
Review

State violence and moral horror

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State Violence and Moral Horror is a work of political theory that is both compelling and frustrating. Combining provocative insights and strong readings of complex theories (for example, Jean Luc Nancy's thought on singularity) with accounts of common topics in contemporary political theory (for example, the 'paradox of politics'), Arnold's volume attempts to revisit the relationship between political violence and moral justification by affirming a radical position on violence and offering a new perspective on ethics and politics. The compelling part of Arnold's study is the radical claim he advances: there is never any possible moral justification for state violence. Moreover, any attempt at deploying a justificatory logic for acts of violence is itself violence. The more frustrating part of Arnold's study has to do with the concept of 'moral horror'. While this is an intriguing concept that enables him to engage important theoretical literatures, it is unfortunately not as carefully developed as it could be. 'Moral horror' is the condition that we, humans, face when we realize that, despite all possible moral justifications, state violence can never be sanctioned or accepted, and yet, this violence is often excused or justified, and this justification morally implicates us all.

Key to this volume's central claims is Nancy's philosophy of the singular plural (or his concept of singularity, more generally). To Arnold, Nancy's singularity is what is threatened by acts of violence, including state violence. Singularity is the main guarantee – and the foundation – for political and ethical life. Derived from Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (p. 55), singularity is a 'primordial mode of being' (p. 63) that is always open to other beings. Singular being is being-always-with-others. It is about sharing being. To allow singularity to thrive means always to maintain the plural in the singular, the openness of being to other and all forms of life. The violence done to singularity is the product of seeking to define, fix, or appropriate the singular, for example, by wishing to give it an identity, or by reducing it to a subject position. Thus justifications for violence, even on moral grounds, are problematic or, as Arnold would have it, conducive to moral horror.



To carry out his theoretical analysis of the impossibility of any form of justification of violence, including state violence, Arnold performs a series of readings of texts and debates that, for some, are quite familiar and, for others, are more unexpected. The first two chapters deploy rather conventional readings of what are probably some of the better-known topics showcased in the volume. While the readings there are interesting, they do not offer much in terms of new insights. Chapter 1 tackles philosophical anarchism and, in particular, the thought of A. John Simmons which offers justifications for the use of violence (particularly the violence of the law). Chapter 2, via arguments previously advanced by Jacques Derrida, William Connolly, and Bonnie Honig, re-reads Rousseau's *On the Social Contract* to examine the 'paradox of politics'. It reveals that, important to contemporary political theorizing as the concept may be, the above-mentioned proponents of this perspective fail to address the question of state violence and its justification.

The study takes off with chapter 3, in which Arnold provides a convincing reading of Nancy's theory of singularity, detailing its important connections to Heidegger's philosophy. Once again, Nancy's singularity is key to Arnold's argument about the impossibility of morally justifying state violence. Tackling what is often a complex set of arguments about ontology, singularity, and plurality, Arnold's exegetic approach to Nancy's work is excellent. One does not need to agree with Arnold's argument about state violence to appreciate the significance of his reading of Nancy. Arnold finds in Nancy's singularity the necessary foundation for his views on the impossibility of justification of state violence and moral horror, views he goes on to detail in the next two chapters.

While chapter 4 does a fine job demonstrating that state violence inevitably targets singularity and that efforts to justify violence are themselves causes for further injury, it also leaves several questions unanswered. First, there is an assumption that acts of state violence are primarily instances of 'physical injury or physical impingements of liberty' (p. 77). The injury perpetrated onto singularity by the state is thought to be physical, but Arnold is never very specific about this claim. Concrete illustrations of practices of physical injury through acts of state violence, in this chapter at least, are generally lacking. More crucially perhaps, it is never too clear how injurious attempts at justifying acts of state violence are 'physical violence'. One is left to wonder if and how certain moral arguments in defense of physical acts of violence remain part of state violence if, as the author maintains, all state violence is 'a subset of physically violent acts' (p. 89) and if moral justifications for state-led injuries onto singular beings are themselves not always physical (since their violence seems to reside in their acquiescence of physical acts of violence by the state, not in their direct use of physical injury). Second, one may wonder if the overall focus of the book is not starting to shift a bit as a result of what is being argued here. Whereas the volume started with the claim that it is never possible to justify state violence, the argument now seems to be



