MORAL RELATIVISM: RIGHT OR LEFT?

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Introduction

The philosophical term "moral relativism" has long since crept out of the academy and found its place in the lexicon of public political debate. A term denoting the absence of any absolute standard for judging between what ought to be and what ought not to be has been adopted by many right-wing commentators to critically characterize the left. Social conservatives pin the blame for the loss of values in today's society on the influence of "left-liberal" tolerance and multiculturalism. Certain strands of the left respond by accusing the right of "cultural imperialism", of falsely universalizing Western values and wishing to impose them on other peoples. These mutual accusations play a large part in current portrayals of the left-right dichotomy.

The aim here is to demonstrate that, contrary to these fashionable caricatures, moral relativism can be most suitably designated as definitively right-wing and moral universalism as definitively left-wing. The terms right-wing and left-wing originated in the seating arrangements of the French National Assembly in 1789, where those sitting on the left supported revolutionary change informed by the universalism of the Enlightenment and those sitting on the right supported the conservation of the traditional social order. It may superficially appear that the terms have since undergone a reversal of meaning, with elements of the left claiming to oppose Enlightenment universalism and elements of the right claiming to believe in the universality of Western values. However, a symptomatic analysis of these claims can reveal that the original left-right schema remains operative beneath a surface of rhetorical refractions and distortions. Social conservatives still regard their values as stemming from the traditions of particular countries, not from universal principles, and the

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purported multiculturalism of elements of the left is really an expression of certain values that are meant to transcend any particular culture. Multiculturalism is a universalism that is unaware that it is a universalism; a universalism in denial.

Confusing the Normative and the Meta-Ethical

The lexical imprecision and conceptual confusion surrounding moral relativism are partly the product of its emergence as something of a buzz-word in the political punditry of the mass media. Public figures ranging from Fox News television presenters to the Pope himself have employed it as a term of abuse to be hurled in the direction of those who are perceived to be the purveyors of a licentious social liberalism. Newspaper columnists and populist politicians alike decry the relativism-fueled tolerance that takes the form of a refusal to morally condemn practices that conflict with traditional Western values. For example, Melanie Phillips, a columnist for the socially conservative *Daily Mail* newspaper, regularly rails against a moral relativism that she seems to equate with a general suspension of moral judgement. After the riots in British cities in August 2011, Britain's Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron declared that the riots were caused by moral failings and thus that the appropriate response from the government should not be one that involved moral neutrality. He said, "this moral neutrality, this relativism – it's not going to cut it anymore". It is clear that many right-wingers regard the term 'moral relativism' as being synonymous with moral neutrality.

The mistake here is to regard moral relativism as itself a moral position. The term is being used by media commentators and politicians to refer to the view that as traditional norms have no absolute or objective basis we should not condemn deviations from them. The use of the word "should" here indicates that a moral or normative position, that of a tolerant non-condemnation, is being derived from the belief that morality lacks an absolute basis. Those labeled "moral relativists" are supposedly espousing a "normative moral relativism", the belief that we should tolerate values different to our own, which is based on a "meta-ethical moral relativism", the belief that the only justificatory basis of morality lies within particular cultural traditions, not in absolute or universal principles that lie beyond them. However, "normative moral relativism" is a misnomer and an incoherent concept. A universal principle of tolerance cannot be derived from a belief in the absence of universal principles.

Moral relativism is essentially a meta-ethical concept, a theoretical response to the question of how morals can be justified. It is the belief that

there is no absolute or universal basis for moral values or norms; they are merely derived from and relative to the particular traditions and cultures in which they are found. It could be countered that there is such a thing as a "descriptive moral relativism" that is not meta-ethical. This is the belief that, as a matter of empirical fact, there are no moral values or norms that are shared by all societies and cultures. However, as soon as this belief is used to support or justify any morally relevant judgement or action it ceases to be merely descriptive and becomes a meta-ethical position. The only coherent form of moral relativism that is relevant to any political or moral discussion about what ought to be done is the meta-ethical one.

