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Civic Friendship, the Burdens of Politics, and the Ethics of Attention

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Abstract: In *Philosophizing the Indefensible* Shmuel Nili proposes *strategic political theory* as a productive and respectful manner for political philosophy to engage with unreasonable political views. One objection to his proposal he considers is that strategic political theory gives 'excessive attention' to unreasonable views. In this paper I offer a perspective on this objection which Nili does not consider and which, I believe, has important consequences for his account. The strategic theorist pays engaged and respectful attention to unreasonable views for the sake of showing respect and upholding ties of civic friendship with unreasonable citizens. Yet such attention might inadvertently disrespect and damage ties of civic friendship with those disadvantaged by the indefensible policies of the unreasonable. I consider how this consideration bears on Nili's argument for strategic theorizing based on the practical necessity to alleviate what he calls 'the burdens of politics'.

Keywords: unreasonableness; democracy; civic friendship; attention

We live in times of ascendant *unreasonable* politics. Indefensible policies, i.e., political choices that cannot be defended through valid moral reasoning, justifiable only by unreasonable standards, are not only advocated by fringe groups in society, but are increasingly endorsed by those in power and shape everyday life in established democracies all around the world. For example, I struggle to find any moral principles that could justify the inhumane treatment of migrants and asylum seekers at European and American borders, anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation in the US, or Israel's treatment of civilians in its devastating war in Gaza.[1] As a political philosopher faced with this reality, I often experience a kind of paralysis. I

1 Of course, moral principles are often used to try to justify these policies, however, in my view, these justifications are simply erroneous. Even when they contain a kernel of moral truth, they tend to reflect "an entirely implausible interpretation of a central moral factor, and/or of its relationship to other central factors." (Nili 2023, 4).

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often find myself asking what, if anything, is there to say, from a philosophical viewpoint, other than that all this is simply horrible, unacceptable by any moral standard. Shmuel Nili's *Philosophizing the Indefensible* offers a unique and valuable perspective on this pressing question.

Nili's book contributes to a growing literature in political philosophy on how to respond to the challenge of advancing unreasonable politics in a democratic spirit (Badano and Nuti 2024; Lovett 2024; Talisse 2021). What distinguishes his approach most markedly is his focus not simply on the philosophical issues raised by unreasonable politics, but also on the role of political philosophers themselves in responding to it. His proposal is *strategic political theory*, i.e., engaging with the indefensible policies supported by unreasonable views by "crafting arguments against them that begin with, and that seek to systematize, unreasonable premises." (Nili 2023, 12) Strategic theorizing aims to provide a sort of 'immanent critique' of unreasonable views by showing how even by their own lights, their indefensible policies lack support.

Nili's general theory of strategic political theory as well as the particular examples he discusses, from Israeli politics through abortion and electoral choice to environmentalism, offer much insight and raise numerous intriguing questions. In this short commentary I will only focus on one issue, namely the worry that "strategic theorizing gives excessive attention to problematic views" (Nili 2023, 13). Although Nili himself addresses this worry, I think there is more to be said about it than what he covers in his discussion. While I focus on a potential objection against Nili's view, my goal is not primarily critical. Rather, it is to bring to view certain considerations that are not sufficiently addressed in his argument.

1 Paying Attention to the Unreasonable

In what sense could the strategic theorist's attention to problematic views be 'excessive'? 'Excess' can be understood in quantitative terms: if we spend too much mental effort on unreasonable views, we risk not having enough energy to engage with other important views and issues of the day. But this is a problem only if all we ever do is strategically theorize the indefensible. This is not Nili's proposal. To say that strategic theory can be an important tool for counteracting unreasonable politics is not to say that we must devote all our attention to it. This quantitative worry, then, is not an objection against strategic theorizing as such.

More plausibly, the objection is not that the attention the strategic theorist pays to unreasonable views is too much but that it is the *wrong kind*; it is in some way unfitting or inappropriate. Strategic theorizing involves what Nili calls "worldviewing" (Nili 2023, 17). Worldviewing consists in the reconstruction of another's outlook as a moral and political perspective on the world based on –

perhaps not reasonable, but – sincere and reflective commitments which an agent of basic integrity could endorse. Such worldviewing tries to present the unreasonable not as mindless slaves to their hateful passions, but as serious persons to be understood and engaged with. The attention the strategic theorist pays to unreasonable views, and the people that hold them is thus not fleeting and superficial but engaged and respectful. It aims not merely at gathering information about the unreasonable, as military intelligence gathers information about the enemy, but at a deeper form of understanding or *Verstehen* (Hannon 2020).

