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Should we Distinguish Between Repugnant and Non-Repugnant Unreasonable Views?

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Abstract: Shmuel Nili's *Philosophizing the Indefensible: Strategic Political Theory* is a thought-provoking book, calling philosophers to arms in the effort of containing the spread of 'unreasonable' views characterising many contemporary societies. Nili argues that philosophers can play a distinctive role by arguing from premises they reject to show how those presumptions do not lead to upholding the 'repugnant' policies their interlocutors back up. This paper focuses on a distinction that is key to Nili's argument, i.e. that between 'repugnant' and 'non-repugnant' unreasonable policies. According to Nili, philosophers should be under no obligation to engage discursively in the way he envisions when their interlocutors support policies that are repugnant, i.e. they clearly violate universal human equality. The paper argues that it does not make sense to treat repugnant unreasonable views as normatively different from non-repugnant premises. The repugnant/non-repugnant distinction is untenable and too subject to 'reasonable' disagreement to offer concrete normative guidance.

Keywords: unreasonableness; containment; illiberal views; abortion

We live during a time of crisis of the very project of liberal democracy. Although existing so-called liberal democratic societies arguably never managed to fully realise values like freedom and equality, there was at least a widespread belief that liberal democracy was an ideal worth pursuing and rallying around. As, for instance, the increased support for far-right political parties and leaders in Europe and in the United States eerily shows, today more and more persons seem to be less committed to embrace liberal democratic ideals and, instead, are attracted by political agendas that propose policies violating the basic rights of, say, ethnic and sexual minorities. Many political philosophers come from or live in societies facing democratic backsliding. They might well have a great urge to contribute to the effort of fighting illiberal and undemocratic forces, but feel inept to do so, at least in their capacity as philosophers. If the image of the philosopher as someone completely

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absorbed by abstract reasoning, which has little to bear on the real problems of many ordinary persons, holds true, then it looks like there is no hope for the politically worried philosopher to put their theoretical and analytical skills at use to defend what they stand for. Shmuel Nili's *Philosophizing the Indefensible: Strategic Political Theory* dexterously shows that philosophers are mistaken in assuming that they "have virtually nothing to add, qua philosophers, to the public conversation" (Nili 2023, 1). According to Nili, philosophical reasoning can play a pivotal role to face indefensible policies endorsed by 'unreasonable' persons through what he calls 'strategic political theory'. Philosophers will find this way of reasoning quite familiar: by starting from premises linked to certain policies – just for the sake of the argument – those partaking in strategic political theory attempt to prove that backing up such policies does not follow from the very premises one interlocutor hinges on (at least once such premises are properly interpreted) (Nili 2023, 3).

Nili's book is thought-provoking and makes a powerful case for valuing philosophy's distinctive contribution to confronting our troubled world, by illustrating strategic political theory through five concrete and wide-ranging examples. Although I admit that I do not share Nili's genuine optimism about the capacity of rational reasoning to persuade persons to change their mind (even when this might simply mean withdrawing support for an indefensible policy), I have found this focus on strategic philosophising refreshing and fascinating.

In what follows, I wish to pause on a crucial conceptual and normative distinction that Nili draws and that constitutes one key argumentative move in his overall approach: the contrast between those unreasonable views that are repugnant and those that are not. In a nutshell, while Nili contends that philosophers should engage in strategic political theory when it comes to unreasonable views that are non-repugnant because they are mistaken but "do not offend rudimentary egalitarian standards" (Nili 2023, 20), he suggests that it is inherently problematic to theorising starting from repugnant premises. In this paper, I will argue that classifying unreasonable views as either repugnant or non-repugnant is (i) unsound in our deeply unjust societies and (ii) much less straightforward to propose than Nili acknowledges. I will proceed as follows. In Section 1, I reconstruct Nili's distinction, by stressing the rationale behind it and the important function it serves in the overall argument. Next, in Section 2, I will show the untenability and complexity of the repugnant/non-repugnant distinction, by focusing on some examples discussed in the book. In particular, I will contend that it does not make sense to treat repugnant unreasonable views as *normatively* different from non-repugnant premises when it comes to strategic political theory. Finally, in Section 3, I will consider how Nili can revise his argument in light of my critique.

