

Kevin Vallier, *Must Politics be War?: Restoring Our Trust in the Open Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 256 pages. ISBN: 9780190632830. Hardback: \$85.

A society exhibits *social trust* to the extent that its members generally believe each other to be cooperative and willing to comply with shared rules, not merely out of self-interest, but for moral reasons (36). Social trust is extremely valuable. When a high degree of it is rationally justified, society enjoys a state of *moral peace* that yields great fruits of social cooperation (49-53), facilitates interpersonal relationships (54-58), and enables individuals to treat each other with respect (75). But such trust is difficult to maintain in diverse societies such as contemporary America, where well-informed and good-willed individuals rationally arrive at different conclusions about morality, yet tend to see those who disagree with them as “cognitively and morally flawed” and so as untrustworthy (20). And once trust breaks down, politics becomes an all-too-familiar state of war: a struggle for power “where hostilities cease solely because the parties at war cannot conquer the other” (43). But need things be this way? Is moral peace impossible? Or can diverse populations rationally sustain social trust, their disagreements notwithstanding?

So asks Kevin Vallier, in his timely and ambitious new book, *Must Politics be War?* The book is divided in two parts, each of which provides a component of Vallier’s answer. In chapter 1 and parts of chapter 2, Vallier draws on philosophical and empirical literature to develop an account of social trust, elucidate its value, and explain the challenge of sustaining it in diverse societies along lines sketched above. In the remainder of chapter 2, Vallier argues that social trust can be rationally maintained only by moral rules that meet a *public justification requirement*—that is, by socially embedded moral norms that each can endorse from her own moral perspective. The final chapter of Part I, chapter 3, fleshes out this requirement. Taking inspiration from Gerald Gaus’s *The Order of Public Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Vallier’s key idea is that a moral prohibition is publicly justified when each would regard it as morally preferable to its absence if she were “moderately idealized” in a sense I will return to shortly.

The upshot of part I, then, is that moral peace requires publicly justified moral rules. But as Vallier argues in Part II, this is not enough, because publicly justified *laws* are also needed to facilitate the alteration, interpretation, and enforcement of moral rules (chapter 4). From here, Vallier outlines a three-step procedure for publicly justifying *constitutional rules* that are in turn needed to govern the imposition and alteration of laws. The first is to identify a publicly justified scheme of “primary rights” (chapter 5). The second is to identify constitutional rules that protect these rights and tend to produce publicly justified laws; the third to ensure that such rules are stable in the right sorts of ways (chapter 6). Finally, Vallier employs this procedure to argue that only constitutions that protect familiar liberal rights are publicly justified (chapter 7). Only liberalism, he concludes, can prevent politics from being war.

There is much to like about this book. It makes a strong case that political philosophers should be paying far more attention to social trust. And it does an outstanding job defending a Gaussian theory of “convergence” public reason liberalism (on which rules are justified when each individual accepts them for her own reasons) against both critics of public reason liberalism and “consensus” public reason theorists

who stick closer to Rawlsian orthodoxy (on which rules must be justified to all for the same reasons). Vallier's central argument often leads him in surprising directions: from the nature and value of love (54-56) to public choice models of constitutional choice (177-185). But he never shies away from these topics, and approaches each with the same lucidity and rigor. Vallier has clearly done his homework. From cover to cover, *Must Politics be War?* is a well-researched and meticulously argued work that seamlessly blends together an impressive range of literatures. One comes away from it having learned a whole lot, and with some serious food for thought.

In all of these ways, this is an important book, and one I expect to make a lasting impact. But though Vallier is certainly onto something, in the end, I find myself unpersuaded both by his claim to ground a public justification requirement in social trust, and by the details of his argument that liberalism is publicly justified. In the remainder of this review, I take up each issue in turn.