Conservatism

There is nothing in meta-ethical moral relativism to suggest that moral judgements should be suspended. Moral judgements can still be made on the understanding that their content is entirely the product of tradition and is not justifiable with reference to universal criteria that go beyond all traditions. The idea that morality has its basis in traditional norms and values sounds strangely similar to the doctrines held by social conservatives. Indeed, it would be reasonable to maintain that moral relativism constitutes the very meta-ethical foundation of conservatism itself. It is telling that conservative commentators often explicitly base their own positions on geographically relative terms, like "British values" or "Western values", even when accusing others of moral relativism. The contents of any particular form of conservatism are entirely relative to the historical situation at hand. Conservatives rarely want to go back to what conservatives in earlier periods of history campaigned to retain, such as racial segregation or not allowing women to vote. The contents of conservatism are thus historically and culturally relative.

Social conservatives tend to support their moral beliefs with reference to either tradition or nature. What these two seemingly disparate notions have in common is that they both refer to the given, to the facts at hand. If morality rests on the given, on whatever merely happens to be the case, then its basis requires no justification or legitimation. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume recognized the dangers of such a position when he claimed that it is a mistake to derive an "ought" from an "is", to equate what *should* be the case with what actually *is* the case (Hume, 1978: 469). Ironically, Hume himself not only failed to develop this insight further, he actually betrayed it by developing a theory of morality based entirely on the sentiments that he regarded as naturally occurring in humans. For Hume, there can be no rational basis of either

knowledge or morality, the former being an illusory manifestation of what in reality are nothing other than habitual and customary ways of thinking, the latter being merely a description of some of the emotions that nature has given us. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Hume's sceptical anti-rationalism, his belief that it is impossible to transcend social conventions and reflexive emotional reactions, went hand in hand with a political conservatism that did not wish to disturb the given social fabric.

An emphasis on the importance of adherence to tradition for the maintenance of a healthy social fabric is explicitly pitched against the universalist ideals of the French Revolution in the writings of Hume's near-contemporary Edmund Burke. It is for this reason that Burke is often considered to be the founder of social conservatism. In his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argues that attachment to the bonds of national tradition rather than abstract universal rights conforms to human nature and secures social harmony. He claims that "the rights of Englishmen… as a patrimony derived from their forefathers" provides a more secure moral and social foundation than the "abstract principles" of "the rights of men" (Burke, 1987: 28). For Burke, it is simply "natural" to venerate those who are higher in the established social order. He even advocates "prejudice", describing it as "the general bank and capital of nations" which can enable people to be virtuous without thinking (Burke, 1987: 76). The rejection of universality and the defense of national and traditional prejudice demonstrate that Burkean social conservatism rests on a moral relativist meta-ethical basis.

Exclusivism

The emphasis on the value of prejudice stemming from particular national traditions unites social conservatism with certain forms of nationalism. The nationalism that is of concern here is not the idea that one nation should be opposed to being ruled by another, an idea grounded in the universal principle of the right of nations to self-determination. It is the belief that the nation or the fatherland is of paramount value and that it should assert itself against internal and external threats to its identity. Universality is the abstract form of the threat to this sense of identity from cosmopolitan contaminations. The most well-known cases of such ultra-nationalism are the fascism and Nazism of the early twentieth century. Here there is no pretense of the legal justification of power with reference to any external or transcendent principle; there is just the willful self-assertion of the nation, the state, and its leader. Mussolini himself recognized that fascism has a relativist basis when he said: "If relativism

signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than fascism" (Mussolini, cited in Cook, 1999: 17). This is a normative derivation from meta-ethical relativism that is somewhat different to the notion of multicultural tolerance. Mussolini thought of himself as putting into practice the relativist philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. What Nietzsche calls "perspectivism", the denial of all absolute truths, leads to his view that values are relative to and the expression of a particular will to power, the demand for their universal justification and validity being merely a decadent self-destructive stifling of this will.

The relativist idea that there are no rational grounds to justify any political ideology lies behind forms of conservatism and nationalism that regard values and rights as applying to particular groups and not to everyone. This intrinsic particularism means that such political positions are limited in their global reach. While pragmatic trans-national alliances between those who share conservative or nationalist ideologies often occur, they are ultimately restricted as there is nothing in the ideology that allows for a reconciliation of all humanity. Conservatives in Texas and conservatives in Saudi Arabia are not going to see eye to eye. Russian nationalists hate Poles; Polish nationalists hate Russians. After all, there can be no international brotherhood of xenophobes.

