

CAN A GOOD CHRISTIAN BE A GOOD LIBERAL?

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“Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword.”—John 18:11

A good liberal endorses freedom from state interference and tolerance of individuals to settle on their own notions of a good worthy to guide their efforts insofar as their doing so is compatible with relative peace and social order. There are many reasons to be a good liberal. One is instrumental. Liberalism is a politics aimed at preserving in the face of value pluralism the conditions of peaceful coexistence among people who have conflicting values. Liberalism, then, is a *modus vivendi*. Liberalism might also be endorsed as a *modus vivendi* between rivals in a struggle for political power, whether it is peaceful or violent, who might wish to establish their particular comprehensive perspective on God or the good, but who instead seek compromise for fear of falling on the losing side of the struggle. So there is a pragmatic reason for liberalism. An epistemic reason for liberalism claims we lack the knowledge of which comprehensive perspective is correct, that is, most conducive to human well-being, assuming there is one. Perhaps liberalism will permit its discovery. Others claim that there is not one correct account since only a person's contingent concerns or desires ultimately ground claims about what contributes to her well-being. So liberalism is the political response to well-being subjectivity.

These reasons have not typically moved Christians to embrace political liberalism, especially those who endorse historical, biblical Christianity and regard the Bible as authoritative in all matters concerning faith and, importantly here, practice. These Christians deny well-being subjectivity; they claim to have, in the Bible, an error-free justification for regarding their comprehensive perspective on God and the good as necessary and sufficient for human well-being. As value pluralism became more widespread over the years, the instrumental and pragmatic reasons have more reliably cut ice among Christians. However, there have also been fairly predictable swerves from the *modus vivendi* when they have won the right to make public policy. Are there any reasons for a good Christian to embrace liberalism, or should she advocate the political establishment of specifi-

cally Christian belief, practice, and morality? All of the following violate God's moral law and are morally wrong, according to the Bible: lying, greed, covetousness, self-abuse, failing to observe the Sabbath, disrespecting one's parents, witchcraft, idolatry, heresy, blasphemy, bestiality, fornication, adultery, acts of homosexuality.¹ Are the state and its officers mandated by God to condemn and punish for violations of the divine ordinances still in effect today?

The Christian Reformers were nearly unanimous in their support for establishment. *The Scot's Confession* (1560), in chapter 24 on "The Civil Magistrate," reads that "The preservation and purification of religion is particularly the duty of kings, princes, rulers, and magistrates. They are not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition." In article 36 of *The Belgic Confession* (1561), there is the following claim:

[God] invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well. And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed, and the kingdom of Christ promoted.

In *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), chapter 20, the divines asserted that

for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity, whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation; or to the power of godliness; or such erroneous opinions or practices as, either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church: they may be lawfully called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the Church, *and by the power of the Civil Magistrate.*²

Further, in chapter 23:

He [the civil magistrate] hath authority, and it is his duty to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

It is worth noting that the American Presbyterians, in their 1787 Adopting Act, adopted the Westminster Standards, but they substantially altered these chapters on the civil magistrate. Most importantly, they removed from the responsibilities of the civil magistrate any duty either to discipline people for the anti-Christian opinions or practices enumerated in chapter 20, or to promote the true religion

and support the church. Moreover, they removed from Question 109 in the Larger Catechism, “What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?” the clause “tolerating a false religion.” The original Westminster Assembly considered it sinful, a violation of the second commandment, for the magistrate to permit false worship in his realm. But these later-American Presbyterians did not consider it sinful for him to permit this, and therefore removed the clause from the catechism.³ In principle, then, they did not perceive the Decalogue, at least in its entirety, as something the magistrate was obliged to enforce in his realm.

These changes made by the American Presbyterians were most directly or immediately derived from their understanding of ecclesiology.⁴ They viewed the church as a distinct social institution from the state. First, there was the concern that any ecclesiastical powers or duties conceded to government officials would disrupt and compromise the inner workings of churches. Second, they noted that the church’s call to observance appeals primarily to conscience, which in their view is unlike that of the state. They held that the state’s call to observance relies upon coercion, but that matters of conscience cannot be coerced. However, the American Presbyterians did not reject all intolerance or persecution on the part of the state concerning matters of conscience. They did not reject the enforcement by the state of every part of the moral law, only the parts that concern religious belief and practice. That is, they, like those in many other religious denominations at that time, considered it appropriate that the state tolerate heresy and idolatry, but not many of the other violations of God’s moral law.

