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### ON LIBERTY AND PHILOSOPHY

As a student of philosophy who also has a concern for individual liberty, I wish to examine the relations between political philosophy and other branches of philosophy, and especially, the effects that one's positions from certain other philosophical disciplines may have on one's general stance towards liberty. Although it may perhaps be thought that the direction of causation is more often the other way, it is my thesis that theories in other branches of philosophy frequently can provide bases, both logically and psychologically, for broad political attitudes. This is most obviously true of moral theories, but in the succeeding I will undertake to show how, perhaps surprisingly, theories of epistemology and of philosophy of mind also play this role. Thus, there are theories of knowledge and of metaphysics that, both logically and psychologically, do not sit well with classical liberal attitudes, and there are others that do mix well.

The import of this discovery should not be construed as the lesson that one should (assuming the desirability of political liberty) rationalize positions in various fields of philosophy to encourage the desired political results. Rather, I intend for this to be first of all simply an interesting investigation. Secondly, I entertain the hope that perhaps such an exhibition of the relatedness of different fields can stimulate some interest on the part of those already interested in liberalism in non-political philosophy, and vice versa. Third, if a further lesson is to be drawn, it should be that it is a good thing for liberals that the views which I shall speak of as inimical to respect for freedom, actually turn out to be false, and that their falsity, when appreciated, is an argument (possibly the main argument) for the classical liberal program.

Given that, it would be interesting and useful to examine in detail why the views that I will characterize as being conducive to respect for freedom are correct; however, I have only space enough in a single article to give this matter the most brief, and not completely convincing, remarks. More full-blown

arguments must be reserved to other papers.<sup>1</sup>

### **The influence of philosophy of mind on political theory**

Philosophy of mind, roughly, is the branch of metaphysics that is concerned with the nature of the mind. In practice, philosophy of mind has always focused almost entirely on the mind/body problem and (if this is part of philosophy of mind) the issue of free will.

The mind/body problem, roughly, poses the question of the nature of the relation between the mind and the body.<sup>2</sup> Concerning this question, two broad theories can be identified that currently hold some sway among philosophers and probably the lay public as well. The first is traditionally called materialism, though the name "physicalism" is growing in fashion. This is the view that everything in the world is physical. Thus, in particular, beliefs, conscious experiences, and everything else mental, if they exist at all, must really be physically constituted. The second view, dualism, holds that the world contains at least two qualitatively distinct kinds of things, namely, mental things and physical things. There are more and less extreme versions of each theory. The 'radical' materialist wing claims that there is no such thing as consciousness<sup>3</sup>, while the more moderate wing claims instead that consciousness is really a physical process<sup>4</sup>. The extreme form of dualism holds that there are separate, entirely mental entities, which could be called "minds" or "souls,"<sup>5</sup> whereas the moderate form states that there are only distinct mental *properties*, which certain physical objects (e.g., people) have<sup>6</sup>.

The issue of free will breaks down to two questions, viz., What is free will? and, Do we have it? Nobody really knows exactly what free will is, but vague theories about its nature can be divided into two classes, namely, (1) theories according to which free will is something it would be possible for purely physical entities to have, and (2) views according to which mere physical objects cannot have free will. If one subscribes to the first type of theory, one will probably also say that we have free will and that we are mere physical objects (this fits with moderate materialism). If one takes the second view, one

will probably be either a radical materialist who denies the existence of free will or a dualist who affirms its reality.

Having now briefly sketched the terrain that I want to consider, we are in a position to ask our question of interest, which is, What could these ideas have to do with political liberalism? To answer that, however, I want to first discuss the nature of liberalism. Liberalism is a political philosophy, and a political philosophy is a type of normative theory: liberalism is primarily about what things are good/bad or should/should not be done, in a certain area.<sup>7</sup> Now, value properties (goodness, wrongness, and the like) are generally admitted to be what philosophers call "supervenient."<sup>8</sup> What this essentially means is that the value properties of any object, action, or event are determined by its nature (as specified in non-evaluative terms). Thus it would be illogical to hold of two otherwise identical actions, that one was right and the other wrong - there must be some descriptive difference between them that makes one right and the other wrong.<sup>9</sup> If this is right, as it surely is, then any normative theory ought to flow from a descriptive theory. If one thinks that a certain object is good, then it must be because of one's prior views about its descriptive nature.