The idea that adopting a political position and identifying oneself with a particular national ideal cannot coherently involve an aspiration towards the reconciliation of all humanity, that it always presupposes an excluded antithetical enemy, was explicitly put forward in the 1920s by the German political philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt. For him, true politics involves making a decision and taking a position against an enemy, a pure decision that is not grounded in any rational universal principle which would potentially enable an ultimate reconciliation with all enemies. A national community is constituted through the exclusion of its non-members. The purpose of the state is to defend the purity of this identity from the threat of contamination by otherness, not to embody and enforce the rights of all. Echoing Burke's "rights of Englishmen", Schmitt wrote in a pamphlet: "All right is the right of a particular *Volk*" (Schmitt, cited in Posner, 2002: 89). Schmitt believed that his moral relativist political theory was realized in the ideology and political practice of the Nazis, with their groundless extra-legal executive decisions and their anti-universalist assertion of a particular group against those designated to be definitively enemies.

The idea of the maintenance of the cohesion of a community and its identifying traditions through the bestowal of enemy status onto certain

groups of people seamlessly unites Schmitt's conservatism with his embrace of ultra-nationalism. It may seem strange then that a thinker who was largely forgotten for many decades has undergone a remarkable revival of interest over the last twenty years amongst academic left-wingers, such as Chantal Mouffe (2005: 117-134). There are two identifiable reasons for this. One is Schmitt's emphasis on the inescapability and irreducibility of the political, the political as that which cannot be universalized, which always involves setting up an adversary, which demands the taking of a position as opposed to a neutral apolitical disengagement, and which contrasts with more typically conservative pseudo-apolitical references to nature and common sense. The other reason is the influence of certain forms of epistemological and historical relativism, under the banner of postmodernism, which have involved an understanding of twentieth century totalitarianism as being the culmination of the rationalist totalizing universalism of the Enlightenment, an understanding which enables Schmitt's anti-rationalist relativism to be seen as anti-totalitarian despite his own personal commitments.

This account of the intellectual origins of totalitarianism is flawed, because it relies on the assumption that there is a real connection between ambitious "totalizing" theories which aim to amplify their explanatory reach and a totalitarian political stance. In fact, the relationship between totalization in thought and totalitarianism in politics is not one of logical entailment, but is merely a devious lexical slippage. The rational universalism of the Enlightenment was not appreciated by the advocates of fascism and, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, "the philosophy that legitimizes a totalitarian regime is generally some kind of evolutionary or vitalist relativism" (Žižek, 1996: 5). A universal totality is a very different kind of thing to the restricted totality of a closed identity. As Hegel's philosophy could be seen as the ultimate example of a universalistic rational totalization, it is perhaps instructive that Schmitt celebrated Hitler's accession to power as the day that "Hegel died" (Schmitt, 2002: 35).

Returning to the first reason for Schmitt's resurrection by the academic left, his notion of the irreducibility of the political accords with the left-wing urge to politicize what conservative ideology usually masks or naturalizes. Indeed, similarities can be discerned between Schmitt's conception of the political and that of Lenin. Lenin also held that taking a partisan position is unavoidable and that there is no transcendent impartiality through which disputes could be arbitrated, the difference here being that the relevant enemy is not a national or ethnic adversary, but a class one. The Soviet Union's obsession with "enemies of the people" gave it a thoroughly Schmittian aspect. What appears to be Lenin's moral

relativism stems from an interpretation of Marx in which morality is nothing more than a refracted manifestation in the ideological superstructure of certain aspects of the socio-economic infrastructure, of the social relations of production. According to this interpretation, morality is socially relative, relative to particular class interests, and historically relative, relative to the mode of production in place at a particular time. However, unlike the neo-Schmittian academic left of today who believe in the irreducibility of political antagonism, Marxism of any interpretation involves the belief in the eventual reconciliation of all humanity in a just society. The proletariat is the "universal class" whose victory will lead to the eventual abolition of all class distinctions. This is an eschatological chink in the relativist edifice that is absent from right-wing ideologies.