centered on the importance of demonstrating that ‘justifications themselves can injure’ (p. 87). Thus, the crux of the study becomes for Arnold to show that violence harms singular beings ‘in the course of morally justifying physical violence’ (p. 87). My point here is not to deny the importance of this demonstration, but rather to suggest that, as the volume unfolds, its main focus is less on state violence and more on what, once again, seems to be a different kind of violence, one that is perhaps just as crucial to the state and pervasive (albeit not necessarily physical), and that one might call exculpatory violence.

The culmination of the study is the concept of moral horror, developed in chapter 5. For Arnold, moral horror is ‘the experience of horror produced by the thought of the contradiction between the unjustifiable violence of the state enacted in individuals and my willingness to let that violence continue’ (p. 102). The evocation of horror in this context is both intriguing and perplexing. Suggesting that the concept of horror may offer new insights into debates on violence, justification, and morality is a daring move that could lead to novel critical possibilities for political theory. Arnold relies primarily on writings by Stanley Cavell on horror, and secondarily by Adriana Cavarero on horrorism. Central to the author’s argument is a distinction between what Arnold calls ‘moral horror’ and ‘aesthetic horror’. For Arnold, moral horror functions as a corrective tool with regards to aesthetic horror (which Arnold associates with Cavarero’s thought). According to the author, aesthetic horror ‘is a powerful, if limited, concept for understanding contemporary violence just as it is an important, if limited and unreliable, impetus to ethical and political action against the existence of horrifying violence in the world’ (p. 107). Allegedly, it is limited because it is understood as a descriptive response to a visual experience or to the perception of a human body (a corporeal unity) outside oneself and in the process of being undone or devastated. By contrast, moral horror is internal to the self. It is a perception ‘of oneself, of a fundamental incongruity between what one understands oneself to be and to be justified in doing and what one sees when what is seen is seen as an object of unjustifiable violence’ (p. 101).

My concern with Arnold’s moral horror is that, in an attempt to correct aesthetic horror, it turns horror into a thought process of and about the self (note in passing that much of the language about singular beings gives way to terms such as the ‘self’, ‘oneself’, or ‘humans’ in the sections on moral horror). While this take on horror may work in relation to Cavell’s thought, it excises one of the key elements of Cavarero’s horror: the fact that horror paralyzes or freezes the body/self (Cavarero, 2009, p. 7). Far from enabling reflexivity, that is to say, far from allowing the continued presence of a moral self that manages, in the face of the horrifying sight, to keep a distance necessary to think about ‘the contradiction between the unjustifiable violence of the state... and my willingness to let that violence continue’ (p. 102), horror leaves no room for thinking or comprehension. Horror is not a capacity the self possesses. Rather, horror is what possesses the self



to the point of its perdition, and the sight of a devastated body is what draws the self towards this total undoing of bodily unities. Thus, following Cavarero and others (Kristeva, Agamben), who have written about horror, one might say that horror is antithetical to any form of singularity. This is a perspective that Arnold is unable to accept. Instead of carefully engaging Cavarero's take on horror, Arnold carves out a new form of horror, a so-called moral horror which, he insists, 'must be produced by acts of thought, or it will not emerge' (p. 119). Yet, such a moral horror actually conjures away horrorist (or 'aesthetic') perspectives so that the realization that 'I am a monster' (p. 123) may remain (and crucially here, it is the 'I' more than the 'monster' that must remain, and this 'I' that remains must retain a capacity for moral reflection). Thus, while the call offered by Arnold towards the end of the volume to embrace (moral) horror is provocative, it is undercut by the fact that this horror is to remain subordinated to human necessities (even if he rephrases them as human/animal or monstrous necessities), to a sense of self that is said to react in horror to the moral dilemma, or to a hope that this so-called horror 'may open a realm of experience and relation in and within the materiality of our lives that was hitherto closed off' (p. 131).

Reference

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