Libertarianism and liberalism center on a value claim about human beings, sc. the claim that people have rights, which entails that treating them in certain invasive ways is wrong. Therefore, libertarians must think that they know something about the nature of human beings (other than our having rights) which differentiates us from other objects that do not have moral rights. And that is the crux of the matter: what is so special about human beings such that it is allowable, for example, to own any object in the world except a human being?

The metaphysical theories that I have named above have a direct bearing on this issue, for what they say about the nature of people. In essence, what the materialist position lays down is that *there is no qualitative difference* between humans and inanimate objects; we in fact are nothing but complicated assemblages of inanimate objects. Given that assumption, it would seem difficult to justify the very radical qualitative differences that common sense morality sees in the value and appropriate treatment of humans as opposed to inanimate objects. If

moral rights are 'supervenient,' and if the materialist position as stated is true, then it would appear that humans should have approximately similar rights to inanimate objects (that is, none).<sup>10</sup>

This argument is not airtight. It is within the bounds of logical possibility to maintain that the special nature of human beings that gives us rights is some physical property or properties having nothing to do with our consciousness. Perhaps we have rights because we are bipedal and lacking in feathers. But this is hardly plausible. Rather than attempt to consider all the different physical properties of human beings, I shall merely be content to note that any materialist who wishes to assign humans a special moral status can consistently justify this only by appealing to some property or properties that (1) are entirely physical, (2) are universally present in humans, (3) are absent from everything else that does not have rights, and (4) have a plausible moral significance. This task appears difficult, though (as a matter of principle) I cannot prove it to be impossible.

There is a second, worse difficulty for materialists which I shall mention in passing. It is that it is hard to see how the materialist's universe can accommodate any values whatsoever, liberal or other. Value properties ostensibly do not have any physical existence. Therefore, *prima facie*, anyone who truly believes that the universe is entirely physical cannot accept any moral theory.

Dualism skates past these difficulties. The dualist will most naturally argue, quite plausibly, that human beings are entitled to special consideration because we are conscious beings, and perhaps also because we possess free will, which sets us apart from mere physical objects.

The second metaphysical issue that I mentioned was that of free will. Like materialism, the view that there is no free will is radically subversive of all moral theories as such. For to say that a person ought to behave in certain ways and not in others implies, as is commonly noted, that he has a choice of various ways of behaving. Thus someone who denies free choice cannot accept any normative theory.

Moreover, the denial of free will is especially inimical to liberalism. Liberalism, after all, places central importance on the value of freedom. Now

political freedom, which is the freedom that results when other people do not interfere with one, is not the same thing as freedom of the will, which is the innate capacity of making choices from among available alternatives; however, I do see an interesting connection between the two kinds of freedom: it is hard to see how political freedom could be valuable, if even meaningful, in a world in which nobody could control his own actions in the first place. What sense could we make of a plea for respecting people's choices in certain areas on the assumption that there really is no such thing as a free choice? It would appear that, though freedom of the will by no means guarantees political freedom, it is at least a precondition on the desirability of political freedom.

The emotional significance of materialism is something more vague but probably more evident than its logical implications (or quasi-implications). A world-view which reduces all of us to physical mechanisms essentially indistinguishable from mindless automata simply has the effect of undermining one's respect for human beings and sense of human dignity on an emotional level. Such a theory produces the feeling of being stranded in a universe devoid of meaning. There is probably a good reason for this, namely the argument above to the effect that no difference of kind between humans and inanimate objects suggests no difference in value between humans and inanimate objects.

The liberal conception of humans as possessing inherent, inviolable rights, on the other hand, seems to express a strong, fundamental respect for human dignity.

Because of this, as a matter of psychology, we might expect materialism and tyrannical ideology to be championed by the same people, that is, people who are hostile towards humanity; and we might expect dualism to correlate with liberalism and respect for humanity. This of course is no airtight argument either. It only points to a certain tendency. Doubtless many exceptions can be found; however, there is a certain amount of highly suggestive empirical evidence.