Although this illiberal doctrine of the duty of the civil magistrate, the establishment principle, was advocated by most of the Reformers, the positions taken in their doctrinal confessions did not permit them to believe that all the civil laws of the Hebrew Republic were still binding upon any of the earthly nations. Article 25 of *The Belgic Confession* asserts that the “ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians.”⁵ *The Westminster Confession* also teaches in chapter 19 that the “sundry judicial laws,” which God gave to Israel as “a body politic,” have “expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”⁶ What is it, then, that motivates accepting the establishment principle? The doctrine is most typically a response to considerations like the following:

1. Jesus Christ is Lord in all aspects of life, including civil government. Jesus Christ is the ruler of nations.
2. The civil ruler is to be a servant of God; he derives his authority from God and he is duty-bound to govern according to the expressed will of God.
3. In his capacity as servant of God, the civil ruler is also duty-bound, according to Aquinas, “to promote the welfare of the community in such

a way that it leads fittingly to the happiness of heaven; insisting upon the performance of all that leads thereto, and forbidding, as far as is possible, whatever is inconsistent with this end.”⁷

4. The civil government of our nation, its laws, institutions, and practices must therefore be conformed to the principles of biblical law as revealed in the Old and New Testaments.⁸

Christian critics of the establishment principle have most typically attacked proposition 3, the idea that the political establishment of Christianity or Christian morality actually does lead “fittingly to the happiness of heaven.” They have claimed, then, that the establishment principle lacks the required motivation. There is simply no point to the coerced compliance with the external requirements of some of God’s moral laws. For what would it be? To change evildoers, making them righteous and deserving of heaven’s delights? But the state is only capable of changing through force and coercion the outward behavior of evildoers. This sort of change, according to the doctrines of historical, biblical Christianity, does not have that effect. What Christians call regeneration, by which sinners are changed in such a way that they respond in faith to God’s calling, is a supernatural act of God, not the result of careful statecraft. In that case, what reason does a Christian have qua Christian to be concerned about the outward behavior of evildoers? There may be reasons a Christian has qua meddling busybody to be concerned about the outward behavior of evildoers, but no specifically Christian reason to be concerned about it.

Martin Luther rejected the establishment principle partly for this sort of reason. He wrote, “Now where temporal government or law alone prevails, there sheer hypocrisy is inevitable, even though the commandments be God’s own. For without the Holy Spirit in the heart no one becomes truly righteous, no matter how fine the works he does.” And,

Christ did not wield the sword, or give it a place in his kingdom. For he is a king over Christians and rulers by his Holy Spirit alone, without law. Although he sanctions the sword, he did not make use of it, for it serves no purpose in his kingdom, in which there are none but the upright. . . . Christ, without constraint and force, without law and sword, was to have a people who would serve him willingly.⁹

Right doctrine and right practice are established and motivated not by the state, but by the Holy Spirit and the church. Sinners are converted by having their hearts pierced by the gospel, not by the sword of the temporal authority. False teaching and immorality within the church are dealt with by the church’s control over the Table and its power to excommunicate. False teaching and immorality outside the church are dealt with by persuasion and example, or the confession and witness of the church. The sort of Christian righteousness that would make someone eligible for heaven is wrought through the Holy Spirit alone, according to Luther. The civil magistrate lacks the power and ability to advance that sort of

righteousness. Surely God does not assign his servant (see proposition 2 above), the magistrate, with a duty he lacks the power and ability to discharge.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has expressed some skepticism about this criticism brought against proposition 3. Wolterstorff agrees that there are limits to the goods that can be accomplished in a person through force and coercion, especially those of the spiritual and eternal variety, but, according to him, “the state is not as hapless in this matter as the objector presents it as being; we are not confined to hanging around waiting for the Spirit to bestow on us the love of God and virtue. Such love can be cultivated—cultivated in oneself, and by oneself in others—by way of social practices, these practices typically incorporating coercion of some mode and degree.”¹⁰ In addition, then, to the confession and witness of the Holy Spirit and the church, in addition to persuasion and example, Wolterstorff thinks certain modes and degrees of coercion could be effective. Indeed, Luther never suggests Christians ought to dispense with persuasion and example because these methods are ineffective. But, given Luther’s view of the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit alone in producing true righteousness, he should not regard those methods as being any more effective than coercion “without the Holy Spirit in the heart.” It might be unseemly in some sense for the state to coerce certain varieties of Christian observance, but then object to its doing so for that reason, not for the reason that it is ineffective to produce any beneficial change.