1 Repugnant Versus Non-Repugnant Unreasonable Views

In describing those who support indefensible policies, Nili labels them as 'unreasonable', but he does not endorse Rawls's political liberal framework, which has made an extensive (yet quite controversial) use of that term. According to Nili, unreasonable persons are characterised by a failure to "respond in minimally adequate ways to key moral reasons that are clearly pertinent to the political subject at hand" (Nili 2023, 3). Not all unreasonable views are of the same kind, though. Nili distinguishes between 'repugnant' and 'non-repugnant' unreasonable premises. While both are unreasonable, the former argues for indefensible policies by relying on premises that are a blatant violation of any possible reading of universal human equality, whereas the latter do not.

To illustrate this difference, which is central to his account, Nili confronts two ways in which a government can back up its decision to scrap all the welfare support for its citizens, including vital resources to guarantee the satisfaction of the basic health, educational and nutritional needs of a large portion of the population, which is a clearly indefensible policy. According to Nili, arguments based on racist views that claim that, say, welfare support should be abolished because it benefits persons of colour are repugnant. However, a government might support the same policy by resorting to ultra-libertarian ideas about the state and taxation, which are "(profoundly) mistaken", but not repugnant (Nili 2023, 20).[1]

Why is such a distinction so important? For Nili, we should ask philosophers to practice strategic political theory when it comes to non-repugnant unreasonable premises, but we should not expect them to engage in this type of argumentation by starting from repugnant views. This is not necessarily because the repugnant views are particularly unamenable to strategic political theory.[2] According to Nili, the main problem lies with the risk of 'self-taint' that arguing from repugnant premises and endeavouring to reconstruct them as a coherent whole would pose to the philosopher in question. Building on his previous groundbreaking work on integrity (Nili 2020), Nili argues that harms to one's own integrity should be taken

1 I will return to these two examples in the next section.

2 It has become more common to differentiate among different types of unreasonableness, especially in the literature on political liberalism. Some do so because they believe that proposed strategies to discursively engage with the unreasonable would work only with some kinds of unreasonable views (see, for instance, Badano and Nuti 2024, 104–9 and Schwartzman 2012). Others, instead, suggest that some unreasonable should not be contained because they do not pose a great threat to liberal legitimacy and stability (Reid 2022; Sala 2013).

seriously. For a reasonable person to engage in strategic political theory by endorsing repugnant views implies "seeing the world through the eyes of the repugnant", which, in turn, means "*becoming* the repugnant and betraying [oneself] in a real, albeit limited way" (Nili 2023, 25; emphasis in the original). Even when the stakes are high and the possible pay-off significant, we should not expect from any reasonable person to put themselves through that ordeal. The examples offered by Nili to illustrate this risk of self-betrayal are compelling and show that the likely anguish and alienation that being unfaithful to one's deepest beliefs and sense of oneself triggers might be seen as an important factor to consider here.

In what follows, I will not debate whether harms to one personal integrity are indeed so great that they grant a permission not to argue from repugnant views, whatever the possible gains and specific threats to the liberal democratic order might be. I will take for granted (at least arguendo) that we might regard self-betrayal as a serious moral wrong. Instead, I will focus on the very distinction between repugnant and non-repugnant unreasonable premises to show that it is both untenable and much more difficult to draw than Nili seems to appreciate.

2 The Repugnant/Non-Repugnant Distinction in the *Real* World

Distinguishing between unreasonable views that are repugnant and those that are not might seem a useful analytical device. After all, we might think, not all unreasonable views held by individuals are the same and, even though we find them all deeply problematic and wrong, we should *conceptually* make some distinctions between totally abhorrent premises and simply flawed ones. However, when we try to operationalise the distinction, we realise that it is *practically* (i) inappropriate and (ii) confusing. The distinction, then, becomes of little use when deployed in the real world, which is the level of theorising that Nili is interested in. Let me unpack each problem in turn.

