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Commentary on Rania Elnakkouzi, “Legitimizing Past Actions Through Appeals to Moral Values”

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Elnakkouzi’s paper is divided into two parts: an overview of the literature on moral-political argumentation relevant to the empirical case study and the empirical case study itself: Nasrallah’s retroactive justification for kidnapping two Israeli soldiers in the face of criticism that Hezbollah’s action brought disaster to Lebanon. Both are models of economy and clarity and I have no objections to raise in relation to what is argued or the formal means through which the argument is articulated. What I would like to do is to think, along the lines of argument laid out in the paper, beyond what the paper itself says, extending its conceptual and political trajectory beyond where it itself goes. I think that the most interesting philosophical problems arise just beyond the limits of the explicit claims that the paper makes.

Elnakkouzi is interested in the problem of how past events can be retroactively justified through moral-political argumentation. The author grounds the empirical analysis and argument in a concise but informative survey of the relevant literature in the theory of argumentation. There is nothing to be gained from repeating the author’s analysis, so I will proceed straightway to the philosophical problems that I think the application of this material to the case study raises.

The basic problem raised by the case study concerns how moral-political argument can justify a past action in light of the criticism that since the results were bad the action was wrong. Nasrallah faced the problem of having to defend himself from criticisms that the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers was morally unjustified because it unleashed the full might of the Israeli armed forces against Lebanon. The facts on the ground—the widespread death and destruction caused by the war—seem incontestable, so the basic argumentative problem Nasrallah faced was: what counter-considerations could he articulate that would normatively outweigh the loss of life and material destruction.

This problem is pervasive in political life. Given the fact that the future is uncertain, expectations can often be disconfirmed by subsequent events, giving rise to the possibility of the criticism that whatever reasons were cited at the moment of action were the wrong reasons. Critics, with the benefit of hindsight, can always argue either that the actor should have known that the disastrous outcome was likely, or, if not, that they should have been more cautious in light of their ignorance of the implications of the decision. The agent who made the decision seems always at a disadvantage, both because they took the decision (and are thus the responsible party) and because they are being evaluated in light of information they did not possess at the moment the decision was taken. Still, the burden of proof falls on the agent to find some grounds for justifying the action whose outcome is now attacked as catastrophic.

In the particular case at issue here I think the first point that needs to be raised is the importance, for those of us in the West—who are fed a steady diet of claims that politics in the Middle East is irrational and that Hezbollah in particular is a group of mad terrorists, to hear an analysis which reveals that there are political *arguments* at work in Lebanon (and by extension the wider Middle East). Nothing is to be gained from demonization, and so the theory of argumentation reveals its practical significance here. Even if one disagrees with Hezbollah’s tactics and

conclusions, recognizing that there are arguments and reasons that back them up creates a space for possible understanding and critical dialogue. At the same time, the paper emphasises the need for political argument to be as sound as possible. When political decisions are made, real people can benefit—or be destroyed.

Whatever anyone happens to think about Hezbollah as a movement, the paper at least reveals that they do think about what they do and are willing to assume the burdens of argument in an attempt to justify their tactics. These justifications are typical of resistance movements secular or religious and comprise an argument of the following form: the goal is everything, whatever destruction of life ensues in the pursuit of the goal is justified as instrumentally necessary to achieve the goal; all criticism to the effect that the sacrifice is too much is a betrayal of the cause, and therefore critics are always wrong, because they betray the end, which is everything. Whether this argument is good or not, it is an argument, and the one that Nasrallah in fact mounted in response to his critics.

Here is the first interesting philosophical question from my perspective: to what extent are ultimate value commitments revisable in light of counter-argument? What I mean is the following: presumably Hezbollah's opponents have heard similar arguments before, and will not be persuaded that *no* sacrifice is too great. No doubt Hezbollah too has heard the criticisms, and will not revise its values in light of the criticism. Does this seemingly unresolvable clash of value-perspectives mean that both sides are closed to argument because they are dogmatic? Or does it mean that at a certain point in political life enough arguments have been heard, a principle stand is taken, and only something extraordinary will cause parties to move off their principles?

I will not venture an answer of my own (I think it is the job of the commentator to raise questions and not give a counter-paper). I will say, however, that the problem reveals an historical dimension to political argument that it is always necessary to uncover and mention. Just because a party appears closed to argument does not mean that they are necessarily closed and dogmatic: it could be that they have heard the arguments before, found them wanting in the past, and decided that they need not pay them any more heed in the future. Having a principled political stance means that one is not obliged to yield to just any criticism that an opponent makes if a similar argument has already been made and rejected (on reasonable grounds).

This issue for the theory of argumentation points concerns the grounds and rationality of ultimate moral and political principles. Parties can hold on to principles even in light of seemingly very strong counter-arguments (Hezbollah should not have kidnapped the soldiers because now much of southern Lebanon is in ruins) because value commitments of these life-defining sorts arise not from arguments but from identification with a cause judged of ultimate importance. These forms of identification I think arise from experience and not instrumental argumentation. Experiences can be of many sorts: one witnesses an atrocity and commits oneself to opposing the group that committed it; one grows up in a community which has been historically oppressed and is socialized into the cause, etc. Criticisms such as those raised by Hezbollah's opponents are unlikely to sway Hezbollah's cadre. If the end is judged supreme then criticisms from those suspected of not sufficiently valuing the end that this or that tactic was wrong will not convince adherents of the movement. I doubt anyone quit Hezbollah because of the Israeli actions. More likely they were confirmed in their beliefs. I do not think the superior power of experience in this regard means that ultimate value commitments are irrational, but it would take me too far afield to explain that point, so I will leave it for another occasion.

I want to close rather with a question for argumentation theory. Does it sufficiently account for the rationality of the holding of ultimate value commitments? If they are, in a sense, beyond

argument from the standpoint of their adherents does this mean that the adherent's dialectical obligations are ignored? Or does it mean that they are discharged in a different way: positive defence through re-iteration of the sanctity of those commitments and a counter-critique of critics as traitors to the cause or fair-weather friends. Those arguments are ubiquitous and seem inevitable in political life, but one might suspect them of not being arguments (but rather ideological deflections of argument). That seems to me to miss a crucial difference between ultimate values and instrumental values: since the former cannot be given up without undermining one's moral and political identity, most political criticisms (which rely on a critique of the values because of the bad results a particular attempt to realise them caused) will not be convincing to the adherent. And, I will suggest in conclusion, if there are to be principles and ultimate value commitments, nor should such criticisms be convincing. Whether that position is rationally justified will have to remain an open question today.