

Professor Waldron Goes to Washington

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Abstract In *Torture, Terror and Trade-Offs: Philosophy for the White House* Jeremy Waldron asks how moral philosophy can illuminate real life political problems. He argues that moral philosophers should remind politicians of the importance of adhering to moral principle, and he also argues that some moral principles are absolute and exceptionless. Thus, he is very critical of those philosophers who, post 9/11, were willing to condone the use of torture. In this article I discuss and criticize Waldron's absolutism. In particular, I claim that the arguments he offers in support of it are either dependent on religious conviction or support only rule utilitarianism, not absolutism. Additionally, I argue that the character of politics is such that it is both undesirable and morally irresponsible for politicians to adopt the absolutist approach favoured by Waldron. We have reason to be glad that Professor Waldron does not go to Washington.

Keywords Absolutism · Dirty hands · Duties of office · Realism · Utilitarianism

The relationship between political philosophy and 'real world' politics has never been an easy one: it all got off to a shaky start in around 399 BCE when Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the youth and duly sentenced to death. He drank the hemlock—some say in obedience to the unjust law which had condemned him—and the scene was set for a series of sulks and squabbles that has continued, off and on, for over 2,000 years.

Of course, the precise character of the quarrel between political philosophy and politics has been different at different times, but the bone of contention has remained roughly the same through the ages, and it is that philosophers are too high-minded and unworldly to have much to contribute to the realities of political life. Moreover, when, like Socrates, they do try to contribute to political life, they almost invariably make things worse. So,

My title is borrowed from that of Frank Capra's 1939 film, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*. The film tells of the fate which befalls a young man of high ideals and firm moral principles when he enters the world of Washington politics. I hope my reasons for choosing this title will become clear as the essay progresses.

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