Further, even if the use of force and coercion is ineffective in producing true righteousness in those who had previously lacked it, there might be other reasons for employing force and coercion. When John Calvin defended the execution of Michael Servetus by the political leaders of Geneva, he did not do this so much in order that Servetus and other heretics might be saved from their errors. Rather, it was to protect others from falling into those errors. Calvin wrote, “That humanity, advocated by those who are in favor of a pardon for heretics, is greater cruelty because in order to save the wolves they expose the poor sheep. I ask you, is it reasonable that heretics should be allowed to murder souls and to poison them with their false doctrine . . . ?”¹¹ A heretic leads others astray, which effects their damnation.¹² “What preposterous humanity is it,” he asks, “to cover with silence the crime of one man and to prostitute a thousand souls to the snares of Satan?”¹³ This was Aquinas’s view, as well:

In so far as heretics are concerned, there is a sin by which they not only deserve to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be separated from this world by death. It is, indeed, far more serious to pervert the faith which ensures the life of the soul than to counterfeit money which is only necessary for our temporal needs.¹⁴

So, even if the civil magistrate is incapable of producing true righteousness through the enforcement of Christian belief, practice, and morality, he still may be able to root out heresy, immorality, and their effects on others.

The duty prescribed in proposition 3 is derivative of the one prescribed in 2. That is, Aquinas believed that it is God's will for his agents on earth to govern in such a way that "leads fittingly to the happiness of heaven; insisting upon the performance of all that leads thereto, and forbidding, as far as is possible, whatever is inconsistent with this end." The duty to govern according to God's will is more fundamental. But proposition 2 supports the conclusion in 4 only if the expressed will of God is that governments, their laws, institutions, and practices conform to biblical moral law. Is it?

The argument, then, relies on something like the following:

2'. The civil magistrate holds his mandate from God, through the people, to protect and enforce Godly righteousness, and restrain and punish violations of the divine ordinances.

Is 2' true? Two passages in the Christian New Testament deal directly with the civil magistrate:

Romans 13: ¹Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. ⁴For [the civil magistrate] is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

I Peter 2: ¹⁴[The civil magistrate is] sent by [God] for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

The two passages cite the civil magistrate as God's minister and being sent by God, respectively, for the punishment of evildoers. What do "evil" and "evildoers" in these passages refer to? Violations and violators of God's moral law? The civil authority Paul and Peter refer to in these passages has to be a magistrate of the Roman Republic. Paul's letter was to the Christians in Rome; Peter's letter was to Christians in various provinces of the Roman Empire. A Roman civil magistrate would not have embraced Christianity; he would not have required such faith of the citizens he ruled; and he would not have required them to embrace or conform to any of the moral teachings uniquely specific to that faith, not even those revealed by the natural law, if there are any.¹⁵ This civil magistrate certainly did not enforce all of them. Indeed, it is likely that he did not even know what Christian faith consisted in or what its distinctive moral teachings were. If he had, it is likely that he would have regarded such faith and moral teachings with either contempt or ridicule. Yet, despite all of this, Peter says the magistrate is sent by God. Paul, who is providing a fuller, more detailed account of the func-

tion of the governing authorities and the relationship between it and Christian citizens, says in verse 1 that God has established the authorities that exist and calls Christians to submit to the Roman civil magistrate. In verse 4, Paul claims that this authority is—not “should be,” but “is”—God’s minister, literally, God’s servant, in his functioning.

Paul claims that the magistrate is God’s servant because Paul would have taken it for granted that even a godless Roman civil authority was enforcing those rules that tend to provide protection from harm to persons and their property, for example, from outward acts of violence and theft. Therefore, it is not necessary to the magistrate’s fulfilling God’s mandate for him that he establishes and enforces Christianity or a specifically Christian morality. All that is necessary is that he be “an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” The simplest way of reading this is to say, as Martin Luther did, that Paul is speaking “of external things, that they should be ordered and governed on earth.” Luther says that without this, “the world would be reduced to chaos.”

For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace. Thus does St. Paul interpret the temporal sword in Romans 13, when he says it is not a terror to good conduct but to bad. And Peter says it is for the punishment of the wicked.

According to Luther, “The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth.”¹⁶

God’s mandate to the civil authority is to provide protection from harm to persons and their worldly affairs, their projects and most central interests.¹⁷ The magistrate fulfills his God-ordained role, and acts as God’s servant, when he merely does this. Scripture does not require that governments, in order to discharge their divinely appointed task, enforce Godly righteousness, or restrain and punish behavior that violates the moral law, or even behavior known from general revelation to be moral evil, other than those evils that jeopardize the social and national peace. The orthodox Christian believer is committed to thinking that any violation of the moral law is morally wrong in as much as it is forbidden by God; but this biblical Christian is also committed to acknowledging that there is no divine mandate to coerce obedience to any of the biblical rules other than those that protect from harm a person’s life, property, and other worldly concerns. Since 2’ is false, a good Christian can be a good liberal. That is, a strict, biblically orthodox Christian can be politically liberal in the sense that she may consistently advocate freedom from state interference for individuals peacefully pursuing modes of living that answer to their own conceptions of the good.