First, the distinction is untenable in non-ideal circumstances. This is because, in societies characterised by racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and other types of deep-seated prejudices, policies supported by non-repugnant premises are bound to have repugnant effects. Consider the example offered by Nili himself, i.e. a government's decision to withdraw any type of welfare support based on ultra-libertarian considerations. We know that in most real-world societies plagued by racial injustice many beneficiaries of welfare support tend to be members of racial and ethnic minorities. This means that, even if not directly motivated by repugnant premises, a decision to cut off state's welfare support will have indirectly repugnant outcomes, by further compounding and exacerbating racial inequalities. In

some cases, the repugnance of the effects of an indefensible policy are so evident and foreseeable that we might even question whether the decision to implement that policy is not actually driven (even if not publicly) by motives incompatible with any plausible understanding of universal human equality.[3] Indeed, when someone is knowingly willing to make determinate social groups suffer from grave injustice, by denying them forms of support for their basic needs, it is very plausible to infer that, at least unconsciously, they are moved by repugnant beliefs and/or feelings about those groups. But, even when this is not the case, we should still assess as repugnant (and not just as mere unreasonable) a government or an individual prepared to accept such deeply unequal outcomes targeting minority groups as a result of implementing their desired distributive policy. Therefore, when applied to our non-ideal circumstances, the repugnant/non-repugnant distinction becomes untenable. This is because in societies characterized by racism, sexism, and other structures of oppression, even indefensible policies backed up by non-repugnant premises are extremely likely to have repugnant effects, i.e. effects whose acceptance is irreconcilable with a commitment to universal human equality (and often might be induced by more or less latent repugnant motives).

Second, determining unreasonable premises supporting an indefensible policy are repugnant or not is not so straightforward in practice. Well-intentioned reasonable philosophers will have opposite intuitions about the same case, making it hard and puzzling to understand when to engage in strategic political theory. To unpack this point, let me turn to one example, which is the focus of chapter 3 of Nili's book: single-issue anti-abortion voters in the United States who tend to belong to the Christian right. In that chapter, Nili treats such voters as unreasonable because they have rallied around Donald Trump in recent presidential elections, thereby endorsing an indefensible policy. According to Nili, such voters were aware of Trump's serious flaws, but nevertheless supported him with the goal of making sure that the Supreme Court overturned the landmark 1973 Roe v Wade ruling, which had guaranteed women the right to a safe abortion up until the point of fetal viability – a goal that was indeed appallingly achieved on 24 June 2022. In his analysis of how philosophers can show single-issue abortion voters that they should not support Trump by starting from their own premises, Nili considers such assumptions as non-repugnant, that is, as not violating basic ideas of human equality (Nili 2023, 78). However, a different (and arguably quite plausible) assessment of the premises of single-issue abortion voters is available, which would declare them as repugnant.

3 One might simply reply that Nili is wrong in evaluating ultra-libertarian views as non-repugnant. Be that as it may, my point here is more general and applies to cases beyond libertarianism. It is about the ways in which policies premised on non-repugnant arguments would interact with structures of oppression in our real societies.

As many political and social historians have pointed out, the US Republican Party became tightly associated with pro-life positions since the Reagan administration. While the party was much more divided on the issue of abortion before the 1980s, it is during the Reagan era that a strong alliance between Republicans and pro-lifers was forged (Flowers 2019). Since then, not only has the Republican Party become the natural political representative of single-issue abortion voters, but also such voters (mainly evangelists and other affiliates of the Christian right) are a key constituency that Republicans cannot afford to alienate. Although 'pro-lifers' cannot be considered as a monolith and there are variations in terms of whether those falling into this group believe that abortion should be outrightly illegal or permitted only in very limited circumstances (e.g., in case of rape, incest and extreme medical emergencies), it is hard to deny that all pro-lifers aim to severely restrict women's reproductive rights (Monk-Turner 2020). In other words, single-issue abortion voters might hold different views on gender roles, but they all at least seem to share a patriarchal understanding of women's rights to reproductive control.[4] It seems, thus, very plausible for a philosopher who is assessing the premises of single-issue abortion voters to conclude that they are repugnant because the ideal of universal human equality is inconsistent with denying women basic reproductive rights, like the right to safely terminate a pregnancy.[5]

To clarify, my point here is not so much to determine whether Nili is right or wrong in evaluating single-issue abortion voters as holding non-repugnant views, but to stress that even philosophers (e.g., Nili and myself) will in practice reasonably disagree over whether premises supporting indefensible policies should be seen as repugnant or not. This renders the repugnant/non-repugnant distinction much more difficult to be worked out and, thus, likely to be not as action-guiding as Nili seems to suggest.

