

On the very idea of the political right wing: a paradox and meta-paradox

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper presents a paradox of the concept of the right wing, because it groups together significantly different political philosophies, in terms of premises and conclusions – ones that recommend a minimal state and ones oriented towards preserving the traditions of a community. It also presents a meta-paradox: everyone has noticed this and yet it is my paradox!

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There are strange concepts which people do not use, or we can devise such strange concepts. They group together very different things and leave us wondering why anyone would group together those things, but not others, under a single heading. We assume that such concepts will not spread. A strange concept might group together members of two very different professions and no one else: if you are a member of one profession or the other, then this concept applies to you. To give a concrete example, one might introduce the word “nursailor” as follows.

(Nursailor definition) Someone is a nursailor if and only if:

(i) they are a nurse;

or

(ii) they are a sailor.

The term applies to nurses who never sail, sailors who never nurse, and those who do both. That term and the associated concept are probably not going to spread. But then what are we to make of the concepts of the political right wing, centre, and left wing? Although they do not appear to strangely group together two very different professions, are they not also

strange in what they group together? I focus on the concept of the right wing below, to introduce a paradox and then a meta-paradox.

I find the concept of the right-wing is applied to very different philosophies. It is applied to the following philosophies:

- (a) The government of a country should protect a minimal set of liberty rights – freedom of speech, of movement, the right to a fair trial, the right to hold private property, etc. – and no more, for moral reasons. To do less, or to do more, would be morally wrong. (See Nozick 1974.)
- (b) The government of a country should protect a minimal set of rights but for economic reasons. Anything more or less would be bad for the economy.
- (c) The government of a country should protect the identity and main traditions of that country, of the national community there.

The premises of these philosophies are very different. Furthermore, with (c), the policies recommended may be very different to (a) and (b). In England, say, taxation is recommended not just for protecting individual rights but also for preserving items of heritage in the country, such as the homes of its celebrated writers, and perhaps the natural environment as well. And in a country with an egalitarian tradition, a person who accepts philosophy (c) will favour taxation for the purpose of redistributing wealth. Given the gulf in premises and potentially in policies accepted by different members of the so-called right wing, this is also a strange concept. More strongly, the concept is paradoxical because: it is part of people's working conceptual equipment (it is a concept regularly used); such a concept presumably has a good rationale for being part of this equipment (a justification); but it is unclear that there is any good rationale for this particular concept, for grouping together the things it groups together while excluding what it excludes.

I am tempted to call that “My paradox of the right wing”! But here is a dialogue I envisage:

Me: This is my paradox, my contribution to political philosophy, or one of them!

Opponent: But everyone has noticed this already.

Me: Well, has anyone stated the paradox? Has anyone made a statement to the effect, “It makes sense to presume there is a good rationale for this concept, given its widespread use, but when you examine it in more detail, it is unclear that there is any good rationale”? And have they offered my reason for why this is unclear? If not, then this is my paradox! I don’t see it discussed in philosophy journals – “This is one solution...”, “This is another...” – but of course the world is wider than what they encompass.

The dialogue gives rise to a meta-paradox: how can it be that “everyone” notices this awkward mixture of what is covered and excluded and yet it is my paradox (assuming it is)?

I should say that I have heard an economist claim that he does not think the two sides of the British conservative party – roughly the libertarian side, that is (a) and (b), and the nationalist side, that is (c) – can function together. That is not so far from the paradox identified. It is also a worrying point for me, because my solution to the paradox would be that historically in some countries, people with the philosophies (a), (b), and (c) manage to resolve their differences within one political party, hence they and their philosophies are grouped together as one political “wing.”

Reference

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