

Its many varieties: does liberalism merely alternate between ethics and economics?

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Abstract. I am not sure who said that liberalism merely alternates between ethics and economics – was it Karl Krauss? – but at first glance the claim is plausible. In this paper I argue that there are varieties of liberalism which do not. Some depend on a nature-culture distinction and some appeal to simplicity in a way that seems aesthetic.

Many years ago, in conversation, I heard a quotation that liberalism merely alternates between ethics and economics. That statement sounded plausible to me and I think I accepted it at the time. Who was it by? I don't know. I accepted the proposition then, but I don't accept it now. Perhaps I do accept it if "ethics" is defined in some highly peculiar way, such as "Everything that is not economics and not mathematics and not natural science is ethics," but I presume it was meant to win acceptance while just relying on an ordinary intuitive understanding. I shall present two challenges to it.

1. A literary magazine. Imagine that you start finding out information about literary journals in a country that you know little about, let us call it country X. You find that one literary journal is explicitly nationalist. It says, "We only accept submissions from citizens of country X." You find that another literary journal is not explicitly nationalist. It says, "The editors are based in country X but we accept submissions from all over the world." Looking at the material it publishes, the content does not have to be about country X either.

Let us call the second kind of journal "a liberal literary journal." Why does such a journal exist? This question is likely to be especially pressing if you think that people are

mostly herd-like and tribal and behave in accordance with the saying, “Blood is thicker than water.” There may be ethical reasons, such as “We do not think it right to exclude good contributions from elsewhere.” There may be economic reasons, such as “We cannot compete with the established nationalist journals without taking the best material from anywhere, because those journals attract the best authors from our nation.” I am not sure how exactly to interpret “alternates” in the claim that liberalism merely alternates between ethics and economics, but there is an answer to this question which neither appeals to the ethical nor the economic. It is probably known to some already and reminds me of some French anthropology, but I have not seen it explicitly stated.

According to this answer, different cultural groups have their requirements one must meet in order to count as a fully-fledged member. If one does not, then one may well be regarded as somewhat “unrefined” – closer to animals¹ – but not necessarily immoral, at least as we use the word in analytic philosophy and beyond.² One is regarded as “vulgar,” as the word is used today and for some centuries probably. (People who munch their food loudly at the dinner table, or end sentences with prepositions, etc., may nevertheless be, and be regarded as, morally good people, and some people who eat more quietly and maintain this grammatical tradition may be radically evil.) The editors of the liberal magazine, according to this answer, regard it as unrefined to directly pursue nationalist ends. “Of course, we want mainly authors from our country. But to explicitly include a requirement is like firing people from jobs or smacking your children. How unrefined! How vulgar! You don’t fire people from jobs. You make their lives unbearable and then they leave.”

¹ The connection to French anthropology, which may be a loose one, is that the person belongs to nature rather than culture.

² No distinction is made between immoral and unethical.

This case is interesting, because such a “liberal” may be even more nationalist at heart than the openly nationalist; but there would be a crudeness, in their eyes, a vulgarity, to dropping the mask and directly placing a restriction. One maintains liberal rules but exercises a subtle craft to keep various potential contributors out, making a few concessions to foreigners where shrewd to, ones that the explicitly nationalist do not make (or so one might presume).³ It sounds snobbish, but perhaps it leads to a certain amount of innovation, such as in the art of rejecting submissions. How does one achieve one’s nationalist ends without direct instruction? But it is difficult to prove that there really is this liberal.

2. An unhesitant decision. The most influential liberal philosopher of recent decades is John Rawls. In his reflective equilibrium procedure, if two theories of justice score equally – in that they both fit with moral intuitions taken from sensible unhesitant states of mind, such as the intuition that freedom of speech at university is of value – then one can use simplicity to decide between them (see Kappel 2006). One prefers the simpler theory. Strangely, the procedure does not permit turning to hesitant moral judgments instead, as a very moral person might in a tight referendum decision, hiding away while hesitating even. Using Rawls’s procedure, one does not ask which theory fits better with one’s hesitant moral intuitions, given the equality in relation to non-hesitant ones. The appeal to simplicity is plausibly aesthetic: rather than ethical or economic reasons, one appeals to the aesthetic.

Perhaps the previous kind of liberalism involves an appeal to the aesthetic as well, but appealing to theoretical simplicity is one thing and appealing to a certain conception of what is less repulsively close to animal nature is another. And even if neither appeal is aesthetic, there would be a difference.

³ Note that this liberal does not ignore the (supposedly) tribal nature of human beings, as the economic and moral liberal appear to. They just do not refer to it in their official doctrines.

Appendix

An earlier draft of this paper included some material that might interest readers, some of which has made it into this appendix.

Nozick on Rawls. Robert Nozick draws attention to the aesthetic satisfaction he derives from reading Rawls: “It is a fountain of illuminating ideas, integrated together into a lovely whole.” (1974: 183) I find the book referred to very hard going, and am even inclined to interpret Nozick as referring to Rawls’s system, rather than the book, merely because of this experience of mine, as if Nozick were sure to have this experience as well.⁴ Anyway, probably there is a “liberal” whom one attracts when one develops a lovely systematic whole, and if no such lovely liberal system is available they would support an illiberal system, Nazism even.

An objection to utilitarianism. The concept of a skilled actor is usually used against attempts to identify the mental states of others, but it is potentially a problem for utilitarianism: attempts to implement utilitarian decision-making – to maximize total happiness – can be impeded by those skilled at feigning unhappiness.

References

Kappel, K. 2006. The Meta-Justification of Reflective Equilibrium. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9: 131-147.

Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

⁴ Hard-going material for others may be easier to read if you know the person and are invested in their success.