In sum, when trying to apply the crucial distinction between repugnant and non-repugnant premises to our non-ideal circumstances and deploying as a compass to decide whether to engage in strategic political theory, it turns out that differentiation is shaky and unlikely to offer clear guidance to philosophers. What are we left with, then?

4 This is still the case even though pro-life movements in the United States have progressively shifted their strategy to emphasise the alignment of foetal and maternal interests (Leach 2020).

5 This is not say that fetuses have no rights at all. However, agree with Rawls that "the equality of women as equal citizens" outweighs "the ordered reproduction of political society over time" and also "the due respect for human life" (Rawls 2005, 243 fn 32). This means that I believe that views that do not give women control over the termination of a pregnancy at the early stages disrespects their equality. When anti-abortion positions deny women that control, thus, are – I think – repugnant.

3 The Complexity of Philosophically Engaging with Unreasonable Views

It looks like, in practice, it does not make sense to differentiate between repugnant and non-repugnant views in deciding whether or not a philosopher should be asked to endorse unreasonable premises to show that an indefensible policy does not follow from them. At this point, two possibilities seem to be available to Nili. The first option is maintaining that the risk of self-betrayal is still too heavy a burden to ask philosophers to take it and, thus, philosophers should not even be demanded to engage in strategic political theory by starting from non-repugnant premises. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous section, under non-ideal condition philosophers will still be bound to taint themselves by arguing from premises that lead to profoundly inegalitarian outcomes. This seems to be an implication that, albeit coherent, cannot appeal to Nili; it would entail giving up on strategic political theory in those scenarios where it looks to be needed the most. If engaging philosophically with unreasonable views turns out to be always so morally demanding, doing so becomes supererogatory and cannot be required of philosophers.

The second option is reconsidering the wrongness of self-tainting by arguing that either it is not so serious or that it is outweighed by other considerations, such as the threat to the legitimacy and stability of liberal institutions. In this case, however, it is worth pondering on whether strategic political theory is actually the aptest way to interact with those holding unreasonable views. In both cases of repugnant and non-repugnant beliefs, the problem does not mainly lie in endorsing an indefensible policy; the troubling issue, which needs to be confronted, has to do with the views themselves as they are directly or indirectly violating rudimentary standards of universal human equality. Consider again the case of single-issue anti-abortion voters in the United States. Convincing them not to cast their ballot for Trump does not seem to solve the real problem, which is that such unreasonable individuals will still be committed to support political leaders who pledge to deny women basic reproductive freedoms – an electoral promise that is in itself not defensible. By accepting, arguendo, those premises assumed by the interlocutors, strategic political theory is ill-equipped to deal with the fact that it is such premises that must change. Transforming value-laden assumptions is, however, profoundly different than persuading someone to stop backing up a policy. It involves engaging with a person's deep beliefs and it is not clear that rational and philosophical arguments are particularly helpful in achieving that. As I argued elsewhere, when it comes to unreasonable persons holding what Rawls calls 'partially comprehensive views', that is, endorsing political principles "without seeing any particular connection, one way or the other, between those principles and their other views"

(Rawls 2005, 160), rhetoric is likely to be more promising than philosophical disputation (Badano and Nuti 2024, 118–28). Instead, as regards unreasonable persons whose political beliefs are derived straight from their comprehensive (e.g., religious) worldviews, engagement might have to look very differently, bypassing rational confutation and finding more 'experiential' and 'practical' ways to encourage those unreasonable persons to realize the attractiveness of universal human equality (Badano and Nuti 2020).

In sum, once we appreciate how the repugnant/non-repugnant distinction would work under non-ideal circumstances, it becomes unclear whether strategic political theory is something that we can morally demand philosophers to engage in or it is even an apt tool of containment.

4 Conclusions

In this paper, I have focused on Nili's distinction between repugnant and non-repugnant views – a distinction that is crucial to understand when to engage in strategic political theory. I have shown that such a differentiation becomes untenable and much more difficult to draw in our real societies characterised by different structures of oppression. This, in turn, should make us reflect on whether strategic political theory is a type of engagement that we can morally require philosophers to partake in and an appropriate tool of containment of unreasonable beliefs.

That being said, nothing I attempted to argue for in this paper should be read as denying the interest and importance of Nili's book, which will certainly spark lively discussions in the years to come.

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