The worry, then, is that such engaged and respectful attention to the unreasonable is inappropriate or unfitting. The unreasonable by definition cannot be reasoned with; they fail adequately to respond to reason (Nili 2023, 3). Trying to engage with them as though they had a coherent and intellectually respectable outlook on the world is at best disingenuous, at worst dangerous, for we might end up proposing plausible-sounding justifications for policies and principles which are, in fact, unjustifiable, and which we ought to oppose rather than support. Nili's response is twofold: first, we owe worldviewing to the unreasonable as a matter of respect to them as fellow members of the polity and civic friends.

Treating fellow citizens as agents of basic integrity is a fundamentally important form of respect and an essential part of civic friendship, i.e., the kind of relationship that ought to obtain between fellow members of a democratic polity. Civic friends owe it to one another to treat each other's basic moral and political commitments as parts of such worldviews. The unreasonable may have abandoned the realm of reasonable discussion, but they remain fellow members of the polity, citizens with whom we must lead a shared life together in a common political world. If we aspire to preserving a democratic way of life, this shared life must be based not on permanent antagonism but mutual respect and civic friendship; we must, therefore, engage in worldviewing with the unreasonable. Call this the *Argument from Civic Friendship*.

Nili acknowledges that the demands of civic friendship are not limitless. He distinguishes between *repugnant* and *non-repugnant* unreasonable views, the former violating such fundamental moral principles, e.g., about basic human equality, that respectful engagement with them itself becomes morally problematic. Strategic theorizing about repugnant unreasonable, e.g., white supremacist, views, therefore, is neither required nor, as a rule, permissible. This is because, first, the repugnantly unreasonable are beyond the *bounds of civic friendship*. Given their abhorrent views, civic friendship is no longer possible with the repugnantly unreasonable, thus the requirements of civic friendship, including worldviewing, no longer apply. Secondly, serious engagement with repugnant views entails a risk of *self-tainting*. "At a certain point, seeing the world through the eyes of the repugnant means *becoming* the repugnant and thus betraying ourselves in a real, albeit limited way."

(Nili 2023, 25; cf. Morton 2011) However, no such objection is forthcoming against non-repugnantly unreasonable views; they are within the bounds of civic friendship and engagement with them does not entail any serious risk of self-tainting.

The other reason why Nili thinks strategic political theory does not give excessive attention to unreasonable views is that this attention is justified by certain practical considerations. These practical considerations have to do with what Nili calls "the burdens of politics". This term refers "to *self-reinforcing political dynamics which impede decent people's moral reasoning about specific areas of public policy*" (Nili 2023, 29). Strategic theorizing is meant to break, or at least contribute to breaking, these pernicious political dynamics that trap decent people in unreasonable outlooks, thus paving "the way towards a public sphere in which it is easier to reason from better premises" (Nili 2023, 7). This goal justifies strategically theorizing unreasonable views. Indeed, Nili goes so far as to claim that the burdens of politics may even justify strategically theorizing repugnant views if certain conditions – one of which I will discuss later – are met. Call this the *Argument from the Burdens of Politics*. In the following I want to put pressure on both arguments.

2 The Argument from Civic Friendship

Let me begin with the Argument from Civic Friendship. This argument rests on the claim that the objections against strategically theorizing repugnantly unreasonable views do not apply to non-repugnantly unreasonable views; the latter are safe to theorize. However, there is a further objection which Nili does not consider, and which applies to both repugnant and non-repugnant unreasonable views. Consider the following example of ordinary friendship.

> *Abuse*. Your friends Abigail and Bob get romantically involved, but as it turns out, Bob is an abuser. He fails to treat Abigail with basic human decency and regularly inflicts psychological and physical harm on her.

Ordinarily, one can expect that their friends pay engaged and respectful attention to them when they come to talk to them about serious matters. But in *Abuse* one can rightly object to paying such attention to Bob. Why? It would be natural to invoke considerations analogous to the bounds of civic friendship and self-tainting. Perhaps you should stop being friends with such an awful person to begin with. Moreover, too much understanding toward his abusive behaviour risks making yourself objectionably prone to or at least forgiving of abuse. But there is a further objection to be raised here. It would be wrongful *to Abigail* if you were to show understanding and empathy to Bob. It seems to me that Abigail would rightly take offence if the stance you took toward Bob were that of respectful understanding or

empathy. Even if the intent is not to excuse or minimize Bob's wrongdoing, treating Abigail's abuser as someone to be understood, rather than as someone to be condemned or blamed seems to fail to adequately respond to the demands of friendship between you and Abigail. Something similar applies in the case of civic friendship as well.

Nili seems somewhat attuned to these kinds of considerations. As said, he proposes that the burdens of politics may justify strategically theorizing repugnantly unreasonable views under certain conditions. One of the conditions is that "the strategic use of the relevant repugnant premises is endorsed in some clear way by actors who can credibly claim to speak on behalf of those segments of the population who are the primary targets of the repugnant attitudes that these premises express." (Nili 2023, 37) The reason presumably is that absent such a permission from those targeted by repugnant views, a stance of respectful understanding to such views would convey, if not a tacit endorsement of, at least an objectionable kind of openness to the repugnant perspective including its dehumanization of the targeted group. The worry here is not self-tainting or upholding civic friendship beyond its proper bounds. The worry is that respectful understanding toward some can be wrongful and disrespectful to others.

