

# Why Monarchy Should Be Abolished

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## Abstract

Monarchy is a form of government that, roughly, dictates that the right to rule is inherited by birth by a single ruler. But monarchy (absolute or constitutional) breaches fundamental moral principles that undergird representative democracy, such as basic moral equality, dignity and desert. Simply put, the monarchs (and their family) are treated as morally superior to ordinary citizens and as a result ordinary citizens are treated in an unfair and undignified manner. For example, monarchs are respected, enjoy dignity, income, opportunity, public office and exalted social status just because of their inherited office, which is due to the mere historical accident of family lineage. Hence, we have good moral reason to abolish monarchy. Finally, I briefly reply to the pragmatic argument for constitutional monarchy, namely, the argument that monarchy can be allowed to play a largely ceremonial role in the context of democracy because it is beneficial for the function of society. As I argue, societies run by presidential democracies can function equally well and, what is more, no matter what the pragmatic reasons for constitutional monarchy are, we still have stronger moral reasons against it. Therefore, it should be abolished.

*The rank is but the guinea's stamp;  
The man's the gowd for a'that'*

Robert Burns, from his *a' That and a' That*

Monarchy (from Greek *μόνος* + *ἄρχων* = sole ruler) is a form of government that, roughly, dictates that the right to rule is inherited by birth to a single ruler, something that in due course establishes dynasties (e.g. the Ptolemies in Hellenistic Egypt, or the Romanovs in Czarist Russia). In the aftermath of enlightenment, the number of monarchies in the world has been steadily declining since at least early twentieth century – as we shall see, for good moral and political reasons – and many of the surviving ones are nowadays constitutional (as in European countries). Constitutional monarchies play a largely ceremonial and symbolic

role with few executive, legislative and judicial powers, but monarchies, in any possible form (absolute or constitutional), are a relic of our feudal past and should be abolished once and for all. This is because of the deeply immoral commitments such a system of government implicitly upholds. Call this *the moral argument against monarchy*. Let me explain.

As Aristotle noted in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (X. ix, 22–3), ethics, law and politics are intertwined subjects and cannot be treated entirely in isolation. This is partly because any system of political governance, of necessity, presupposes and upholds some moral and political values that should be instituted in the law. For example, the representative democracy that blossoms in the West today is a form of political government



that by definition treats all persons – at least all adult nationals – as citizens with equal political rights, liberties and obligations, such as the right to vote and be voted for, freedom of expression and the obligation for taxation.

By treating all persons as citizens with equal political rights, liberties and obligations, representative democracy assumes that all persons are of equal basic moral and political status (and consequently everyone is equal before the law). Thus, democracy presupposes that it is a moral and political truth that all persons are of equal basic moral and political status. Call this fundamental moral truth *the principle of basic moral equality*. It is a fundamental moral requirement, or a *moral fixed point*, as philosophers

Terence Cuneo and Russ Schafer-Landau would call such truths.

The political importance of the principle of basic moral equality is difficult to overstate. It is a *cornerstone* moral and political truth because if we remove that truth from the fabric of a representative democracy, democracy as we know it will inevitably collapse. That is, in the absence of such a basic moral truth, rights, liberties and obligations (and the rule of *just* law that goes with them) would be violated and abused in an *ad hoc* manner and this would deal a fatal blow to representative democracy. As Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note in their *How Democracies Die*, such violations are a mark of a dying democracy and historical

precedents are not hard to find. Historian Ian Kershaw describes in his biography of Hitler how in Nazi Germany the rights and liberties of Jews, gypsies, the mentally ill, homosexuals and other minority groups were violated at will as any semblance of a representative democracy (and the rule of just law) gradually receded and all the powers were concentrated in the hands of the megalomaniac Führer (and his cronies).

**‘The monarchs are to be respected, enjoy dignity, income, opportunity, public office and exalted social status just because of their inherited office, which is due to the mere historical accident of family lineage. This is deeply unmeritorious, nepotist and unjust.’**

The basic moral equality principle entails that respect of equal basic moral and political status is due and this indicates that there is no person who from the outset is to be treated unequally in terms of moral and political rights, liberties and obligations because of normatively irrelevant variables (gender, family, ethnicity, religion, language, political beliefs, race, social class etc.). As professor of law Andrew Clapham underscores in his *Human Rights*: ‘the foundation of human rights can be traced to the twin ideas that human beings are born equal in dignity and rights, and that all

human beings have to be treated with equal concern and respect’. Hence, the moral foundation of representative democracy is equality in basic moral and political status, which implies equality in rights, liberties and obligations.

