import? The answer to both questions is ‘yes’.

That fact-insensitive principles can have practical import in Miller’s restrictive—as well as in my favoured broader sense—can be seen if we consider someone who subscribes to the principle I used in Section 2—‘It is impermissible for the state to torture people’—as an example of a principle that is held as a fact-insensitive principle. This principle has practical import, even in Miller’s narrow sense, in that it contains ‘ideas that people engaged in real-world politics can [and, as a matter of fact, do: KLR] take up and act upon when drafting legislation or making public policy’.

Conversely, a fact-sensitive principle can have no practical import. Suppose that for me, the fact that crime is bad for people grounds the fact-sensitive principle: ‘(We/)The state ought to eliminate crime’. I directly see that the truth of this principle depends on the fact that crime is bad for people. Since the relevant principle does not, according to Miller (2013, p. 32), have any practical import—it is not in the relevant Millerean sense a practical possibility for (us/)the state to eliminate crime—it is possible for fact-sensitive principles not to have practical import.¹⁰ Moreover, since

¹⁰ (We/)The state can eliminate crime in the sense of ‘can’ involved in the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. It is just that we (it) will not, e.g., because of what that

fact-insensitive principles can have practical import, in Miller's specific sense and more broadly so, and fact-sensitive principles can fail to have it, it follows that the grounding disagreement does not determine which side one should take in regard to the purpose disagreement.

It might be replied that while the present point is correct, it is also correct that plausible fact-insensitive principles tend to be more abstract than plausible fact-sensitive principles and that, for this reason, plausible fact-insensitive principles tend to have less practical import than plausible fact-sensitive principles. First, suppose this is so. Still, a mere tendency would not suffice for drawing a *principled* contrast between two conflicting approaches to political philosophy.

Second, it is a further question what exactly determines the purpose of political philosophy, and even if it were—as it is not—the case that all fact-insensitive principles have no practical import and all fact-sensitive ones have, the view that basic political principles are fact-sensitive does not on its own imply anything about what the purpose of political philosophy is. One could subscribe to the relevant fact-sensitive view and hold that the aim of political philosophy is to identify valid normative principles. One could even welcome, given the stated assumption, that these principles happen to have practical import without seeing it as the purpose of political philosophy to have practical import (of the right sort, i.e., to enjoin people to act in the right sort of way).

As Miller reasonably sees it, the purpose disagreement is connected to the practice disagreement. If the purpose of political philosophy is to have practical import, then political philosophers should also immerse themselves in 'the literature

would involve in terms of loss of other values or because of the way in which some of us have an interest in committing crimes.

of history and social science’ (Miller 2013, p. 16) or, as he puts it, exploiting the Starship Enterprise metaphor: They should ‘first understand the form of life’ on the planet to which they will apply their principles and only then ‘discover what are the appropriate principles to apply when you beam down’ (Miller 2013, p. 39).

In response, I make two observations. First, Miller’s talk about chronological order seems neither here nor there. Suppose you subscribe to the view that basic principles of political philosophy are fact-sensitive. Nothing prevents you from starting out with a description of a range of different possible circumstances; determine (a priori) which principles are appropriate under the different possible circumstances, and once you have done that, determine what the relevant empirical circumstances are, and thereby, determine which principles are valid under the actual circumstances (cf. Kurtulmus 2009, p. 504). You might think that finding out which principles are valid under merely possible empirical circumstances is not a proper task for political philosophy, but presumably, doing so is a respectable inquiry, and whether we subsume it under what we refer to as ‘political philosophy’ or see it as a different discipline seems more a matter of what we call the relevant line of inquiry and not a substantive issue.

Second, Miller has not shown that the two views are in substantive disagreement regarding how political philosophers should proceed with their business. One could subscribe to the Starship Enterprise view about grounding and yet think that what political philosophers should be doing is to have practical import and that this implies giving priority to doing what Miller calls ‘applied political theory’; that is, combining basic principles with ‘factual evidence about the kind of society in which the principles are going to be applied’ (Miller 2013, p. 17).

