Distributive Justice: The Complexities of Membership

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Abstract

Michael Walzer breaks from typical modes of political philosophy. The standard move in political theory is for a philosopher to distance himself from the particular community he lives in order to gain a viewpoint unencumbered by history or culture. From this perspective, the philosopher can come up with universal, or “external”, principles that define distributive justice for all societies throughout time. Michael Walzer believes that this theoretical practice is flawed because it is impossible for a person to break free from history and culture to theorize in such a manner. Instead, Walzer focuses on a society’s particular history, culture, and identity in determining the just principles for the distribution of different goods in society, what he terms “spheres.” Walzer’s “internal” break from “external” theorizing is successful; it is realistic and defensible against criticism. However, Walzer’s internal perspective is problematic when determining distributive principles for a particular sphere, membership, because its particularities make it something other than a sphere. This essay aims to analyze the complexities of membership, and shed some light on where it stands in relation to Walzer’s internal spherical theory.
Michael Walzer is a philosophical rebel. Many philosophers try to detach themselves from their particular time period and cultural ties in order to create an abstract theory, applicable to all societies for all times. Walzer rebels against this “external”, “thin”, “detached”, or “universal” theoretical practice. He argues that external theory is unrealistic because it falsely assumes that political philosophers can escape their particular societal and cultural biases. In addition, universal theory is not beneficial because it fails to consider each society’s unique culture and history. Walzer counters with his own “internal” or “thick” philosophy. He explains that based upon its unique history and culture, each society develops particular meanings for different goods (healthcare, money, education, etc.) that citizens distribute amongst one another, what he terms, “spheres”. Walzer reasons that since each society is so different, there is no single way to justly determine spheres’ mode of distribution because it is dependent upon each society’s particular history and culture. Walzer’s internal rebellion is successful because it realistically takes into account how the particularities of each society provide connectedness and meaning for the people that live in that society, and is defensible against critics with an external or universal perspective.

However, his internal rebellion has a significant shortcoming: Walzer mistakenly considers membership – decisions regarding who can join the political community – a sphere. However, membership is very different from other spheres. Therefore, Walzer falls short in providing a flawless theory that breaks from external considerations. Nonetheless, in analyzing Walzer’s position on membership, he stakes a complex and nuanced stance, which incorporates membership’s internal and external principles,
something that many of his critics fail to do, but that a complete analysis of the issue requires.

**Walzer’s Challenge to External Theory**

According to Walzer, some theorists, such as Rawls and Plato, theorize, in an “external” or “universal” manner. These theorists “walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for [themselves]… an objective and universal standpoint” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* xiv). They try to free themselves from their particular societal and cultural biases. In doing so, the philosopher hopes to be more critical of current society, and ultimately come up with universal truths that define “justice for all citizens for all times,” what Walzer calls an external mode of theorizing (Whiteside 3).

John Rawls’ theory on a just society reflects external philosophy. Professor Alan Brown explains that Rawls believes that any society can reach socially optimal outcomes regarding the just distribution of goods and individuals’ status in society if the people making the decisions in society do so using a “hypothetical” viewpoint called “the original position” (Brown 64). This perspective requires that people make decisions behind a “veil of ignorance”, in which they are blind to their race, culture, identity, or status in society (Brown 65). Rawls argues that ignorance of these details leads to a fair society because if people make decisions not knowing where they might end up in society, they will choose principles that treat everyone fairly out of fear of ending up in a disadvantaged group. Rawls’ theory is external or universal in nature. His hypothetically conceived “veil of ignorance” when making decisions from the perspective of an
“original position” assumes that an individual can detach oneself from his/her particular identity in order to define justice for all societies at all times.

Walzer challenges this external mode of theorizing, arguing that external theory is both unrealistic and not beneficial in practice. Instead, he believes that all societies have a particular history and culture that define its identity and that people are inevitably influenced by the particular culture and society in which they live. Since a political philosopher is inevitably shaped by his particular culture, it is unlikely that he/she can break from his/her societal and cultural ties to abstractly formulate a universal theory. These assumptions lead Walzer to believe that external theorizing is unrealistic. However, even if it were possible to detach oneself from local ties, the theory would not be beneficial. A universal theory neglects to consider the differences between each society’s particular culture and practices and thus would be inapplicable to any given society.

Instead, Walzer stakes out an “internal” theory. Walzer believes in the uniqueness and power of each society’s history and culture, so he does not try to pledge a universal standpoint that transcends defining characteristics of his society. Instead, he aims to “stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground… interpret[ing] to one’s fellow citizens the world of meanings we share” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* xiv). In other words, his internal theory takes into account each society’s particular culture, history, and practices.

In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer lays out his internal argument that each society’s particular history and culture determines its principles for distributing different goods, what he terms “spheres”. Spheres are a metaphor, borrowed from Pascal, referring to
how aspects of the social world can be separated and categorized: “the art of separation” (Walzer, “Liberalism” 322). In his Pensees, Pascal explains how just relations requires keeping various advantages in their proper spheres:

“The nature of tyranny is to desire power over the whole world and outside its own sphere.

There are different companies – the strong, the handsome, the intelligent, the devout – and each man reigns in his own, not elsewhere. But sometimes they meet, and the strong and the handsome fight for mastery – foolishly, for their mastery is of different kinds” (Pascal 96).

Walzer borrows Pascal’s logic of separate and distinct categories where a person can gain “mastery” when laying out his theory of the just distribution of spheres. Walzer argues that although each society is very different, they all have some similar societal divisions – into spheres of membership, security and welfare, money and commodities, office, hard work, free time, education, kinship and love, divine grace, recognition, and political power. Walzer, like Pascal, argues that each sphere ought to have separate and distinct requirements for how a person can acquire more or less of the goods within that sphere.

The essential characteristic of such spheres is that they have a bounded quality. The spheres are “bounded” to a particular community, separated from the international community. That is, in order for a community to have spheres, a distinct and autonomous society must be established because Walzer argues that each society collectively determines spheres’ distributive principles based upon its unique history, culture, and
identity. If the society were not isolated, or bounded, from the international community, it would be unclear who would be collectively deciding upon the goods’ (spheres’) just modes of distribution. Since the community is bounded from the rest of the world, the decisions that a community makes regarding the boundaries of the spheres should not affect the international community. By similar logic, the international community has virtually no say in how spheres’ distributive principles are regulated in each society. The spheres are also “bounded” from themselves. Each sphere has a set of unique principles that separate it from other spheres. However, within each sphere exist interrelated principles that determine how the goods within that sphere will be distributed. Respecting spheres assures that those goods are distributed according to the relevant principles – and not by other principles from other spheres.

Looking at some of the particular spheres – political power, divine grace, and money and commodities – helps sheds light on why Walzer wants the spheres to have separate and distinct distributive principles. Walzer argues that the money, divine grace, and political power spheres have very different modes for how a person can attain influence in that sphere. Further, once a person gains influence in that sphere, their power stays within that sphere, and does not carry over to other spheres. For example, people who are creative and entrepreneurial gain a “monopoly” over money. Therefore, they have the right to buy “all those objects, commodities, products, services... that individual men and women find useful or pleasing” (Walzer, Spheres of Justice 103). Meanwhile, people who are charismatic and persuasive gain influence in the political sphere (Walzer, Spheres of Justice 306). With their monopoly in the political sphere, an individual has the right to rally support for political change. Those who gain a monopoly
in the sphere of divine grace attained, or at least convinced others they were granted, “the gift presumably of a gracious God” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 243). With that gift, they can perform religious rituals such as “curing souls” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 245).