In contrast to representative democracy that is built on the cornerstone truth of basic moral equality, monarchy by definition cannot respect equality in basic moral and political status because it is a form of government that proposes that some class of persons, most often a dynasty, inherit privileged moral and political status by birth. Some of the persons are not just ordinary citizens, or ‘commoners’, but they have the inherited right to govern and are worthy of respect by right of birth (and belong to a tiny class that lives off the wealth produced by the honest toil of other ordinary citizens).

In medieval times, this inherited right to govern was typically morally justifiable by appeal to an inalienable divine right to rule (allegedly granted by divine grace), something that was famously castigated by the English enlightenment philosopher John Locke in his *First Treatise on Government* (1688). But in our post-enlightenment world, such an attempt of political legitimization would naturally sound comical at best. Why would God – if we agree that such an appeal bears any moral authority – privilege this particular person or family over another? And even if some member of that family is particularly good in governing for some reason, why think that his or her successors would also be good at governing? The son of the great Athenian statesman Pericles, as Plato’s *Meno* (94A–E) points out, was totally incompetent in politics, in spite of having the best education of his time, and Abraham Lincoln, the great American statesman, was the largely self-educated son of a humble farmer.

To make a long story short, it is obvious that the argument for political legitimization of monarchy by appeal to a divine right to rule fails even by its own quasi-religious lights. It is a ridiculously weak argument because it is ad hoc and unfair and God, if she exists, cannot be ad hoc and unfair. If God exists, by a standard so-called Anselmian (after St Anselm of Canterbury) understanding of her nature, she is

the greatest conceivable being, perfect in wisdom and benevolence and, hence, cannot be ad hoc and unfair in judgment. It follows that *the (im)moral foundation of monarchy is inequality in basic moral and political status*, which implies inequality in rights, liberties and obligations. Given such an immoral foundation, there can be no rule of just law and, consequently, society is structured in a socially unjust manner from the outset because it unfairly privileges and favours some persons and group over others.

As in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, written by Thomas Jefferson and influenced by the ideas of philosopher John Locke, we may treat basic moral equality as *a fundamental moral truth that is self-evident* in light of – what Locke called – ‘natural light of reason’. Like the American founding fathers, I take it that equality in moral and political status is a basic moral truth, a truth that perhaps should, in conditions of sufficient virtue, be self-evident to rational agents. I won’t defend this thesis here (I try my hand elsewhere), but I will assume it for the sake of argument. Be that as it may, if such a moral truth holds, then monarchy, in any form, is morally unjustified because it is built on the basis of the denial of a basic moral truth. What is more, it is a moral truth that if denied, *human dignity* cannot be respected, as it intuitively should. Let me elaborate.

I understand dignity in the terms outlined by the great German philosopher of the enlightenment Immanuel Kant: we are endowed with dignity as persons and we should be respected as *ends in themselves*. Call this moral truth, or fixed point, *the basic dignity principle*. The basic dignity principle implies that, as Kant’s so-called ‘formula of humanity’ suggests, we should not be treated as *mere means or tools to an end*, that is, instrumentally, because this is disrespectful and undignified to our humanity.

In the case of monarchy, this due respect to the dignity of persons is not paid because some persons are unfairly assumed to be superior in terms of moral and political rights, liberties and obligations and this is disrespectful to the persons assumed to be inferior. It violates their rights and liberties and they are treated as mere means by

the monarchs because, for instance, they pay taxes and provide for them, often doing unhealthy and dangerous jobs, and in times of need, they fight and die to defend their country (and with that, the monarchs’ inherited privileges, of course). Monarchy is, therefore, an affront to human dignity, if anything is, and should be abolished.

Moreover, in a society run by a monarchy, access to what the American political philosopher John Rawls (in his famous *A Theory of Justice*) calls primary goods, such as respect of one’s dignity, income, opportunity and public office, is not open to all persons on an equal footing. The monarchs are to be respected, enjoy dignity, income, opportunity, public office and exalted social status just because of their inherited office, which is due to the mere historical accident of family lineage. This is deeply unmeritorious, nepotist and unjust.

As the civil rights activist Martin Luther King stated in his famous ‘I Have a Dream’ speech of 1963, we should be judged ‘by the content of our characters’, by our virtues and vices as persons and citizens, and not by morally irrelevant factors, such as social class, family lineage, political and religious beliefs, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc. We should take credit and praise for being virtuous persons and good citizens and be criticized and blamed for being vicious persons and bad citizens. Call this moral truth *the moral desert principle*. It is another moral requirement, or moral fixed point. Clearly, monarchy violates the moral desert principle. This and the violation of the principle of basic moral equality and the principle of basic dignity constitute three basic immoral presuppositions of monarchy.