Notice that the argument only advocates political liberalism. Theological liberalism finds no support in it. In fact, theological liberalism is inconsistent with the argument since the argument is based in the biblical doctrines of traditional,

orthodox Christianity. Church leadership within this tradition will exhort obedience to every jot and tittle of the moral law. They will not condone violations of it. They will exercise modes of discipline in order to reconcile and restore congregants caught up in sinful behavior. They will excommunicate those who remain unrepentant. However, one obvious sort of implication that can be drawn from the argument has to do with controversial issues concerning morals legislation, for example, anti-sodomy laws and laws prohibiting same-sex marriages. The doctrines of historical, biblical Christianity do not require such legislation, even if adherents of this tradition are right and homosexual activity is unequivocally forbidden by God.¹⁸

Another implication has to do with end-of-life issues in medical contexts. One thing that is very wrong about killing is that it harms the victim. It harms the victim roughly because it denies the victim the rest of the life he would have enjoyed as that person. This harm-based account provides a pretty plausible account of why killing is wrong when it is, though perhaps it does not make obvious everything about killing that figures into it being wrong. For example, Christians might complain that it is silent about our unique status as bearers of God's image. Even if that is right, Christians should think this harm-based account (or something like it) is an adequate account of what it is about killing that entitles us as a society to prohibit it. According to the proposed analysis of the biblical view of a government's responsibilities, legal prohibitions are justified when they are made with an eye toward protecting from harm our most central projects and concerns. The state has an obligation to recognize the sanctity of a person's life, property, and other worldly affairs by protecting these from harm. So, obviously, someone would not have a right to murder another. He would not, perhaps, even have a right to commit suicide simply because the way his life is going does not match his hopes and expectations. The state can legitimately prevent someone from harming his own interests. But most cases where the prospect of medical killing is raised are more difficult. On the assumption that the patient's taking steps to hasten his own death does not cause harm to him, civil authorities are not required to prevent him from doing so in order to discharge their divinely ordained functions.

An important proviso is that the argument that the doctrines of historical, biblical Christianity do not require the state to interfere with a person's working out and peacefully pursuing his conception of his good in these ways does not rule out the state interfering on some other basis. Some argue that homosexual activity presents a public health risk. Others claim that taking a permissive stance to it or providing legal recognition for unions homosexuals might like to enter into with a partner will lead to other types of social harm.¹⁹ Similarly, some argue that permitting voluntary cases of euthanasia is the beginning of a slippery slope leading to the increased likelihood that the medical killing of some patients who do not consent will become socially acceptable. If these claims are true, if the more

permissive stances toward the behaviors discussed above are dangerous to society and destructive of some of the benefits to be derived from living in a society, then perhaps the interferences would be justified. However, a great deal would depend on the scope of the putative dangers and how it compares to the dangers that could potentially result from attempts on the part of the state to root out the proscribed behaviors, or from empowering the state effectively to do so. These are probably debates worth having, and, in any case, concerns about the dangers associated with the behaviors are at least relevant to the question of whether or not the state should interfere. That the behavior is condemned by God's moral law or by general revelation is not.

Does the proposed analysis of the biblical view of a government's responsibilities support the stronger claim that a good Christian should be a good liberal? Two considerations support this stronger claim. First, Luther's position is that no greater scope beyond the protection of life, property, and external affairs is to be afforded even truly Christian government officials. The argument offered against establishment did not rely on practical concerns involving, for example, pessimism about the reliability of the civil magistrate's holiness. Pessimism about the holiness of the magistrate and the concern that he may interfere with the inner workings of churches are not the only reasons to side against establishment. Anyway, would a truly Christian government official go beyond the divinely instituted mandate for his office? This suggests the second consideration supporting the stronger claim. The illiberal establishment of Christianity or a specifically Christian morality is impermissible since it involves the state in stepping beyond its divine mandate only to punish social evildoers who disrupt the social and national peace by harming others or their property. If proposition 2 is correct—and nothing about the argument here conflicts with or undermines it—then since the magistrate has no divine authority to punish any behavior but that which is socially evil, the magistrate not only need not enforce God's moral law; he must not. It is not given him to do so.