However, I think this worry applies to non-repugnantly unreasonable views as well. Consider the following example:

> *Bad friend*. You, Anna, and Brett are friends. Anna is a good friend both to you and Brett; she keeps her promises, helps you when in need, and always listens to you. Brett is a bad friend; he is unreasonably concerned with his looks, he spends too much time buying clothes, and as a result, he regularly fails to keep his promises to Anna, fails to help her when in need, or even listen to her.

Brett's behaviour and outlook in *Bad friend* is not 'repugnant' – in the way Bob's is in *Abuse* – but, in light of the normative demands of friendship, it is still unreasonable, and his 'policy' concerning his friendship with Anna is 'indefensible.' Here too Anna would rightly take offence if you were to take a stance of respectful understanding toward Brett. Say, you were to engage in something analogous to strategic theorizing. For example, you tried to show that even if we accept Brett's unreasonable premise that looks matters more than friendship, Brett has reasons to abandon his 'indefensible policy' of being a bad friend to Anna, for if he treats her in a respectful and friendly way, she will be willing to help him with picking out clothes and improve his looks. Anna would rightly object to this kind of 'strategic theorizing.' She would rightly claim that if you were to propose this 'strategic theory' you would fail to be fully respectful to her. You should not propose to anyone to treat Anna as a mere means of improving their looks. This is no way to treat a friend. What Anna rightly expects from you in this situation is to affirm her

standing as a person with dignity to whom respectful treatment is owed. This case, of course, is but a caricature of Nili's deep and thoughtful account. Still, it points to something important.

The indefensible policies both of the repugnantly and non-repugnantly unreasonable impose considerable burdens on fellow citizens. In the case of repugnant views, these burdens are extremely severe, tantamount to dehumanizing and worse. But even though non-repugnantly unreasonable views often do not directly target individuals and groups for violence and dehumanization, they nonetheless support policies that put indefensible, unjustifiable, perhaps even outright unjust burdens on fellow citizens. I see no reason why those individuals and groups that are unjustly disadvantaged by indefensible policies could not claim that strategically theorizing the unreasonable views that support such policies fails to show them the respect civic friendship demands.

One might think we face a kind of dilemma here: civic friendship demands, on the one hand, respectful engagement even with the unreasonable. At the same time, it might also demand refusing such engagement as a matter of respect to those unjustly disadvantaged by indefensible policies. But going a step further, one might ask, how much of a dilemma this really is. After all, who has the stronger claim to being treated respectfully as a civic friend? Those who are unjustly disadvantaged by indefensible policies or those who, against reason, promote these policies? Don't the unreasonable forfeit at least some claims to respectful engagement by abandoning the realm of reasonable debate (Lovett 2023)?

In a case like *Bad friend* don't the demands of friendship require that we simply take Anna's side? Perhaps not; my intuitions are somewhat unstable on this case, and there is room for reasonable disagreement. And in any case, there is a limit to how much the lessons from interpersonal friendship can be applied to politics. Still, these considerations at least put pressure on the Argument from Civic Friendship. They show that it is at least somewhat unclear what civic friendship demands in response to unreasonable politics. Thus, it is far from certain that civic friendship mandates or even permits strategic theorizing even with non-repugnantly unreasonable views.

3 The Argument from the Burdens of Politics

But what about the burdens of politics? Even if civic friendship alone does not justify strategic theorizing, the need to alleviate the burdens of politics, according to Nili, does. Is this right? To restate the argument: unreasonable views and indefensible policies are often produced by pernicious political dynamics that obscure the moral vision of decent people and thereby reproduce unreasonable views.

Strategic theorizing does not target these views directly; rather, it is meant to produce better policies which transform political background conditions and thereby eliminate or weaken the dynamics that produce unreasonable views. Over time this contributes to restoring democratic politics premised on reasonable discussion and mutual respect. One might say, then, in response to my previous discussion that even if strategic theorizing involves some disrespect to those unjustly disadvantaged by indefensible policies, its ability to restore, or contribute to restoring, the proper functioning of democratic politics justifies it. After all, restoring functioning democracy is in the interest even of those disadvantaged by indefensible policies.