Transcendent Arbitrariness: the Religious Right

Redemptive eschatology and universalism are features of Christianity, yet more often than not religion is associated with the right of the political spectrum. This may be due to religions usually being embroiled in the traditions of particular cultures, but the major religions seem to make universal moral claims. The Catholic Church is, of course, the "universal church". However, this does not significantly trouble the argument that right-wing ideologies are morally relativistic. Religion is by no means inherently right-wing. From radical protestant reformers like Thomas Müntzer to Latin American liberation theologians, Christians have often been on the side of revolutionaries struggling for equality.

It is religious fundamentalism that is both right-wing and morally relativistic. This is because fundamentalists believe that something is right because it is written in a holy book, not that something is written in the holy book because it is right. This dichotomy is a version of the dilemma formulated by Socrates in Plato's "Euthyphro" dialogue: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, 1997: 9). The fundamentalist position here is a case of moral relativism, because the view that God's will is in no need of further justification effectively means that what is right is relative to the willful whim of a particular being and that there are no more grounds for following this than there would be for following the whim of any other particular being, except for the mere fact that the particular being in question is very powerful. Fundamentalism can be defined as a normative moral absolutism resting on a meta-ethical moral relativism, which is to say that the normative "everyone must follow these rules" rests on the

meta-ethical "for no other reason than that this powerful individual says so".

Of course, there are many whose religious beliefs do not fall on the moral relativist side of the Euthyphro dilemma, but who nevertheless adhere to some form of political conservatism. However, the conservatism is based on merely traditional values whereas their eschatological universalism is, unlike that of the Marxists, reserved for the after-life, a relativism of this world and an absolutism of the next world. A similar compartmentalization can be seen in the coexistence of an adherence to moral absolutes at the personal level and a cynical realism at the political level. Unlike the left, who often conflate morality and politics, such as with the feminist motto "the personal is political", the right tends to rigorously separate them. The socio-political realism that ensues from this separation is encapsulated by Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand", the idea that the best way to achieve the common good is to avoid, at the political level, putting into practice moral principles whose aim is to achieve the common good.

This compartmentalization and separation of morality from politics is informed by the idea that any attempt to improve society by means of political control and intervention, however well-intended, inevitably leads to unintended undesirable consequences, whether they take the form of economic decline or political tyranny. The conservative political philosopher Eric Voegelin argues that political attempts to create an ideal society have evil consequences, because such attempts are manifestations of the epistemological and gnoseological arrogance and hubris of humanity. This arrogance is essentially the idea that human knowledge is ultimately capable of working out the means of creating heaven on earth, an idea that Voegelin refers to as "Gnosticism". For Voegelin, modern ideologies that ultimately aim to achieve an earthly paradise are guilty of "immanentizing" eschatology, the moral dangers of which lie in its denial of transcendence, the denial of any authority above and beyond humanity (Voegelin, 1987: 163). The ultimate fulfillment of human spiritual aims lies exclusively in the transcendent heavenly realm and it is a grave mistake to try to bring about such fulfillment in the secular political world. This viewpoint echoes a certain line of thinking within the Christian tradition that advocates a rigorous separation between the spiritual and the secular worlds, a line that includes Augustine's distinction between the heavenly city and the earthly city and Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, an idea that ultimately stems from a particular interpretation of Jesus's statement, "Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and unto God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21).

Voegelin's political conservatism is based on the recognition of the importance of avoiding the implementation of moral absolutes in political practice. This is because for him the ideal of how things ought to be is not amenable to human knowledge; any claims to such knowledge are false and are to be dismissed with the pejorative term "Gnosticism". These claims are false and dangerous, because through them humans are presuming to accede to what is the rightful preserve of God. What this means is that moral absolutes should not inform human socio-political aspirations, because these absolutes are transcendent with regard to human knowledge. If they are transcendent in this manner then such absolutes can only appear in this world, in the realm of immanence, in the form of the arbitrary dictates of a God understood as mere authority. In this way Voegelin falls on the moral relativist side of the Euthyphro dilemma.