It might be objected that only absolute monarchies should be abolished but not constitutional monarchies, because in such a form monarchy plays a ceremonial and symbolic role that is otherwise valuable for the smooth function of society (socially, economically, politically). It enhances social cohesion and national unity, instils a sense of pride and prestige, a sense of community and continuity with the historical past, attracts tourists, stimulates the local economy, etc. So, even if there is no *moral* justification for constitutional

monarchy, there might be a *pragmatic* justification (and politics is the art of the feasible, not of the ideal). Call this *the pragmatic argument for constitutional monarchy*.

**‘Monarchy is based on immoral commitments and it is an affront to human dignity. It is a vestige of our more irrational, feudal history that in our post-enlightenment world we can get rid of, almost without apology, and definitely without tears.’**

George Orwell himself (Spring 1944, *Partisan Review*), eloquent as ever, seems to have succumbed to the allure of the pragmatic argument when he argued that:

The function of the King in promoting stability and acting as a sort of keystone in a non-democratic society is, of course, obvious. But he also has, or can have, the function of acting as an escape-valve for dangerous emotions. ... In England the real power belongs to unprepossessing men in bowler hats: the creature who rides in a gilded coach behind soldiers in steel breast-plates is really a waxwork. It is at any rate possible that while this division of function exists a Hitler or a Stalin cannot come to power. On the whole the European countries which have most successfully avoided

Fascism have been constitutional monarchies. The conditions seemingly are that the Royal Family shall be long-established and taken for granted, shall understand its own position and shall not produce strong characters with political ambitions.

Orwell’s pragmatic argument for constitutional monarchy, however, fails. First of all, it seems dubious that constitutional monarchy itself had anything to do with averting fascism during the interwar period, as countries like Italy and Greece were constitutional monarchies but had fascist or proto-fascist regimes (Mussolini and Metaxas, respectively) with the backing of the monarchs. Second, who is to say that one day a monarch won’t appear on the scene who ‘shall not understand her/his own position and shall be a strong character with political ambitions’?

As Christopher Hitchens writes in *The Monarchy*, in 1936 only accident and luck prevented ‘the accession of a young man with a pronounced sympathy for National Socialism. The former Edward VIII, as Duke of Windsor, was a permanent worry and embarrassment for the British government’ (fortunately, Edward VIII abdicated in order to be in position to marry a divorced woman, something unacceptable at the time). There is no guarantee that such situations will not arise in the future and such situations would simmer, I think, a constitutional crisis, as it has happened elsewhere in the history of constitutional monarchy (e.g. Greece’s constitutional crisis that led to a *coup d’état* by the military and the establishment of a military junta in 1967).

Third, even if we grant for the sake of the argument that constitutional monarchy is beneficial in social, economic and political ways, that it safeguards and will not threaten the stability of a democratic state in the future, it still remains the case that it is an affront to human dignity and I think that, at least in this particular case, moral reasons are weightier than pragmatic reasons. For one thing, even if constitutional monarchy is pragmatically useful, the world would still be an *overall* better place if we abolish such an atavistic, unmeritorious and unjust institution that affronts human dignity. Moral reasons, in this case, trump pragmatic reasons. Besides,

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social cohesion, national unity, a sense of pride and community, economic stimulation, etc. can also be promoted within a republican constitutional framework that leaves no place for the unjust institution of monarchy. This actually happened in countries with a republican constitutional framework that in the past made the transition from a monarchy to a republican, presidential constitutional framework (e.g. Italy, France, Germany, Greece).

I conclude that we have a good moral reason (that is weightier than pragmatic reasons) to abolish monarchy, in any form, once and for all. Monarchy is based on immoral commitments and

it is an affront to human dignity. It is a vestige of our more irrational, feudal history that in our post-enlightenment world we can get rid of, almost without apology, and definitely without tears. When this political transition takes place everywhere, as I am confident it will in the long run – ‘the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice’, said Martin Luther King – and ‘royals’ can finally earn a day’s wage of honest toil, this will be a day of moral progress. It will be truly respectful to their fellow citizens’ rights and dignity, who have been working all their lives to pay for their glittering palaces, fancy costumes, luscious banquets, exotic trips and otherwise indolent lives.

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