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NOTES

This paper, though virtually none of its central argument, was partly inspired by Philip Quinn's "Can Good Christians Be Good Liberals?" which I heard him read at the *God and the Ethics of Belief* conference at Yale University in 2002, and which is now available in *God and the Ethics of Belief*, ed. A. Dole and A. Chignell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Though many who knew Professor Quinn better than I described him as both a good Christian and a good liberal, this paper does not present the existential generalization argument.

1. Many of these behaviors proscribed by the moral law—lying, greed, covetousness, self-abuse, failing to observe the Sabbath, disrespecting one’s parents, idolatry, heresy, blasphemy, and adultery—are either arguably or clearly prohibited in the Decalogue. See Exodus 20:1–17; also, Matthew 5:18–20a, Mark 7:20–23, and Colossians 3:5–6. A variety of sexual acts are forbidden in Leviticus 18. See also I Corinthians 6:9, Galatians 5:19–20, and Romans 1:26–28, 32. Witchcraft is forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:10–11 and Galatians 5:19–20.

2. Emphasis added.

3. Thanks to David Gordon for a helpful discussion about this history.

4. See Charles Hodge, *A Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1839] 1851), I, pp. 131–132.

5. Affirming this is consistent with thinking that the moral law remains legally binding on earthly nations as Article 25 speaks only to the abrogation of the ceremonial purity and dietary laws. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* goes further.

6. In the ancient Hebrew Republic, the judicial or civil law contained both the moral law and the ceremonial and dietary laws. According to Christians, the latter have been brought to an end, or perhaps better, fulfilled, through the ministry of Jesus. See Mark 7:19 and Hebrews 10:8–12. They covered aspects of the sacrificial system and mandated the methods of maintaining ritual cleanliness. They were for ritual purity, rather than ordinary moral guidance, and are thought to prefigure Christ, including his sacrifice and its effects. Even though the ancient Hebrew Republic has “expired,” we remain called to obedience by God with respect to the former, even to a more ambitious interpretation of the former. See, e.g., Matthew 5:21–30.

7. Aquinas, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. P. D’Entreves, trans. J. G. Dawson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959).

8. Propositions 1, 2, and 4 derive from “Statement of Purpose,” National Reform Association (<http://www.natreformassn.org/>).

9. Martin Luther, *On Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* (1523) (<http://www.augustana.edu/religion/lutherproject/TemporalAuthority/Temporalauthority.htm>).

10. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Do Christians Have Good Reasons for Supporting Liberal Democracy?” *The Modern Schoolman*, vol. 78, nos. 2–3, p. 241.

11. Quoted from Calvin, *A Defense of the Orthodox Faith of the Holy Trinity Against the Errors of Michael Servetus* (1554) in Joseph Lecler, S.J., *Toleration and the Reformation*, vol. 1, trans. T. L. Westow (New York: Association Press, 1960), p. 334.

12. This concern is not, despite appearances, inconsistent with Calvin’s predestination theory. Quite like the way the influence of other individuals (or perhaps even the civil magistrate) can be proximate causes for a person’s salvation, ordained ultimately by God, the influence of heretics can be proximate causes for a person’s damnation, ordained ultimately by God. According to the view, neither the heretic nor the person influenced by him is any less blameworthy for that. A possible concern that would be inconsistent with Calvin’s predestination is that a heretic may lead someone astray who had been ordained by God for salvation. Calvin, though, is not expressing that concern.

13. Quoted in Sebastian Castellio, *Concerning Heretics, Whether They Are to Be Persecuted and How They Are to Be Treated*, trans. Roland Bainton (New York: Octagon Books, 1965 [1554]), p. 203.

14. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, qu. 11, art. 3.

15. For example, Christian natural law theorists take it to be a foundational precept of natural law, publicly accessible to all rational persons, that God exists, and that we are obliged to honor and serve him. If anything is revealed by the natural law, according to the tradition, this is. See Romans 1:19–20. Even so, there were obviously no proscriptions against publicly blaspheming or mocking God in the Roman Republic.

16. Luther, *On Temporal Authority*.

17. This should not be thought to entail the thesis that the state need only enforce negative political rights of noninterference. The protection of individuals' projects and central interests may require various positive provisions.

18. See note 1.

19. See, for example, the conservative justification offered for the enforcement of traditional morality based on a social harm principle in Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), esp. chap. 1. Others are more specific than Lord Devlin. They worry that the next step in the erosion of traditional morality is reversing laws prohibiting polygamy, incest, or bestiality. John Corvino responds to the worry in "Homosexuality and the PIB Argument," *Ethics*, vol. 115, no. 3, pp. 501–534.