The Libertarian Market

The need to avoid the unintended consequences of political intervention is also a key characteristic of the more secular-minded proponents of *laissez-faire* economic liberalism, the so-called right-wing libertarians. Out of Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" of the free market through which the common good is furthered by the self-interested behaviour of individuals in interaction, Friedrich Hayek develops a social theory of a "spontaneous order" (Hayek, 1967: 163) that can best occur when the state restricts itself to providing nothing more than the conditions necessary for a free market to function. A social system based on the autonomous and self-regulatory functioning of market forces would amount to, in the words of Hayek, "a society which does not depend for its functioning on our finding good men for running it" (Hayek, 1948: 11-12). The "spontaneous order" of a free society is thus not a product of the implementation of ideals, values, or principles; it is "the result of human action but not of human design" (Hayek, 1967: 96). Humans cannot be trusted to make the right decisions. For Hayek, it is better to rely on the market system than on human design, because of the fallibility of human knowledge. This epistemological modesty leads to the meta-ethical modesty of moral relativism, which Hayek explicitly endorses (Hayek, 1976: 25).

However, not all right-libertarians would agree that their position involves the separation of politics from moral absolutes. Robert Nozick bases his libertarian political philosophy on what he regards as Kantian meta-ethical principles (Nozick, 1999: 30-33). Here the veneration of individual free choice in a free market society free from state interference is advocated not on the basis of its positive consequences, of its promotion

of the common good, but because it is morally right in principle. The function of the minimal state is to uphold the liberty of each person, protecting them from coercive violations of their liberty, not to engage in such violations itself. An example Nozick gives of the state violating the liberty of the individual is the use of taxation to redistribute wealth through the funding of welfare programmes. The segment of the worker's labour that creates the wealth that is taken away as tax is effectively forced labour (Nozick, 1999: 169-172). For Nozick, coercion of this kind is morally wrong, because it violates the Kantian principle that people must be treated as ends-in-themselves and not utilized as mere means to other ends.

It may appear that the case of Nozick would seriously undermine any hypothesis regarding the morally relativistic nature of right-wing ideologies. However, Nozick's position relies on a thoroughgoing restriction and distortion of the very Kantian principle that he himself invokes, such that it ceases to be recognizable as a meta-ethical principle at all. The principle in question is Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative: "*So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only*" (Kant, 2005: 88). Nozick interprets this to mean that each person is a "self-owner", not to be owned or used by anyone else. This entails that a person has the right to do what she wants and to dispose of her legitimately gained property as she wishes, free from external coercion, as long as her actions do not violate the self-ownership and property rights of others. Property is legitimately gained through "acquisition" of that which was previously not owned by others, by means of labour or discovery, or through voluntary "transfer", by means of trade or gift-giving rituals such as inheritance (Nozick, 1999: 150-153). The *status quo* of the wealth distribution in a particular society is then ultimately legitimated by the categorical imperative as Nozick understands it, so long as that *status quo* results historically from legitimate property transactions. However, Nozick's use of a form of the categorical imperative to legitimate a hierarchical socio-economic system containing huge wealth and opportunity gaps, gaps largely the product of privilege and inheritance, restricts its range of applicability to such an extent that it ceases to be a categorical imperative at all, and effectively becomes a hypothetical imperative. Of course, in Kantian terms a restricted hypothetical imperative is not a moral one. An example of such an imperative in this case could take the form of a conditional statement such as, "Do not treat a person as a means to an end *unless* they voluntarily present themselves as such under pressure of circumstance". According to Nozick, when the state accrues tax revenue

from part of a person's work it is effectively forcing the person to engage in unpaid labour and is thus treating that person as a means and not an end, but when an employer accrues surplus value from someone's labour this employee is not having her self-ownership compromised simply because she, in a formal sense, voluntarily entered into the contract, even if she had no real choice due to her economic circumstances. Constraints that unjustifiably hamper a person's liberty are only recognized by Nozick if they are narrowly legalistic, which is why he cannot recognize the way in which economic circumstances can seriously constrain a person's autonomy, circumstances that are the product of a system which is created by people and which are thus morally relevant. Nozick's attempt to derive a defense of libertarian capitalism from the moral absolute of the categorical imperative is ultimately untenable.

Laissez-faire capitalism is sometimes defended in meritocratic terms and thus in universally principled terms of fair reward for people who deserve it. This is expressed most clearly in Ludwig von Mises phrase, "Under capitalism everybody is the architect of his own fortune" (Mises, 1944: 100). In this ideology that states that the rich are rich because they are talented and hard-working and the poor are poor because they are feckless and lazy a universal egalitarian level playing field is assumed. The ideology is inconsistent, because the myth of an existent meritocracy is used to support the maintenance of a social hierarchy formed by inherited wealth. Any ideology that consistently aimed to create a substantive level playing field in the first place would be unlikely to be thought of as right-wing, even if that level playing field took the form of a market system.