Walzer argues that the power a person can gain in each sphere ought to be limited to that sphere. For example, Walzer submits that someone who has the skills required to gain a monopoly in the money sphere does not entitle this person to power in the political sphere because these spheres require different talents. The political power sphere also has limits. For example, with respect to divine grace, those with power in the political sphere ought to have no say in how grace is distributed, as decreed by the First Amendment (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 245). This is because the political power and divine grace spheres have unique distributive principles, which should not interfere with each other. By similar logic, someone who has a monopoly in divine grace is not entitled to political power because of the separation between church and state. Walzer calls these attempts at keeping each sphere autonomous a “blocked exchange” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 100). Without blocked exchanges, a person could unjustly use their monopoly in one sphere to gain power in all other spheres in society, what Walzer terms “domination” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 121).

Walzer’s argument regarding the just distribution of spheres is an internal concept. In philosophizing about just modes of distribution for these different goods or “spheres”, an external philosopher would determine how all societies throughout time should distribute them. However, Walzer reasons that since each society is so different, they have varying viewpoints regarding each sphere, and thus require different modes of distributions. Take, for example, the distribution of education. The philosopher who
subscribes to external principles would define how every society throughout the history of time ought to distribute education. Walzer’s mode of theorizing, however, recognizes that in some communities, education has been considered a luxury (something sold on the open market). Meanwhile, other communities consider education a basic need, which means that the government ought to provide it to all citizens in proportion to need. Walzer’s internal theory uses a country’s particular history and culture to determine the just distribution of all spheres.

**Internal Theory’s Legitimacy: Its Merits and Defense**

Walzer’s internal rebellion is successful, as it is realistic, and defends well against criticism. Walzer’s internal mode of theorizing is sensible because, unlike external theory, it does not try to ignore the reality that each society is very different. Instead, it embraces each society’s pluralism – unique culture, history, and identity – in trying to come up with just distributions of spheres.

In defending against criticism, Walzer helps legitimize his internal position. Many probe Walzer to answer whether no universal principles guide spheres’ distribution. For example, Walzer explains that Amy Gutmann and Jon Elster argue that his theory has no concern for “ordinary morality” (i.e. universal principles) that constrains the distributive process (Walzer, “Response” 293). Walzer defends his internal theory by answering this criticism in *Thick and Thin*. He argues that thin universal principles are meaningless until they are placed within the context of a thick
culture, what he calls “a (thin) set of moral principles adapted (thickly) to these or those historical circumstances” (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 4).

Walzer’s discussion of distributive justice shows how thin (external) principles only gain meaning when applied thickly (internally). For example, the Greeks’ distributive principle – “‘to give every man his due’” – is, at least potentially, a minimalist position applicable to any nation in the world (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 21). However, this external principle is virtually meaningless by itself. What does it actually mean to ‘give every man his due’? The Greeks’ appliance of this universal principle to their particular culture gives this external principle meaning. Greeks believe a person’s “due” depends upon an individual’s “social status” and “moral virtue” (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 22). Therefore, only within Greek society does this external principle begin to have any meaning.

Walzer’s argument regarding tribalism follows similar logic. Walzer takes on a difficult question: how can a country limit their cultural minority (tribal) tensions? Walzer argues that there is not one single, minimalist answer that could solve this tribal question. He explains that a thin, or minimalist answer would advocate for “neutrality” – trying to suppress nationalist sentiment - in attempts of creating, in many ways, a cultureless (or at least a neutral) society (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 70). The problem, though, is that there is no just “imperial, bureaucratic, or international authority” that could assist a nation in such an endeavor, and thus any effort to do so would constitute “domination” (Ibid). Therefore, Walzer explains, a country ought to follow a thin principle, and apply it thickly to their culture. The thin principle is ‘self-determination’: a nation’s autonomous power to handle their internal affairs without international
interference (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 67). Self-determination, however, has no meaning until it is applied within a thick culture. Essentially, then, self-determination means that each nation has the right to handle tribal and nationalistic tensions according to its own particular practices and culture (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 68).

Walzer’s chapter on social criticism provides yet another example of when external principles do not gain meaning until applied internally. Walzer argues that social criticism often times take on an external or universal viewpoint, yet is most effective and accurate when it takes an internal perspective. Walzer uses the Czechs’ and other east European dissidents’ criticism of communism to illustrate meaningful social criticism. The critics begin their argument from an external perspective when “demanding that the tyrants deliver on the values to which they claimed to be committed… freedom, equality, and democratic government”, external principles with which even Westerners sympathized (Walzer, *Thick and Thin* 46). However, their criticism was only meaningful and accurate when it also took on an internal or thick nature by “introducing new distinctions into the social idealism of the left” those of which Westerners would not have thought of or understood (Ibid).

The external critics are not satisfied, though. Walzer explains that Gutmann and Elster also argue that if distributive principles are only internal, and have no universal morality, it seems difficult to see many circumstances where Walzer can avoid accepting a nation’s political choices. That is, focusing on a country’s history and identity simply reaffirms a nation’s political choices, and thus does not allow much criticism regarding its (potentially unjust) choices (Walzer, “Response” 293). Walzer recognizes this in *Spheres of Justice* when conceding that his communitarian position requires him to
defend India’s caste system, because India’s particular culture and history justifies its existence.

In *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Walzer responds to these charges by explaining how social criticism is possible within his internal theory. He argues that the connected social critic – a person who critically interprets the shared values of the society in which he/she lives in – can establish enough critical distance and still interpret the particular history and culture to provide meaningful social criticism. Meanwhile, the “disconnected” individual – a person who does not live in the society and therefore does not understand the particular culture – will likely not offer meaningful social criticism because he/she cannot critically “interpret” shared social values, and will be unable to escape from the perspective of his/her home society’s conception of equality and justice. Ultimately, then, Walzer believes that connected social criticism is the best and only useful type because every society has a discernable and moral history and culture which is used as a basis for critical judgment.

Walzer argues that the connected social critic can establish critical distance from societal norms to enable him/herself a clear mind to find the appropriate resources embedded within his/her history and culture allowing for meaningful social criticism. Connected social criticism comes from the perspective of a “third self”, somewhere between the first and second self. The “first self” perspective is colored by his/her particular social standing in society; he/she is an “involved, committed, parochial, angry” citizen (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* 49). Meanwhile, “self two” is completely “detached” from society, “quietly watching self one” (Ibid). The “third self” is removed from his/her particular social standing, and yet, still knows the particular
history and culture of that society; he applies “standards that we share with the others to the others, our fellow citizens, friends and enemies (Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism 50). From this perspective, the social critic can find particular social and historical evidence that is unique to his/her society that enables him to “challenge the leaders, the conventions, the ritual practices of a particular society”, but is not biased by his/her particular social standing (Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism 89).

Walzer argues that there are historical examples (although only a few since good social criticism is very rare) when a person has offered successful social criticism from this “third self” perspective. For example, he credits parts of Marx’s work as “third self” social criticism. At times, Marx did not criticize England’s twelve-hour workweek as an angry proletariat (the first self), nor from the perspective of a universal supporter of workers rights (the second self). Instead, he pointed out the irony of a seven-day workweek in a country that had a history and culture valuing strict adherence to the religious “‘sabbatarian’” rest (Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism 56). Walzer concludes that had Marx argued from this third self more often instead of as a universal “support[er] of workers rights”, his social criticism would have been taken more seriously (Ibid). Walzer also uses an example from the Bible to show “third self” social criticism. He explains that the prophet Amos was able to promote positive change in ancient Jerusalem society because he was a connected social critic: he criticized Jerusalem for not protecting the “poor and needy”, which was essential to the particular religious and cultural history of its people (Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism 89).
Walzer contrasts the connected social critic with the disconnected social critic who tries to discover and invent. The disconnected critic is an outsider who “comes and goes… unconnected to the people of the city” and is ignorant of the particular culture and history that shapes a society’s practices (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* 78). He tries to “discover” when he “climb[s] the mountain, go[es] into the desert, seek[s] out the God who reveals, and bring[s] back his word” (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* 5). Meanwhile, he tries to “invent” when creating “an entirely new moral world.” For example, Rawls does this when trying to neglect all knowledge of culture, religion, and social standing behind the veil of ignorance (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* 9-11). Neither of these methods is interpretive: the first relies on an all-knowing God, and the second neglects shared social values for universal truths. Walzer is critical of both methods because neither requires critical engagement nor interpretation of shared values and culture.