Moreover, people with the Starship Enterprise view might think applied political theory can take a form different from the one Miller describes here. For instance, they might think that it is a hard question which of two (or more) fact-insensitive principles are valid; think that, given the empirical facts, both commend adopting a certain policy; and think that in the light of the moral importance of whether or not the relevant policy is adopted, political philosophers should devote themselves single-mindedly to expound the case for the relevant policy and not to the tricky issue of which of the two fact-insensitive principles is valid. In short, friends of the Starship Enterprise view of grounding might think that political philosophers should spend their time doing what Miller labels applied political theory. Miller might think that applied political theory is what we consider to be political philosophy. But this is merely a terminological difference. The substantive point is that Miller and friends of the Starship Enterprise view might agree that political philosophers should engage in the relevant activity, whatever it is called, and that doing so is more important than determining which fact-insensitive principles are valid (assuming that such principles exist) or determining which fact-sensitive principles are valid under different empirical circumstances.

Reasonable requirement of practical import

According to Miller, political philosophy is not merely speculative but has practical import. However, there are many different ways of fleshing out a requirement of practical import. In this section, I briefly discuss what a plausible practical import requirement looks like.

Richard Hare has argued at length that moral judgments entail prescriptions. Assuming that in espousing a principle of political philosophy, one makes a moral

judgment, his view applies to espousing to such principles. Hence, sincerely saying that ‘We ought to bring about democracy’ entails that if one ever were in a situation where one could act in a way that would bring about democracy (or make it more likely)—alone or together with others whom one believes will do their part—all other things being equal, one acts in that way (Hare 1981, p. 21).

Clearly, fact-insensitive principles championed by friends of the Starship Enterprise view have practical import in this sense. Take one of Miller’s examples of a possibly fact-insensitive principle, ‘We should help people to pursue their projects’. Sincerely assenting to this principle entails, if Hare is right, that, other things being equal, one helps other people pursue their projects when possible. Assuming that there are no *conceptual* constraints on how normative judgments in political philosophy have practical import that do not reflect conceptual constraints on moral judgments in general, there are no conceptual constraints on how normative political principles must have political import that render what friends of the Starship Enterprise view are doing something other than political philosophy. Moreover, if the present assertion is accepted, this raises the question of the non-conceptual basis on which Miller adopts a thicker notion of practical import and exactly which form that import takes. Again, he runs together a number of different views here.

Miller suggests that while basic political principles should be sensitive to certain facts, there are other facts to which they should be insensitive, such as general facts of economics and psychology that obtain only in capitalist societies; for example, that to elicit extra efforts, material incentives are required (Miller 2013, p. 20). The reason why political principles should be insensitive to the latter facts is that ‘[r]eliance on such facts distorts the theory and makes it ideological rather than philosophical: justice comes to mirror too closely prevailing institutions and practices,

rather than serving to assess them critically’ (Miller 2013, p. 20). Assuming that the passage that precedes ‘:’ simply elucidates the passage that comes after it, call this rationale *the critical assessment rationale*.

There are different ways to flesh out the critical assessment rationale. Suppose human beings are biologically hard-wired to be quite selfish, as those who assert the Humean circumstances of justice think we are. Suppose also that we are unable to affect this aspect of our biological set-up now, but that human beings in the past could have acted differently such that now we would have been biologically hard-wired to be more altruistic and less selfish.¹¹ Question: should political philosophy reflect this fact about human selfishness?

If the answer to this question is ‘yes’, is political philosophy then not vulnerable to the charge of being ideological in the sense that it is willing to mirror any prevailing facts that result from past, now unalterable actions, however seemingly unjust these actions were?