Pseudo-Universalism

Right-wing political realism which separates moral absolutes from the political domain contrasts with the seeming idealism of the tendency on the right that has come to be known as neo-conservatism. The latter is generally associated with the belief in a strident assertion of the universality and superiority of Western political and economic values, largely in the area of foreign policy. While neo-conservatives claimed to support American military interventionism in places like Iraq on the grounds that it would promote democracy and universal human rights, the left saw it as imperialism, the expropriation of the wealth of another country to serve particular interests.

Many political commentators and journalists have associated neo-conservatism with the influence of the philosopher Leo Strauss. This

association is based largely on the fact that a number of neo-conservatives, including some who were involved in the Bush administration, were once taught by Strauss or by his students. However tenuous his connection to neo-conservatism is, it is certainly the case that Strauss was a highly influential conservative political philosopher. It is also the case that he criticized liberalism for encouraging what he called "relativism", something that he thought led to nihilism. He uses the term 'relativism' in the normative sense, as he conflates it with the notion of tolerance (Strauss, 1965: 6). While he may be opposed to normative relativism, Strauss is himself a relativist at the meta-ethical level. He argues that morality comes from the arbitrariness of religious revelation rather than from rational deliberation, because being is fundamentally unintelligible and reason cannot ultimately justify itself (Strauss, 1965: 106-107). Despite attacking historicism for its relativistic encouragement of nihilism, he claims that "all natural right is changeable" (Strauss, 1965:157-159).

In his essay entitled "Relativism", he criticizes liberals such as Isaiah Berlin for what he considers to be their relativism, but the reason behind his criticism is that the liberals elevate tolerance to an absolute principle and that such tolerance stops people from believing in any principles (Strauss, 1989: 15). Later in the same essay the dismissive tone gives way to an approving one when Strauss discusses Nietzsche's relativism. Nietzsche is party to "a truth that is deadly", the relativity and lack of "objective validity of any principles of thought and action", but, unlike that of the liberals, his philosophy is an attempt to circumvent the nihilism that this insight engenders (Strauss, 1989: 25). While in the "Relativism" essay Strauss makes reference to Nietzsche's notion of a revaluation of all values which is a life-affirming creative act that avoids nihilism, in general what Strauss takes from Nietzsche is his elitism and exclusivism. In his book *Natural Right and History* Strauss suggests that the latter provides Nietzsche with an alternative means of averting nihilism to mere life-affirmation. This alternative would be to write the relativistic "theoretical analysis of life" in an "esoteric" manner, such that only an exclusive elite would be exposed to the "deadly truth" (Strauss, 1965: 26). Strauss is really talking about himself rather than Nietzsche here and the 'esoteric' is a recurrent theme throughout his writings. The disjuncture between meta-ethical relativism and normative absolutism takes the form of the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric in Strauss's work. For Strauss, writers who come to relativistic conclusions through philosophical reasoning should communicate these insights in an indirect and coded way, so that the "deadly truth" is only accessible to the elite few who are strong enough to deal with it. Such writers should, in the same texts,

communicate in an explicit exoteric way a different message for the mediocre masses, so that the masses can be protected from the nihilistic implications of the "deadly truth" of relativism. The message to be exoterically conveyed is that the norms and values of the society that people live in are absolute and unchanging. Strauss identifies this duplicity with Plato's notion of the "noble lie" that is necessary for social cohesion. Strauss's Nietzschean noble lie is a reversal of Plato's, in that the Platonic lie involves hiding the truth of human equality and universality behind a racial myth in order to encourage people to accept the roles assigned to them in the ideal state, whereas the Straussian lie involves hiding the truth of relativity and contingency behind the myth of the universal applicability of a particular culture's norms and values.