Walzer goes further when explaining that the disconnected social critic who tries to invent or discover is simply advocating for the particularities of his/her culture. He uses Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration” as an example of seemingly disconnected social criticism that is actually tied to a particular culture and history. The Letter was seemingly disconnected because Locke wrote it in hopes of challenging “England’s political elite” while living in very “detached” circumstances – exiled in Holland (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* 53). Seemingly, his letter consists of universal principles in hopes to justify the revolution of English society. In reality, however, Locke’s exile “tied him more closely than ever before to the political forces fighting against Stuart ‘tyranny’” (Ibid). He argued for Protestant values and a
commitment to toleration, principles on which English society, and ironically Holland society as well, were founded on.

Walzer argues that the best and only type of social criticism possible is connected social criticism. Admittedly, there are some ambiguities in this response. In assuming that meaningful connected social criticism based upon a culture’s particular history and culture can occur in each society, Walzer also presumes that each society has fundamentally sound and discernable principles at its core. Walzer admits that there might be some cases when a society has bad principles, which would justify a detached mode of social criticism. However, Walzer does not offer any answers about cases when a society’s particular culture and history provide ambiguous answers regarding a nation’s guiding principles. For example, although Marx criticized English society’s working conditions on the basis of the Sabbath day of rest, perhaps English society also valued hard work. In this and similar cases, it seems very difficult to find evidence to produce meaningful, consistent, and connected social criticism based upon a country’s particular history and culture. Considering Walzer’s perspective, he would defend this charge by arguing that members of a society have the responsibility to politically determine how their history and culture shapes and defines their shared social values. Citizens can then use these agreed upon values to offer internal criticism. This explanation adequately defends the fact that his internal position is not free from possible criticism.

Walzer also is forced to respond to criticism his theory presents an inaccurate metaphor for society. Two groups from radically different political views – Marxists and Liberals – argue that it is impossible to separate society into separate spheres. The Marxists argue that the economic sphere cannot be separated from other spheres when
arguing that there are “direct and indirect causal links that radiate outwards from the economy” (Walzer, “Liberalism” 317). They explain that money dominated relationships in the economic sphere ultimately seep into the other spheres, making most other spheres extremely impersonal and dependent on money. Similarly, liberals also argue that society is not neatly separated into spheres. They argue that the Government sphere tends to overstep its boundaries by imposing too much control over other spheres, such as the economy. While these arguments take opposing views of where the spheres are overstepping their boundaries (Marxists argue that the economy oversteps its boundaries, while Liberals that the Government does), they both criticize Walzer’s notion that society can be neatly separated into spheres.

In admitting that the Marxists and Liberals are correct that the spheres cannot be completely separate, Walzer paradoxically answers their criticisms and adds nuance and clarification to his theory. Walzer counter-intuitively explains that the ideal of distinct and separate spheres can only begin to be achieved if the spheres are not completely separate. For example, the separateness and distinctiveness of the economic sphere from all other spheres in society is only possible with some intervention from the Government sphere. Walzer explains that if the economic sphere were not regulated, it would “defy the art of separation”. That is, acquired wealth in the economic sphere would easily convert into “power, privilege, and position” in the other spheres (Walzer, “Liberalism” 322). Thus, the economic sphere would blend into all the other spheres, eventually leading to a “sphere-less” society. Walzer asserts that the only way to prevent this amalgamation of all spheres is for people who have influence within that sphere to act preserve the sphere’s autonomy if it is threatened. Thus, in the case of the economic
sphere gaining too much influence, the people who have influence in the Governmental sphere would try to protect its autonomy by imposing regulations and restrictions on what money can buy. In this way, limited interference of the Government sphere into the economic sphere, based upon its desire to have an autonomous sphere, helps maintain distinct and separate spheres.

Walzer’s internal rebellion is successful in formulating realistic theories regarding spheres’ meaning and distribution. He also adequately responds to and defends against critics’ claims that his theory neglects universal reasoning.

A Hole in Walzer’s Theory: The “Membership” Sphere

However, Walzer’s internal rebellion has a gaping hole: it wrongly considers membership a sphere.

It is clear that Walzer intends to treat membership as a sphere for two main reasons. First, he tries to explain that his way of viewing membership is an entirely internal concept, thus making it a sphere. He says that he is not concerned “with the historical origins of the different groups” (Walzer, Spheres of Justice 31). In other words, he is not concerned with how the group was formed, which would make the membership issue “external”, since a society’s formation obviously occurs prior to the society’s existence. Instead, Walzer wants to consider the decisions that political communities make regarding who can and cannot become a member of the already established society, what Walzer refers to as decisions “about their present and future populations” (Ibid). This makes the issue “internal” because the decisions take place
within a bounded community with a particular history and culture. To Walzer, this explanation helps qualify membership as a sphere because it meets a sphere’s definition of being wholly internal, separated from the international community. Walzer also tries to treat membership as internal and thus a sphere by coming up with some internal principles that govern its distribution. Walzer explains some criteria that ought to govern the distribution of membership. First, mutual aid (for example, to refugees or asylum seekers) is required when “it is needed or urgently needed by one of the parties”. Second, it is needed “if the risks and costs of giving it are relatively low for the other party” (Walzer, Spheres of Justice 33). Walzer also argues that all guest workers must be able to become citizens, his logic being that if the workers must be subject to society’s laws, they must also be given a chance to become a citizen so that they can have a say in the lawmaking process or at least a vote in who makes the laws. Walzer argues that each nation ought to ask itself these questions, and develop answers based upon its particular history and culture when deciding whether to allow a certain person or group to become a member. Second, it is clear that Walzer treats membership as a sphere by a simple analysis of the structure of his argument in Spheres of Justice. The first chapter, “Complex Equality”, explains Walzer’s general argument regarding how just societies distribute goods. The remaining chapters (besides the concluding one) attempt to apply Walzer’s idea of complex equality to different spheres, membership being the first.

However, membership is different than the other spheres for two main reasons, both having to do with Walzer’s definition of a sphere. The first – as discussed earlier, spheres are an internal concept, which implies that decisions regarding the just distributions of spheres are bounded to a particular community, separated from the
international community. Walzer tries to justify his decision to make membership a sphere by explaining its internal nature (discussed in the last paragraph). However, this justification does not suffice. Unlike other spheres, decisions regarding membership are not confined to a particular political community. That is, a nation’s choice to allow in immigrants or refugees also greatly affects the international community. The international community, however, does not have a particular culture or identity to determine membership policy. Therefore, unlike the other spheres, “external” or “universal” considerations are also needed in determining just membership policy. Thus, membership should not be considered a “sphere” because it has internal, as well as external principles that determine its distribution.

