

# Political normativity: Exemplarity, plurality, judgment

---

 [openaccessgovernment.org/article/political-normativity-exemplarity-plurality-judgment/185763](https://openaccessgovernment.org/article/political-normativity-exemplarity-plurality-judgment/185763)

3 December 2024

## **Nicholas Poole is a PhD candidate at York University in the Program for Social and Political Thought. Here, he examines political normativity, focusing on the concepts of exemplarity, plurality, and judgment**

---

There are many sources of norms in our world. That we ought derive 4 from the addition of 2 and 2 is distinct from the 'ought' implied in our choices not to lie or steal, for instance. But while we may comfortably distinguish epistemic normativity (concerning knowledge) from moral normativity (concerning action), the question of whether politics similarly constitutes its own normative domain has occupied political philosophers for some time.

Realists have argued that politics indeed constitutes its own domain insofar as it is uniquely oriented toward the satisfaction of a distinct set of norms observable throughout the history of its practice, like order, security, and social cooperation.

Moral political philosophers, by contrast, have argued that since there are many ways of pursuing such norms, moral principles are required to orient their pursuit in the right direction.

Where both positions embrace a broad political understanding of normativity, then, the derivation of the 'ought' in each case is different: from the history of politics on the one hand, moral principles on the other.

This debate about political normativity is far from idle. Nor are its stakes strictly academic. Citizens of democracies around the world are wondering whether they can or should expect anything more from their institutions than brazen power politics, whether demagoguery and violent rhetoric should be accepted as norms in our collective lives, or whether the benefits of social cooperation should extend to all or only a few.

### **Realism, moralism and exemplarity**

---

Both positions have advantages and disadvantages. If realism has sobriety on its side, it can come close to accepting practices that our moral intuitions rightfully reel against.

If moralism seeks to honor those intuitions, it does so at the risk of drifting from the actual world we live in. My research considers a source of normativity that lies between these positions and that, I think, avoids the pitfalls at both extremes.

If realism derives its norms from what is the case, and moralism from what is ideally the case, then we would do well to consider a kind of normativity that emerges from cases that appear as they ought to be. These are exemplars: persons and events that reveal,

through very particularity, norms and possibilities that can be generalized through public endorsement and emulation.

The domain in which exemplarity is traditionally most recognizable is aesthetics, where it is common to adjectivize or generalize the names of persons and works to indicate a domain of aesthetic influence, as in 'Kafkaesque,' 'Orwellian,' or 'Impressionism.'

But politics is no different. Our language for styles and forms of government, for instance, also derives from exemplary cases, as in 'Bonapartism,' 'Trumpism,' or 'totalitarianism.' In both cases, examples are conjunctions of the order of facts and norms. They reveal possible ways of going on that emerge as sources of inspiration, not as binding rules. When confronted with an exemplary instance of justice, we are struck not so much by its accordance with a principle of justice, but by the revelation of the meaning of justice from within the act itself: 'justice is like that.'

## **Exemplarity at the center of political normativity**

---

Placing exemplarity at the center of our understanding of political normativity allows a host of features of our everyday lives to come into view. The claims of exemplars are all around us, perhaps most vividly in the ways we reify their otherwise fleeting lessons through various kinds of memorialization, like storytelling, displaying photographs, maintaining libraries, or building monuments.

Each of these provides occasion for imaginative return and thereby establishes a kind of normative recursivity that serves to fashion, if indeterminately, our values, character, and conscience over time.

However, placing exemplarity at the center of our understanding of political normativity also allows us to clarify those practices and dispositions by which exemplarist normativity can become distinctly democratic. Here, I follow the work of the influential political theorist Hannah Arendt who suggests that the claims of exemplars on our normative horizons are properly mediated by our capacity for judgment, which she understands not as the application of principles (cognitive or moral) to new political events, but as the ability to discover meaning from those events and evaluate them by imagining the perspectives of others. In this sense, judgment actuates the fact that we share the world with others whose standpoints differ from our own. It is a world-building capacity that realizes human plurality.

## **How judgment modifies our perception of exemplary value**

---

The question then arises of how judgment modifies our perception of exemplary value. How does exercising judgment lead us away from endorsing and emulating authoritarian political actors, for instance? In my research, I developed the view that judgment supplies conditions for evaluating exemplars in a manner that supports democracy, freedom, and equality.

By practicing judgment, we implicitly rely on normatively elevated versions of its basic axes: we understand that the ‘objective’ grounds for our judgments are exemplary persons and events that have come to shape our outlooks, the value of which are not absolute but remain subject to ongoing reflection and revision; that the ‘subjective’ grounds of our judgments requires taking ourselves as persons responsible for the exemplarity of our own actions before others; and that the ‘intersubjective’ realm that relates us to others is the shared world that emerges between free and equal persons.

By clarifying these axes, I aim to show why exemplars of, say, courageous truth-telling or non-violent political action deserve public endorsement and emulation, not those that promote domination and cruelty. And why certain practices of public communication, like redescription and storytelling, help create common ground between differently situated persons by turning a potentially adversarial ‘us-them’ relationship, which so dangerously emerges when we take exemplars as idols, into a democratic ‘we’ relationship.

Articulating the relationship between judgment and exemplarity allows us to honor the aspirations of the moral approach to political normativity without severing the connection with the actual world of politics, which is so important to realists. Through judgment, the normative power of exemplars is channeled towards the project of building a world that promotes the freedom and equality of plural persons.

## **Contributor Details**

---

- Article Categories
- [Social Sciences](#)
  
- Article Tags
- [North America Analysis](#)
- [Politics](#)
  
- Publication Tags
- [OAG 045 - January 2025](#)
  
- Stakeholder Tags
- [SH - Department of Humanities - York University](#)