If, on the other hand, the answer is ‘no’, one might ask why political philosophy should reflect purely natural facts—that is, facts that would have obtained however anyone exercised their agency? We cannot say that political philosophy should presuppose, rather than assess, such facts because now we can do nothing about them, since the same is true about non-purely-natural facts reflecting the past actions of past generations, which, *ex hypothesis*, we do not think political philosophy should reflect on pain of being ideological. Indeed, if, as Miller (and Rawls, according

¹¹ If you think that past generations could not have acted such that we were biologically hard-wired to be more altruistic, since they could not coordinate decisions and did not possess the required knowledge, then suppose—Starship Enterprise-political-philosophy-like—that now is 2500 AC. For the last 500 years, people could have coordinated their actions and did possess the required knowledge to make it the case that in 2500 AC, people would have been biologically hard-wired to be much less egoistic than they actually are.

to Miller), we think that ‘political philosophy in democratic societies should be aimed at citizens generally, setting out principles that they might follow when supporting or changing their institutions and practices’ (Miller 2013, p. 34), then there is no relevant difference between purely natural facts and the sort of impure natural facts reflecting past actions. I conclude that there is no easy way out for Miller of the relevant dilemma.

As noted in the previous section, Miller has a very specific Rawlsian notion of practical import in mind. For instance, he thinks that principles of political philosophy should be action-guiding in the sense that ‘they cannot contravene the deeply-held commitments of present-day citizens’ (Miller 2013, p. 34). It is clear, however, that Miller’s ‘in the sense’ does not qualify the relevant principle’s action-guidingness, since it is precisely because of the actions that it guides people to do that it contravenes their ‘deeply-held commitments’. The relevant specificity is imposed in a way that has nothing to do with action-guidingness.

Between purely speculative forms of philosophy and political philosophy that has practical import in the mentioned specific Rawlsian sense, there are other forms of philosophy with some practical import, though different from the specifically Rawlsian import that Miller champions. Presumably, Miller acknowledges the possibility of doing political philosophy without its having its particularly Rawlsian practical import, such as political philosophy that aims to guide the action of dictators or non-citizens with residency permission (cf. Miller 2013, p. 34). Moreover, when Miller subscribes to the Rawlsian view that political philosophy should delineate a ‘realistic utopia’, where that, in turn, is in part determined by ‘what, for us, would count as a tolerable or intolerable outcome’ (Miller 2013, pp. 31-32), presumably, he is not suggesting implausibly that those who describe utopias that are not realistic in

the present sense (and might otherwise to subscribe to the Earthling view of political philosophy) are not doing political philosophy. Ultimately, his acceptance of the very specific Rawlsian view of political philosophy is grounded, not in any view about the nature of political philosophy, but in his view that a democratic way of doing political philosophy is more ‘attractive’ than neo-Leninist views of political philosophy that is required to be ‘less than fully open with its addressees’ (Miller 2013, p. 35). While there is indeed something admirable about doing political philosophy that is ‘fully open to its addressees’, there is, as far as I can see, nothing in the Starship Enterprise view of fact-insensitivity, nor in a view according to which the practical import of political philosophy need not simply address the agency of citizens, that permits lack of full openness. Indeed, there is no reason why a friend of either of these views might not endorse a (defeasible) moral norm to the effect that political philosophers should be fully open about their reasoning when addressing citizens and so on. Neither the concern for avoiding being ideological, nor the concern for democratic reasoning justifies the particular form of practical import that Miller favours.

Conclusion

My view of political philosophy fits well with the Starship Enterprise view. However, I have not defended this view directly here. Instead, I have argued at length against Miller’s arguments to the effect that basic normative principles of political philosophy are fact-sensitive. Moreover, I have argued that the disagreement over fact-sensitivity of basic principles is not closely connected with the disagreements over the purpose and practice of political philosophy. In particular, it is unclear why political philosophy should have practical import in the way Miller thinks it should and why

the Earthling view of basic principles is incompatible with a purely speculative view of political philosophy.

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