In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer lays out his clearest argument showing the internal and external principles that guide membership’s distribution, which clearly demonstrates that membership should not be a sphere because it is not wholly internal. In the chapter, Walzer addresses a particular membership issue – immigration. Walzer believes in the external principle of mutual aid – all nations should be responsible to admit victims of political or religious persecution who would be killed if sent home because they need assistance to survive. Walzer warns, however, that countries will only practice this “external” principle if they are allowed some freedom to distribute membership (i.e. those who enter) according to their society’s “particular understanding of what membership means” and the “sort of community” they want to have (an “internal” principle) (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 32). This is because if nations were to adhere to purely “external” principles, such as an open-border policy that accepts all people who want to live in the country, the “external” principle of mutual aid would actually become meaningless.
Walzer reasons that if anyone could move to a particular country under an open-border policy, members in smaller communities (or “neighborhoods”) would likely “organize to defend the local politics and culture against strangers”, creating a world with “a thousand petty fortresses” that would be focused on defending their own cultures and practices, not providing mutual aid (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 38). To Walzer, then, allowing nations to distribute membership (an “internal” principle) is positive insofar it promotes “external” principles of mutual aid. This demonstrates that Walzer’s consideration of membership as a sphere contradicts his theory because external and internal considerations guide its distributive principles.

The second reason why membership is not a sphere also has to do with its definition. As mentioned earlier in the paper, Walzer argues that a just society ought to have autonomous spheres of power; monopoly in one “sphere”, such as money, cannot gain a person influence in another “sphere”, such as political power. However, decisions regarding who can be a member in a particular political community ultimately affect the way that the other spheres are distributed and thus membership should not classify as a sphere. In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer describes how allowing foreigners into the political community can affect the way the other spheres are constituted. He explains that members in a political community “have a collective right to shape the resident population” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 52). Thus, allowing foreigners into the country, with a different history and culture, could over time change the meaning of other spheres, as well as their mode of distribution. The inevitability of membership affecting the other spheres clearly breaks its autonomous identity, and should therefore not be classified as one.
Walzer’s Stance on Membership

Even if Walzer concedes that membership’s complexities make it not a sphere, however, his position still seems ambiguous and loosely defined. On the one hand, Walzer believes that nations are bound to some external principles such as mutual aid. And yet, on the other hand, he also believes that nations are autonomous agents, not bound by the international community, and free to determine their own criteria in distributing membership. Many criticize Walzer’s unclear position, even explaining why it contradicts his general theory. One side criticizes Walzer’s stance as too universal in nature, arguing that his theory contradicts his internal principles. Interestingly, another group of critics argue that Walzer’s position neglects important external principles, which undermines the international community, contradicting both his liberal and communitarian positions. In responding to his critics, Walzer shows that his theory, although sometimes ambiguous, does not contradict his overall theory, but rather has a nuanced understanding of a complex issue – perhaps something that his critics lack.

One side, Joseph Carens in particular, criticizes aspects of Walzer’s theory regarding citizenship for being too universal or external in nature, which contradicts Walzer’s internal theoretical approach. Carens argues that in three instances, Walzer takes an unfortunate turn from his internalist principles towards external ones. First – when Walzer criticized Africa and Asia for expelling current inhabitants after the demise of colonialism, he contradicted his internal theory. If Walzer were consistent with his internal logic, he would have explained how “African or even Asian understandings of
community and of responsibilities towards... outsiders” required them to not expel the inhabitants (Carens, “Complex Justice” 50). Instead, Carens explains that Walzer’s condemnation of Asia and Africa’s actions used a universal principle, applicable to any nation for any time: that it is wrong for newly formed states after the demise of colonialism to expel current inhabitants, who do not share the race or ethnicity of local inhabitants. Thus, Walzer contradicted his internal theory.

Second – Walzer’s argument that all “people who live and work in a country should be given access to citizenship” also is external (Carens, “Complex Justice” 50). Carens argues that for a country like Germany, whose “understanding of citizenship… has very deep roots in German history and culture”, a guest worker program that does not allow citizenship can be justified based upon its history (Ibid). Carens thinks that Walzer should agree with this analysis; however, his universal guest worker principle suggests otherwise. Thus, Carens argues that in not sticking to his internal or thick principles regarding this issue, Walzer contradicts his own theory.

Third – Walzer contradicts himself with regard to immigration policy. Carens argues that the first two ways that Walzer’s theory veers from internal principles – principles on newly formed states excluding certain members and guest workers – can be justified if Walzer also views countries who subscribe to “liberal democratic principles” as a particular community with a “local” or internal understanding (Carens, “Complex Justice” 51). Countries who subscribe to such principles are required to provide mutual aid. However, even if one concedes this point, he still maintains that Walzer’s “critique of exclusionary citizenship policies”, in which (I assume Carens is referring to) Walzer’s assertion that countries are bound to provide mutual aid when the “risks and costs” are
low, is not justifiable from a Walzerian point of view (Ibid). Countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia do not claim to be liberal democracies. However, in making a universal claim that all countries should provide it, Walzer also requires that countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait must provide mutual aid. If Walzer were consistent in his logic, he would reason that they should not be bound to liberal democracy’s principles, for that would be an external position (Carens, “Complex Justice” 57).

Interestingly, critics also argue from the opposite angle – that Walzer’s communitarian positions regarding membership fail to consider the broader global community, which contradicts his overall theory. Both James Hudson and Brian Barry argue that Walzer’s immigration stance is ironic because it neglects his general political/ideological stance. They explain that Walzer takes, what many would call, socialist stances regarding economic issues. However, in advocating for each nation’s right to care and protect its own citizens more than foreigners, Walzer justifies that nations have no obligation “(or only a severely attenuated one) to foreigners, no matter how poor they might be” (Hudson 58). Barry says that the implication of Walzer’s policy implies that “there is nothing unjust about a world in which poor countries are making net transfers to rich ones and in which the USA uses up to 40 per cent of total resources while a quarter of the world’s population goes without the most basic necessities” (Barry 79). To Hudson, this is an “oddity”, for if Walzer is a left-winged international socialist, why would he adopt such right-wing stances (Hudson 57).

Other critics go even further, explaining that Walzer’s policy is contradictory because internal logic actually supports an open border policy, an external principle. Such critics explain that Walzer’s internal theory should also consider the international
community as a legitimate society of peoples, whose principles ought to be upheld. Therefore, communitarians should actually support an open border policy because the international community has a long historical and cultural history of subscribing to principles that an open border policy promotes: “freedom and equality” (Seglow, 324).

In responding to these criticisms, Walzer does not justify why he tries to consider membership a sphere. Doing so would force him to adopt only internal principles, yet he also has universal considerations with regard to membership. However, in responding to his critics, Walzer shows that his theory regarding membership, although sometimes ambiguous, does not contradict his overall theory; rather, it recognizes the issue’s complexities.

When addressing both sides of his critics, Walzer sheds light upon how membership principles do not contradict his overall theory. In response to those who argue that his membership positions contradict his internal stances, he explains that a country’s citizenship policies should have some “minimalist and universal” guiding principles, one of which is “reciprocity” (Walzer, “Response” 288). In other words, even though a country ought to have the right to determine its own membership policies, it also should consider the broader international community in a reciprocal kind of logic: “first for us, then for them” (Walzer, “Response” 289). Walzer clarifies, however, that reciprocity “is not wholly an external idea”, for it can be applied uniquely to each society, forcing members to define their “local self-understandings” (Ibid). In using such logic, Walzer shows that his position does not veer from his mainly internal principles. Rather, he takes on external principles, and applies them in an internal manner.
In responding to critiques that his membership policies neglect the international community, Walzer also sheds light upon how his position does not contradict his liberal or communitarian stances. Walzer explains that his views do not neglect the international community because he does not advocate for complete closed borders. In fact, he explains that in some cases, an open-border policy is the only just policy. For example, “Anglo-Americans were right to open them [their borders], and would have been wrong to close them… because they were themselves immigrants” (Walzer, “In Response” 1). Walzer explains, however, in countries where there is a “long-established territorially-based majority”, it is not required nor does it make sense to have an open-border policy because the resident population would not want to become the cultural minority (Walzer, “In Response” 1). In advocating for open borders in some instances, Walzer does not neglect the international community, nor does he contradict his liberal leanings.