Vallier's core argument that public justification bears some connection to social trust is undeniable. Social trust involves a belief that others will generally comply with shared rules for moral reasons. This trust can be rationally sustained, Vallier plausibly claims, only by individuals in fact complying with such rules for moral reasons (60). But individuals can only comply with rules *for moral reasons* if these rules are justified to them in light of their own moral convictions. So, everything else being equal, publicly justified rules promote moral compliance, and therefore sustain social trust, better than publicly unjustified ones.

The trouble is that things are not always equal, and that social trust may therefore both conceptually and empirically diverge from public justification. Conceptually, for example, suppose an extant rule prohibits and effectively prevents the use of some recreational drug. If many believe the drug to be morally corrupting, and so would not trust others to act morally if the prohibition were lifted, then abolishing the rule may reduce social trust—even if it is publicly unjustified because rejected by others. And empirically, one robust finding is that while ethnic diversity per se does not reduce social trust, ethnic segregation does (e.g., Ryan Enos, *The Space Between Us*, Cambridge University Press, 2017). Policies that reduce segregation may therefore promote social trust even if they are publicly unjustified, perhaps because they violate some individuals' convictions that policies must be "color-blind." So social trust and public justification sometimes come apart, and Vallier cannot defend his view that we should abolish any rule that fails a public justification test, and enact only those that pass it, by claiming that this always promotes social trust (119). At best, he may argue that publicly unjustified rules do not "sustain social trust in the right way" (77), since holding individuals accountable to them manifests unacceptable disrespect (69-72). But then Vallier's public justification requirement turns out to be grounded in a contentious understanding of what respect requires "[w]ithin a system of social trust" (72), rather than in the more widely recognizable value of social trust itself. And we have not found a new foundation for public justification in social trust after all.

Let me now turn to Vallier's argument from public justification to liberalism. Vallier holds that rules are publicly justified not when individuals presently endorse them, but when they would endorse them if "moderately idealized" so that they accepted everything they would accept after the modest amount of reflection we can expect of "ordinary persons" (98). He defends this idealization by arguing that whereas more

radically idealized public justification tests that appeal to what “fully rational” (101) individuals would accept yield verdicts “too far removed from ordinary agents’ concerns” (100), his own requirement sidesteps this criticism. When a rule is justified to all moderately idealized individuals, after all, this “guarantees” that any “real person will, on reflection, find no reason to reject [it]” (104).

Vallier provides a compelling defense of moderate idealization. The problem is that, in the course of defending liberalism, he smuggles in a substantially more radical idealization than he lets on. In particular, Vallier’s argument crucially relies on the idea that individuals would accept liberalism from behind a “thin veil of ignorance” that deprives them of knowledge about the proportion and standing of those who share their moral views (167). But though Vallier claims that this veil serves merely as a “heuristic” for discovering what moderately idealized individuals would accept (166), this appears inconsistent with the moderate idealization he defends, since “ordinary persons” may be unable to reason in the impartial manner the veil forces upon them. For example, Vallier claims that even nonliberals behind the veil would accept “extensive, equal” liberal rights because “they prefer to be protected in living out their doctrines and ideals rather than betting on being” the dominant group (200). But dominant nonliberals in the real world may very well fail to reach this conclusion through the modest amount of reflection we can expect of them, since, as Vallier admits, moral reasoning is often biased by self-interest and existing power relations (107-108). And Vallier’s argument that anyone behind the veil would endorse liberalism therefore cannot establish that liberalism is publicly justified to all moderately idealized individuals—at least given his own account of moderate idealization.

So Vallier’s attempt to ground public reason liberalism in social trust faces some challenges. But none of this diminishes the value of this book, nor does it mean that some version of Vallier’s argument that liberalism uniquely sustains moral peace cannot be made to work. Throughout *Must Politics Be War?*, Vallier lays a number of promissory notes about topics he will expand upon in a sequel that empirically examines the ability of liberal institutions to sustain social trust in the real world. We should all look forward to such further developments of Vallier’s project, and can all trust him not to disappoint.<sup>1</sup>

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