There are several things to be said about this argument. First, it only applies when unreasonable views are in fact produced by the burdens of politics, i.e., pernicious political dynamics that impede moral reasoning. This need not always be the case; sometimes unreasonable views are produced and perpetuated by political dynamics we have reason to value and support. This seems to be the case, for example, with reactionary *backlash* against progressive social change. To take an example that Nili discusses, the contemporary anti-abortion movement in the US emerged as a reaction to women's greater access to reproductive healthcare in the second half of the twentieth century. These political dynamics contribute to reproducing unreasonable views, but not by way of impeding the moral reasoning of anti-abortionists. To the contrary, they seem to make the relevant moral reasons, e.g., about bodily autonomy or the social subordination of women under patriarchy, more salient. It is hard to see, then, to what extent anti-abortionists, to the extent they are unreasonable, are victims of the burdens of politics. And if they are not, do we owe it to them to try to engage in worldviewing with them, especially if, as I suggested, this might mean failing fully to respect as civic friends all those women who, due to anti-abortionists' indefensible policies, have lost access to reproductive healthcare? I am unsure if the Argument from the Burdens of Politics manages to establish this.

But even in cases where the Argument from the Burdens of Politics properly applies, further questions can be raised. For example, is strategic theorizing the only or the best way to alleviate the burdens of politics? Is there no other strategy that is at least as likely to achieve the same outcome without disrespecting the victims of indefensible policies? If there is, perhaps we should abstain from strategically theorizing unreasonable views after all. But suppose strategic theorizing is our best chance at counteracting unreasonable politics and restoring a public sphere of reasonable discussion. Do these unquestionably good ends justify the means? Is restoring a public sphere of reasonable discussion, or democratic normalcy more generally what we should value most?

Nili suggests that thinking otherwise is "a purist insistence on arguing solely from blemish-free premises" (Nili 2023, 36–7). But I am not sure. Consider, again, our

simple example of *Bad friend*. Suppose I were to say to Anna: "I know that the strategic theory I present to Brett disrespects you; it proposes not to treat you respectfully but to use you as a mere means to improve his looks. This is bad. But, you see, Brett is, in fact, a decent person caught up in self-reinforcing social dynamics that impede his moral reasoning. He spends most of his time in a social environment where looks are overvalued, and he is pressured to adopt these social norms. My strategic theory can get him to adopt better policies toward you; he will start keeping his promises and spend more time with you. As a result, he will gradually get in a better position to appreciate the value of friendship, and over time our friend group will become fully functional again. Isn't it worth it?" I'm not sure what Anna should say. She could respond that a friendship achieved through such means is in some way tainted; even if the resulting friendship is otherwise perfect, the disrespect Anna must endure to achieve it undermines its value. Perhaps it would be better for her to have an imperfect friendship where Brett remains a bad friend to her, but at least you fully respect her.

But, of course, politics is not friendship. Imperfect friendship may be unpleasant, but imperfect politics endangers life and liberty. Good politics and a functioning democracy should be among our supreme goals. However, Nili's argument is not fully consequentialist; he recognizes that the way in which we pursue our goals matter. Democratic values, such as civic friendship, constrain the set of permissible means through which democratic goals, e.g., the alleviation of the burdens of politics, may be pursued. And perhaps sometimes civic friendship toward the victims of indefensible policies might demand not to pay attention to the unreasonable, or at least not to pay the kind of engaged and respectful attention that strategic theorizing requires, even in the case of non-repugnant unreasonable views and even when this would be necessary for alleviating the burdens of politics. This latter possibility should be taken seriously.

4 Conclusion: The Political Ethics of Attention

My goal in this paper is not to reject Nili's approach. His project rests on a deep and important insight about democratic politics. In democratic life we must leave space for compassionately acknowledging one another's fallibility and limitations as moral reasoners. But fallacious moral reasoning in the political realm leads not only to error but to injustice and suffering. And we must take account of the fact that victims of this injustice and suffering may rightly be uneasy with the compassionate attention we pay to those unreasonable agents that inflict these harms and wrongs on them. This does not necessarily mean that we ought not to engage in strategic political theory. It could mean that – as with strategically theorizing

repugnant views – we ought to acquire the permission of those disadvantaged by indefensible politics. Or perhaps we should say that – again similarly to the case of repugnant views – strategically theorizing unreasonable views in general may be "all-things-considered justified," however, it nonetheless leaves "a genuine moral remainder" (Nili 2023, 26). For example, if we do strategically theorize the indefensible, we might incur duties to also engage in worldviewing with the victims of the unreasonable as well. This seems all the more important given that these victims are often marginalized groups whose perspective frequently remains obscure or outright invisible in mainstream public discussions. This leads us back to worries about the distribution of our political attention. The larger lesson to draw from this discussion, perhaps, is that upholding the ties of civic friendship requires not only engaging in worldviewing and respectful discussion with fellow citizens, but also maintaining a healthy economy of attention where we try to give our fellow citizens the amount and kind of attention they are owed. Strategic political theory, its potential benefits notwithstanding, can make this harder.

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