Similar logic also answers critics’ claims that his policies are contradictory because communitarians ought to consider the principles of the international community, which would justify an open border policy. In drawing distinctions between countries, such as Denmark and France, that have a “long-established territorially-based majority” and countries, such as the United States, who have a history of admitting immigrants, Walzer shows that the international community’s history and culture is too varied to be considered a single society with concrete values (Walzer, “In Response” 1). Therefore, he does not contradict his communitarian stance in not advocating for open-borders.

In responding to his critics, Walzer shows that his membership theory is complex and nuanced. His critics try to simplify the issue and lock Walzer into an ideological/political prism. Those who criticize Walzer for making exceptions such as
mutual aid to his generally internal principles want Walzer to advocate for a country’s complete autonomy and ignore important obligations to the international community. Meanwhile, those who criticize Walzer for giving each country power to determine its own immigration policy seem to want something very close to open borders. In responding to these criticisms, Walzer demonstrates that he recognizes the complexity of the issue. He carefully explains the he does not advocate for open-borders nor complete autonomy for a nation to choose its own immigration policy without considering the international community. Admittedly, his theory has ambiguities such as not specifying the meaning of “mutual aid”. However, such a difficult and complex issue cannot have as clear an answer for which his critics would advocate.

Membership: a Generally Difficult Issue

Comparing two extremes, Walzer and Carens, and their position on membership highlights the issue’s uniqueness and complexity. Regarding every other sphere, internal and external theorists would fundamentally disagree regarding its just mode of distribution. An internal theorist would advocate for a policy based upon a society’s particular history and culture. Meanwhile, an external theorist would advocate for a universal principle. Michael Walzer and Joseph Carens’ differences seem to embody the classic debate between internal and external theorists. Walzer argues for some thin constraints on a predominantly thick morality; that is, universal principles, such as mutual aid, have some influence over a country’s decisions regarding membership, but a country’s right to determine its own policy based upon its culture and history reigns
supreme. Meanwhile, Carens argues for the opposite, some thick principles constraining a thin morality. In other words, a country’s history and culture have some (but minimal) influence compared to universal principles, such as basic human rights, in shaping membership policies. Interestingly, Walzer and Carens prod each other’s theories to clarify an ambiguity that plagues both of their works: to specify exactly how internal and external principles work in conjunction with shaping just membership policy. Their criticisms ultimately lead to careful reflection and explanation of their own theories. In defending their positions, Walzer and Carens arrive at a very similar conclusion – that universal principles ought to govern nations’ membership policies, but can only be achieved within the borders of a culturally and historically unique political community – suggesting that when pushed, even the seemingly extreme views on membership arrive at a similar perspective, highlighting the issue’s uniqueness and complexity.

Walzer and Carens’ membership positions seem diametrically opposed, internal versus external. Walzer advocates for a thin set of principles applied thickly to a country’s particular history and culture. That is, a nation’s immigration policy is just if its thin or universal principles, such as providing mutual aid, are applied thickly to a particular set of values, history, and culture in a given society. For example, to Walzer, the United States has a great responsibility to provide mutual aid because it has a past history and culture of being an immigrant nation. However, countries such as Denmark and France that have a “long-established territorially-based majority” could potentially face cultural deterioration if they were strictly bound to a mutual aid principle (Walzer, “In Response” 1). Thus, each nation has the right to apply universal principles in their own particular way justifying closed borders in some instances.
Meanwhile, Carens takes the opposite, external, position: that a nation’s immigration policy is justified if only some thick principles are applied to predominantly thin principles. Carens acknowledges that there are some thick principles, what he calls “realities”, that constrain the universal principles (Carens, “Realistic and Idealistic Approaches” 156). One thick restraint is that each nation is “sovereign and independent”, and therefore can determine its own immigration policy (Carens, “Realistic and Idealistic Approaches” 158). Along similar lines, Walzer’s communitarian argument is also a thick restraint: “You cannot abstract entirely from the culture and way of life in which our sense of right and wrong, good and bad, is embedded and still make moral sense” (Carens, “Realistic and Idealistic Approaches” 163). Thus, Carens concedes that a nation’s particular identity and culture will inevitably shape immigration policy. At the same time, Carens aims to “abstract from considerations of immediate feasibility” in search for universalistic principles (Carens, “A Reply to Meilaender: Reconsidering Open Borders” 1084). He argues that although internal principles can restrain the external principles, basic values, such as the “equal moral worth” of persons, justify an open border policy (Carens, “A Reply to Meilaender: Reconsidering Open Borders” 1088). He goes even further, explaining that if we were to wear a “veil of ignorance” - somehow forgetting every presupposed fact regarding society – everyone would opt for open borders because of its equality and fairness (Carens, “Aliens and Citizens” 255).

Interestingly, however, Carens and Walzer criticize each other for the same ambiguity – lack of specification regarding how internal and external principles work together in shaping immigration policy – thus forcing each other to clarify their positions. Carens points out that in explaining refugee policy, Walzer initially makes a
communitarian (internal) argument: “communal self-determination is a morally legitimate concern that may justify the exclusion of refugees” (Carens, “Refugees” 32). However, Walzer then explains instances where countries are required to provide mutual aid, a universal position. Carens concludes that Walzer’s position regarding refugees is inconsistent and unclear: how do we know where political community’s (internal) decisions should be upheld, and where the importance of mutual aid (external) principles restrict a community’s decisions (Carens, “Refugees” 32)? Carens points out similar ambiguities regarding Walzer’s guest worker policy, which states that all guest workers must also be able to become citizens, and his rule that states may not expel existing inhabitants whom the majority or the new government regards as alien. Carens wonders why, in these particular cases, universal principles trump a nation’s (thick) right to determine its own culturally relevant principles. Carens’ argument leads readers to question how Walzer’s thick and thin principles work in conjunction to make just membership policies (Carens, “Aliens and Citizens” 268-269).

Although Walzer does not directly address Carens’ work, it seems that he would point out similar ambiguities; that is, lack of clarity in how internal considerations provide some restrictions on predominantly external principles. Walzer would argue that the human rights (external) argument is incomplete because it does not address “who has the authority to determine the laws through which political power is exercised… over boundaries” (Abizadeh 148). In other words, Walzer would point out that no authority, other than each sovereign nation, has the power to enforce human rights laws. Further, if each nation is not bound to any world government or global authority, then it inherently has the right to determine membership policies based upon its values, culture, and
history. Thus, Walzer points out limitations in how Carens’ internal and external considerations work to determine membership policies.

In pointing out these flaws, Carens and Walzer force each other to clarify their position; in doing so, it becomes evident that their positions have striking similarities. In responding to Carens’ criticisms, Walzer tries to clarify how external principles can limit predominantly internal considerations. He explains that he finds external principles such as “admission of refugees to full citizenship; increased foreign aid, economic unification, and cooperation across borders… [and] extensions of sovereignty to stateless peoples” extremely important (Walzer, “Response to Veit Bader” 249). However, Walzer explains that these external principles are contingent upon internal restrictions: “the hope of ordinary people in their diverse national, religious, and political communities for their own survival and well-being, and for that of their neighbors, under conditions of peace and justice” (Ibid). In responding to his critics, Carens reaches a strikingly similar conclusion. Carens argues that following the highest ideals advocates for greater human rights considerations, and thus an open border policy. However, he also admits that there is no world government to enforce such laws: “Justice permits the political community to pursue its own interests in these matters within broad limits” (Carens, “A Reply to Meilaender: Reconsidering Open Borders” 1087). Thus, while he believes that his writing can begin a “conversation” regarding promotion of open borders, he recognizes, that it is not a political reality (Carens, “A Reply to Meilaender: Reconsidering Open Borders” 1084).