Universalism in Denial

As with Strauss's critique of liberal tolerance, the contemporary right-wing characterization of the left as being in thrall to a morally vacant relativism is based on the idea that the promotion of tolerance and diversity leads to a nihilistic non-commitment to any values. The left in question here is not the traditional left that aims to achieve socio-economic justice, but the "postmodern" left associated with so-called "identity politics" and multiculturalist pluralism. This tendency draws much of its inspiration from Michel Foucault, who argues that universal principles and the idea of a universal human nature should not be affirmative reference points for a genuinely emancipatory politics, because they inevitably bear within themselves particular structures of repression and exclusion. As universalism is considered to be only ever an imperialistic product of the culture that produced it, relativism is employed to enable emancipatory theory to avoid surreptitiously and unintentionally reproducing some of the subtle forms of domination embedded in the social formation it is submitting to critique. What we have here is a critical relativism enlisted to strengthen and deepen the critique of given power structures – a left-relativism.

This kind of relativism informs the "radical democratic" political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that the aim of politics should not be to achieve a universalist consensus, as this would always ultimately exclude and silence groups and individuals whose demands and needs were not even envisaged by any particular determinate emancipatory theory. In order to avoid this danger, antagonism and dissensus should be regarded as irreducible. The traditional left-wing emphasis on class-based politics meant that the needs of people identified

and oppressed in terms of gender, race, and sexuality were ignored and marginalized. No political practice, whatever its intentions, can anticipate all the forms of exclusion and suppression that may arise, so a democratic space open to dissensus is always needed. For Laclau, there can be no definitive idea of the "good" that is not open to the "possibility of challenge" (Laclau, 1996: 100).

However, this "postmodern" tendency is only identifiably left-wing because of its protest against given hierarchies and exclusionary discriminations. Its supposed relativism is really just a radicalization of emancipatory egalitarianism, one that promotes resistance to the repressive and exclusionary power structures that lie at the heart of the very constitution of identities. It appears to be relativistic, because it resists the homogenizing and imperialistic strictures of merely traditional values that are falsely presented as universally applicable. It is not relativistic, because its resistance involves an implicit appeal to freedom and equality as universal values. It is assumed that discriminations and repressions should be resisted on principle rather than accepted as constitutive and enabling features of social cohesion. Foucault at one point goes so far as to admit that his concern with "the undefined work of freedom" concurs with Kant's notion of "enlightenment" as the maturity of self-determination and autonomy (Foucault, 2007: 110-114).

Whether left-wing political philosophies think they are relativistic or not, they are all marked by a demand for both equality and a liberty that is predicated on there being equality. This is what Étienne Balibar calls "equaliberty [*égaliberté*]", the idea that liberty as "non-coercion" and equality as "non-discrimination" are inseparable, such that "abolishing or fighting discrimination also implies abolishing or fighting constraint and coercion" (Balibar, 2002: 166). As an abstract ideal, equaliberty is affirmed categorically and unconditionally, as exceeding any determinate context. The inseparability of non-discrimination and non-coercion can be seen in the fact that Kant claims that the imperatives "to act on a principle one can willingly universalize" and "to treat people as ends-in-themselves" are different ways of formulating what is essentially the same categorical imperative.

Conclusion

The characteristically left-wing affirmation of socio-political equality derives from moral universalism, the normative consistency required by the categorical imperative. The characteristically right-wing political affirmation of given hierarchies and of the interests of certain groups to the

exclusion of others can only be based on a form of moral relativism. The popular portrayal of the left-right dichotomy that reverses this schema is unfounded. The conservative idea that particular traditions are the only sources of normativity, the nationalist exclusion of certain groups from moral consideration, the moral arbitrariness of religious fundamentalism, and the market-libertarian requirement to rigorously separate politics from moral deliberation, all indicate that the family of right-wing ideologies are bound together by an implicit meta-ethical relativism. When certain segments of the left claim to follow a form of moral relativism they are mistakenly using the term to refer to an affirmation of universal equality and liberty against the imperialistic false universalization of the interests of particular dominant groups.

It is sometimes said that the distinction between left and right has outlived its usefulness and that its persistence merely serves to obscure our understanding of the variety of political persuasions. If the distinction is framed in terms of the meta-ethical basis of either side it can be revealed that the intuitive and traditional placing of the variety of political standpoints on certain sides of the dividing line remains largely intact. This framing serves to clarify the meaning of the distinction in the face of the prevailing mutual and self mischaracterizations that the proponents of left and right frequently engage in. Essentially, what the terms left and right refer to is the meta-ethical orientation of political positions, with the range of left-wing positions characterized by moral universalism and the range of right-wing positions characterized by moral relativism.

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