Despite Walzer and Carens’ seemingly insurmountable internal and external differences regarding membership, they arrive at a very similar conclusion: that external
considerations are ideal, but can only be achieved within the internal borders of a culturally and historically unique political community. This suggests that the internal and external dichotomy regarding membership is meaningless. That is, Walzer and Carens, who seemingly epitomize the classic difference between internal and external, end up reaching the same conclusion. They both advocate for some external policies and also equally consider (and are unknowingly influenced by) their society’s particular culture and history regarding membership. Walzer and Carens’ agreement on membership policy also provides a clear indication that membership is not a sphere. This is due to the unlikelihood of internal and external theorist agreeing upon the conditions and distribution of the other spheres. The internal theorist would use a country’s history and culture, while the external theorist would use universal principles. However, in the case of membership, the internal theorist finds it acceptable to adopt external logic, and the external theorist finds it acceptable to adopt some internal logic.

A Final Thought Based Upon on the Carens/Walzer Debate

It seems that ultimately, the reason why internal and external theorists can reach a similar conclusion regarding membership (but for no other sphere) is because of its complexity, which requires careful consideration from a number of angles. On the one hand, decisions regarding membership take place within a bounded political community. On the other hand, its decisions affect the broader international community. To add further complication, decisions regarding membership also affect the other spheres’ distribution, and thus presuppose a bounded political community. Although Walzer
mistakenly considers membership a sphere – which is a flaw in his internal rebellion – and cannot specifically define membership and from which perspective to address the issue, Walzer nevertheless provides a nuanced analysis that tries to recognize all of membership’s complexities, exactly what such a complicated and unique topic necessitates. Walzer’s internal rebellion certainly has its strengths, however, it would benefit from someone else’s help in defining where exactly membership fits into his theory.

**Defining Membership**

At this point, it is clear that Walzer should not have treated membership as just another sphere. Although I am not going to embark on a process of finding an alternative metaphor to describe membership, I aim to describe, with more detail than earlier in the essay, two main complexities that make membership something other than a sphere. First, membership has a pre-spherical nature in two ways. One - decisions regarding membership take place before a society has a long-established history and culture. Two – the membership sphere is constantly changing and evolving. These two ways that membership is pre-spherical becomes clear when describing the second complexity of membership: the particular decisions regarding membership seep into the distributive principles of other spheres. Unlike nations with long-standing cultural majorities, analyzing the United States’ history sheds light on these complexities regarding membership that Walzer does not fully address.
Membership as a Pre-Spherical Moment

The first complexity of membership that the United States case can shed light upon is its pre-spherical nature at the formation of a newly formed society. Walzer tries to treat membership as decisions about current and future populations once a society is already established. He explains this when saying that he is not concerned about “the historical origins of the different groups, but with the decisions they make in the present about their present and future populations” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 31). Walzer argues that in nations such as France and Denmark, where there has been a long-established cultural majority, membership can be treated as decisions regarding the current and future populations (Walzer, “In Response” 1). This is because the same groups of people (the French and the Danes) have the right to determine their membership policies based upon their particular histories, identities, and cultures. Not all nations, however, have a long-established cultural majority and history. In such cases, membership concerns cannot be limited to the particular decisions once the nation is already formed. The history of the United States highlights membership’s complexities at the formation of a nation. That is, the United States was not a nation with a long-established history or cultural majority. Instead, the original 13 colonies were filled with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. Although the settlers had a common bond as escaping religious, political, or economic persecution from their home country, their diverse histories, identities, religions, professions, etc. made it difficult to formulate membership policy. In formulating policy, the diversity of opinion had to be taken into consideration, leading to somewhat contradictory and inconsistent policies at the national
This analysis highlights membership’s first complexity that make it something other than a sphere: its pre-spherical nature.

A diverse people populated the original 13 colonies. Although the settlers had a common bond as escaping religious, political, or economic persecution from their home country, they also had a multitude of differences regarding their history, culture, and identity. People came from different countries – “Scotland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands” –, religious affiliations – Quakers, Puritans, Pietists –, and professions – farmers and merchants (Hing 12). The thirteen colonies reflected these differences in backgrounds and identities. For example, the Puritans, who settled in New England, created a “homogenous world… where large landholders, mostly Anglicans, built plantations along the coast from which they lorded over a labor force of black slaves and looked down upon the poor white farmers who settled the backcountry” (Hing 12). Meanwhile, colonies stretching from New York to Delaware reflected the diversity that inhabited them: “Well-to-do merchants put their stamp on New York City, as Quakers did on Pennsylvania, while out in the countryside sprawling estates were interspersed with modest homesteads” (Ibid). Unlike the Puritans, many of these groups, especially the Quakers, were opposed to slavery and thus developed an economy that was slavery-free (Soderland 1). It is important to point out that this diversity amongst the settlers already creates problems in Walzerian terms: their conception of the “just” distribution of labor (slavery) is based upon particular values and cultures prior to arriving in the United States.

The colonists’ diversity in religion, culture, and identity led to a variety of different views regarding just membership policies. For example, the Pennsylvanian
Quakers (led by William Penn) had very tolerant views on membership policies based upon their particular history and identity as Quakers (Soderland 1). As William Penn explained, his identity as a Quaker influenced him to found the colony on two principal motives: “the desire to found a free commonwealth on liberal and humane principles, and the desire to provide a safe home for persecuted Friends” (Hing 16). Therefore, Pennsylvania welcomed people with diverse religious views – Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Quakers (Ibid). Meanwhile, settlers in Virginia had opposing views regarding immigration policy based upon their particular history and culture. The first settlers in Virginia were “emigrants from England who belonged to the English church, at a point in time when the church was flush with complete victory over the religious of all other persuasions” (Hing 15). This group of people escaped England in order to have complete autonomy over their own religion, which led to fear and skepticism of foreigners who could possibly strip them of power to control their religious practices. Thus, they passed many laws to prohibit religious groups, such as Quakers, from infiltrating their place of religious solitude (Ibid). Clearly, the settlers’ diversity in backgrounds and histories led to differences in views regarding the (Walzerian termed) religious sphere, which in turn affected their views on membership policies.

Multiplicity of views within the colonies manifested itself in inconsistent and fickle membership policies on the National level, too. The differences in views regarding just membership policies among the settlers were represented through the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties – the political sphere. The Federalist Party, led by President Adams, supported the notion that allowing too many foreigners within
American borders could be dangerous. In his inaugural address, Adams warned that “[it is] the pestilence of foreign influence, which is the angel of destruction to elective governments” (Hing 18). Acting upon this viewpoint, Adams and the Federalist-controlled Congress passed many policies making it difficult to become a member of the United States. For example, the Naturalization Act required that “aliens be residents for fourteen years instead of five before they became eligible for U.S. citizenship” (Ibid). Similarly, the Alien Friends Act authorized the president to deport aliens “‘dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States’” (Ibid). Meanwhile, the Democrat-Republicans were opposed to such strict membership policies. In the 1800 election, Thomas Jefferson campaigned in opposition to the Federalist Party’s policies. When Jefferson won, he repealed the Alien Friends Act, Sedition Act, among other policies that made becoming a member of the United States difficult. As demonstrated by the first two administrations’ actions to impose federal laws regarding membership, the newly formed nation had clear disagreement and unsettled feelings regarding just membership policy.

This analysis of the difficulty of establishing membership policies at the formation of the United States sheds light on the first problem regarding membership: the decisions that go into formulating initial policies have a pre-spherical nature. In the United States’ case, the nation was in its formulating moments when the settlers were forced to make decisions regarding membership. Therefore, unlike Walzer assumes in *Spheres of Justice*, the decisions regarding membership were not based on long-established histories or traditions. Instead, the settlers had different histories, cultures, identities, religions, etc. which affected their viewpoints on just membership policies, thus making membership decisions difficult and contentious, and the official policies
subject to change. These fundamental complications that the United States faced regarding membership decisions at its formation are not unique to the United States, but applicable to any society at its starting point. Unlike Walzer asserts, even a society with a long-established cultural history, had to at one point face fundamental questions regarding who could become a member. At its formation, it likely had people with different backgrounds, cultures, religions, etc. who had to make difficult decisions (not based upon a collective or unified history and culture) regarding how their society would be constituted – a pre-spherical moment.

Decisions regarding membership are pre-spherical not only at the formation of a society, but also throughout a society’s existence. This is because the membership sphere has the potential to constantly change, thus affecting the distribution of other spheres. Looking at the history of the United States highlights this aspect of membership’s pre-spherical nature. That is, the composition of the immigrant population has fluctuated religiously, ethnically, culturally, etc. This has great implications for the distribution of other spheres, thus making membership a pre-spherical moment.

The United States’ membership policies have changed and fluctuated greatly over the course of its existence, thus affecting the composition of the population, which greatly influences spheres’ distributions – a pre-spherical process. As Hing explains, membership laws in the United States have fluctuated greatly. Mainly, Americans have grappled with the question: “who is an American?” (Hing 273). At certain points in its history – “When naturalization rights were extended to those of African descent in 1870, when the Chinese exclusion laws were repealed in 1943, when the 1964 Civil rights Act was enacted, when the immigration quote system was repealed in 1965”, and when
Attorney General John Ashcroft publically condemned racial profiling – the United States answered the question “broadly” (Ibid). At other times, the question was answered very “narrowly”: “Africans were not considered full persons at the founding of the nation”, “Asian immigrants were excluded and denied the right to citizenship”, “Native Americans were taken from their families and placed into schools where the goal was to ‘kill the Indian in him and save the man’”, “Japanese Americans were interned”, etc. (Ibid).

The different answers to this question have led to different types of people living in the United States at different times. At different points in America’s history, the United States has had vastly different percentages of legal immigrants in the population. In 1855, the immigrant population was about 10%, while in 1935 it was about 1%, while in 1995 was about 4% (Nee 272). The people within the immigrant population have also been very different. For example, the religious composition of the United States has greatly fluctuated over time. The percentage of Protestants in the United States was 70.4% pre-1930, and is only 46.1% post 1970 (Portes 309). To add further complication, different groups of people have had different political clout at different times. Italians and Jews were once thought of as “racial and religious outsiders” but are now part of the “institutional mainstream” (Nee 273). These differences in composition of the United States’ population have strong implications for other spheres. This is because each particular group of people with their own history and identity will have different conceptions about their just distributive principles. Therefore, the spheres’ distributions are mainly determined based upon membership, thus making membership a pre-spherical moment.
Membership: Not an Autonomous Sphere

As alluded to at the end of the last section, The United States, unlike other nations, also sheds light upon how membership policies are not limited to its own sphere, but also affect the distributions of other spheres. The United States is unique because, other than the Native Americans, it is no one’s true home; “[i]t never happened that a group of people called Americans came to form a political society called America” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 27). Instead, the United States is mostly composed of voluntary immigrants (a “nation of nationalities”) bringing their own particular culture, religion, and history (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 9). These immigrants spread all over the nation, creating small neighborhoods composed of people with a similar past. In people’s private social lives within these small communities, they celebrate their shared identity and past by observing a particular religion, raising children in a certain way, celebrating culturally shared holidays, etc. Amidst this cultural diversity, all of these immigrants have found a way to unify politically by creating a “nationally, ethnically, racially, and religiously neutral” state, one that is committed to abstract principles of “liberty, equality, and republicanism” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 30). Walzer emphasizes that this dichotomy, the “oneness” of politics versus the “manyness” of cultures in private life, creates a fundamental ambiguities and difficulties regarding many issues, or “spheres”, in American political life - interpreting the Constitution, determining just economic policy, and competing to prove patriotism (Ibid).
This fundamental dichotomy stemming from the United States’ membership history causes conflict in interpreting the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Constitution reflects the membership ambiguity as it consists of two documents, the Constitution itself and the Bill of Rights, which diametrically oppose one another (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 105-106). The former explains the design for the state and government, emphasizing the unification and neutrality of the state (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 105). Meanwhile, the Bill of Rights emphasizes the individual; it stresses the “individual rights” that people have as culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse citizens (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 112). This fundamental tension within the U.S. Constitution makes it “tricky” to interpret and apply because it is complicated for the state to act within the Constitution’s guidelines when trying to limit cultural separatism for the sake of unification, yet “without violating individual rights” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 124).

A similar tension, stemming from diversity of cultures in private life and yet a unified and neutral government, conjures debate within another sphere - just economic policy. One side argues for government subsidies to support communal life. Meanwhile, the other side argues that government intervention thwarts individual attempts to climb the economic ladder, thus hurting “individual mobility” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 74). These two sides reflect America’s central conflict – “oneness” in politics and “manyness” in private life (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 30). Those who support the first argument, that the government ought to redistribute wealth and provide many welfare programs, contend that America’s history justifies such programs because America was built upon providing a fair and equal
opportunity to people of all cultures (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 66). Meanwhile, those who argue against government sponsorship of such programs point to a different aspect of America’s history to justify their claims. They argue that government intervention to redistribute wealth or provide welfare programs takes liberty away from the individual to act freely in the open market, thus violating America’s basic principles of “liberty, equality, and republicanism” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 30). Although Walzer believes that America’s commitment to preserving pluralism requires the government to provide welfare programs and redistribute wealth, he nevertheless recognizes that America’s history makes the economic debate very obscure and complex.

Similar debate stemming from America’s ambiguous membership history also explains why in the United States, unlike most other countries, politicians treat patriotism as a sphere by “[engaging] in a fierce competition to demonstrate [it]” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 24). To Walzer, America’s conflicting history leads to this odd practice. On the one hand, America is a culturally pluralist society; “[i]t is a country of immigrants who, however grateful they are for this new place, still remember the old places” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 25). At the same time, these immigrants have tried to unify under abstract principles of “freedom, equality, and republicanism” (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 30). This contradiction leads to public skepticism over politicians’ commitment to and balance of America’s principles, forcing political candidates to engage in an “odd competition” to prove their loyalty and commitment to liberty, equality, and republicanism. (Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* 24).
Analyzing the United States sheds light upon how membership policies are not limited to its own sphere, but also affect the distributions of other spheres. As explained, Walzer argues that the United States’ history creates a fundamental tension between private social life and public political life, which ultimately affects other spheres. I think, however, that there is another equally accurate way to describe why the membership sphere affects the distribution of other spheres in the United States. That is, at the beginning stages of the United States’ formation, there was fundamental disagreement over membership policy, what Hing refers to as the “Two Americas”. Both Americas begin with the notion that America is a land of immigrants. The first America, however, accepts people of all differences. The second, meanwhile, views Americans as white, Anglo-Saxon, English speaking and Christian (Hing 5-6). This fundamental tension at the start of the United States was never resolved, and thus has seeped into the debate over the distribution of other spheres. The debate over the distribution of money, education, and healthcare clearly reflect the “Two Americas”. Often times, one side argues that since America was founded as a nation that helped the “tired”, “poor”, and needy, such goods (money, education, healthcare) ought to be distributed according to need. Meanwhile, others argue that distributing according to need would cause laziness and the downfall of society, as would admitting too many needy outsiders. Throughout America’s history, these two viewpoints have been constantly debated and disagreed upon, resulting in different policies at different times. Meanwhile, for nations with long-established histories and majorities, membership is contained to its own sphere. That is, there was no fundamental disagreement regarding membership policies at the start since there was a long-established cultural majority. Even more, in countries such as France
and Denmark, it is generally much more difficult for visiting populations (immigrants, emigrants, guest workers, etc.) to attain citizenship, and thus have much say in political decisions (Walzer, “In Response” 1). Therefore, the same majority population gets a say in political matters, usually reaffirming the already established decided upon principles for the distributions of other spheres. In the United States, fundamental tension over membership policy at its conception creeps into the debate over other spheres’ distributions.

**Conclusion: The Role of a Political Philosopher**

Even if it is true that Walzer’s theory on spheres has a gaping hole – membership is something other than a sphere – his overall internal theoretical style is extremely useful in understanding the important role that the political philosopher plays in a society. Walzer’s theoretical style suggests that he believes that the philosopher’s role is not to try to provide answers for all questions in every society, but rather to provide a framework for people to think about the society in which they live, and provide meaningful criticism based upon it. In other words, Walzer’s theoretical style tasks people to solve societal problems within the political sphere. However, his theoretical framework does not provide citizens a way to ensure that fair and reasonable outcomes emerge out of the political process. Combining aspects from other philosophers’ ideas regarding deliberative democracy could help provide this theoretical framework to citizens, thus satisfying Walzer’s defined role of a political philosopher.
Walzer contrasts his conception of philosophy with Ludwig Wittgenstein who believed that, “‘The philosopher… is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher’” (Walzer, “Philosophy and Democracy” 379). This sort of view applies also to Rawls in his early work. Rawls aspired to devise universal principles of justice, applicable in all developed societies. In sum, it views the political philosopher as a god-like figure who can answer all of society’s difficult questions so long as citizens follow his prescriptions. Walzer, however, does not have this view of a political philosopher. Instead, Walzer views the political philosopher as someone deeply connected to the society he lives in. Instead of providing answers that all citizens should follow, Walzer’s theoretical style relies a great deal upon ordinary citizens to determine answers to their society’s questions about just distributions. This is because Walzer simply provides a theoretical framework – the art of separating society into different spheres – which then requires people, through the political process, to determine whether their society is reaching just distributions of goods based upon its history and culture.

I would submit that while Walzer’s theoretical framework is useful in many instances, he does not have an adequate framework to provide guidance to citizens on some of the more difficult political questions. True, Walzer’s framework works well in many instances. Viewing American society through the lens of spheres would lead many people to similar conclusions regarding certain spheres’ distributions. For example, thinking about the ideas of divine grace and political power in terms of spheres, one would come to the easy conclusion that there ought to be a separation of church and state. However, on other difficult questions, such as membership, Walzer admits that his framework does not lead to a clear answer. He says, “Decisions of this sort [that is,
difficult membership questions] are subject to constraint, but what the constraints are I am not ready to say. It is important first to insist that the distribution of membership in American society, and in any ongoing society, is a matter of political decision” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 40). Thus, Walzer points to the political sphere as being able to resolve these difficult problems such as membership.

Pointing to politics as an answer to solve difficult questions such as membership is problematic because Walzer does not provide a framework that enables people to judge whether fair outcomes emerge from the political process. Walzer describes a number of ways that power can be gained in the political sphere, none of which requires fair outcomes. For one, he argues that the “citizen who makes the most persuasive argument – that is, the argument that actually persuades the largest number of citizens – gets his way” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* 304). He does not address that persuasion may in some instances lead people towards an unfair outcome. He also says that political power is gained by the party who has the best skills in mobilizing, stimulating, provoking, and energizing people to support their cause (Walzer, *Deliberation and What Else?* 65). In addition, politics involves “bargaining” in order to get one’s way and even “scut work” such as “stuffing envelopes, setting up chairs, preparing place cards, handing out leaflets, making phone calls (to ask for signatures or money, or to get people to go to meetings or vote on election day), knocking on doors… and so on (Walzer, *Deliberation and What Else?* 65). Using means to rally support for a particular issue, however, does not guarantee fair distributive principles. True, for some difficult questions where the different sides are potentially equally represented, such as abortion, Walzer’s described political sphere provides a framework for people to solve the issue. People can mobilize
and try to convince others of their stance. I would submit, however, that Walzer’s politics does not ensure that fair outcomes are reached regarding some difficult questions where not everyone’s views can be brought to light, such as the membership sphere. Walzer’s described political process provides a systematic disadvantage for those seeking entry into society; it would be nearly impossible for outsiders to mobilize, stuff mailboxes, and fight for their cause when they are not even members in the community. Therefore, Walzer falls short in providing a framework that can help citizens resolve the membership question.

Adding some principles from another theory – deliberative democracy – would sufficiently provide citizens the necessary framework to solve political problems in a political manner. Deliberative Democracy does not accept all outcomes of the political process, as Walzer seemingly would. Deliberative Democracy argues the political process ought to be constrained by certain principles. For one, many deliberative democrats argue that the political process ought to include all people with different points who can support their position with moral reasoning “that can be accepted by others who are similarly motivated to find reasons that can be accepted by others” (Gutmann and Thompson 54). In exchanging moral reasons with each other, citizens learn all sides of an issue (Smith 61). Once all perspectives are brought to light, and sufficient debate occurs, an outcome must be decided upon. This outcome will likely reflect the common good – not merely a bargain (Smith 63). This is because in the course of exchanging moral reasoning with each other, citizens not only learn all sides of the issue, but also gain “mutual understanding” of their fellow citizens (Smith 61). Therefore, citizens will be more likely able to “accommodate” other people’s preferences through compromising
in order to reach a solution that gives equal recognition to all citizens’ particular claims (Wertheimer 171). This leads to citizens feeling satisfied with and being supportive of the given outcome, which ultimately ensures its success.

Combining Walzer’s framework of spheres and deliberative democracy’s of providing some constraints to the political process not only provides citizens a framework to resolve difficult societal questions, but also helps define the role of a political philosopher in society. Unlike the early Rawls, Walzer and deliberative democrats do not believe that their roles are to provide universal answers about just distributions. Rather, they provide citizens a different perspective on the world, which can provide a framework to help facilitate answering societal questions. This connects the philosopher to the particular community in which he lives. However, there is still yet another layer of complexity to the role that a political philosopher has in society. That is, each society views a philosophers’ role differently and a philosopher with varying degrees of respect, thus affecting the level of influence a philosopher can have in a society. I would submit that American society ought to take more seriously philosophers’ (especially Walzer’s and deliberative democrats’) ideas. For debate in America is particularly difficult because of the unresolved fundamental questions regarding membership at the nation’s formation, which continually causes divisive controversies in the other spheres’ – money, education, and healthcare – distributions. These recurring debates in American society would benefit from philosophers’ ideas, for they could provide a framework to help citizens find common ground to find some answers to difficult issues, one of them being membership.
Works Cited