Consider the case of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes is famous for exactly two things: first, his materialist metaphysic claimed that the world is composed of

matter and that mental phenomena are nothing but motions occurring in the body; second, his equally extreme and equally hard to swallow political philosophy constitutes one of the few academically reputable defenses of absolute government. Hobbes argued, in brief, that human beings in a state of nature would be constantly fighting, stealing, and attacking each other, and that the only solution to this problem is for them to all agree to give one man absolute power - that way, he'll be able to protect us from each other. Once this social contract is established, Hobbes believed that there is no limit on what the sovereign may legitimately do.

John Locke, on the other hand, was arguably liberalism's most influential and illustrious champion, and he, though not particularly known for it, was a radical, Cartesian dualist.

And Marxism's endorsement of 'dialectical materialism,' of course, hardly need be mentioned, as well as its commitment to tyrannical social order.

Moving into more modern times, behaviorism's arguably most well-known champion, B.F. Skinner, has infamously proposed that society be remodeled such that a dictatorial government molds all of its citizens according to Skinner's methods of behavioral conditioning, in a book whose very title (*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*) is an explicit expression of hostility to freedom and human dignity. Skinner also holds basically that consciousness does not exist and that psychology studies only behavior.

Ayn Rand, the 20th century's strongest defender of the ideas that spawned libertarianism, has not made her view of the mind/body problem entirely clear, but her insistence on the reality of free will and of consciousness has been particularly emphatic.

John Rawls, author of the very influential defense of radical redistribution of wealth, *A Theory of Justice*, is opposed to the doctrine of freedom of the will.

These correlations, then, would certainly seem to suggest that our analysis of the relation of philosophy of mind to political philosophy is correct.

**The influence of epistemology on political theory**

With regard to epistemology we will not find the same kind of obvious empirical correlations with political theories as we did in the case of philosophy of mind; however, I will argue that there is at least a loose logical and psychological connection between a certain general stance in the theory of knowledge and a pro-liberty stance in political theory.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge - what is it, what kinds are there, and how does one get it? Traditionally, answers to the last question have been dominated by two schools of thought, known as empiricism and rationalism. The basic idea of empiricism is that all knowledge is derived from experience. Rationalism counters that there is a certain amount of highly general innate knowledge (of things such as the law of non-contradiction and other laws of logic) that we must apply, together with our observations as minor premises, in order to deduce most of the things we know. Each of these schools of thought has an illustrious history not particularly associated with totalitarianism.

There is, however, a third, much neglected alternative. It is possible to maintain that there is a significant, interesting class of things that one can come to consider, apply one's best judgement to, and thereupon immediately see intellectually that they are correct. Such knowledge would thus not be innate nor yet derived from experience, and could be described as 'intuitive.' This is the core idea of intuitionism, though intuitionism may also include a few other, secondarily important ideas that are related by lending the core idea support, receiving support from it, or else being supported by similar arguments. For example, it would be intuitionistic to claim that there are certain basic concepts (such as 'good,' 'consciousness,' and 'time' for instance) that cannot be analyzed in terms of any simpler ideas, and therefore are indefinable, but are grasped 'intuitively,' which is to say, directly and without recourse to something else to explain them. Just as, for obvious reasons, not all knowledge can be derived, similarly not all concepts can be defined (for this would produce an infinite regress). But this does not imply the presence of innate knowledge or ideas; rather, argues the intuitionist, it implies the existence of a human capacity of intuition - i.e., of grasping new truths or new ideas directly.

And once this general capacity is recognized, it then becomes easy to understand numerous human activities as being carried out through the use of intuition. For instance: Chess players often learn certain common rules of good play that are supported by reasonable arguments, experience, or both. For instance: Rooks are worth five 'points,' bishops three, pawns one, etc., and you should always trade pieces if you can get more points than you lose; try to control the center of the board; castle early; be aggressive; and so on. Now there are a few philosophically interesting things about these rules. First, they are often vague and subject to interpretation; there are, however, no rules provided for interpreting the rules (which could start an infinite regress). Second, they clearly are not sufficient to completely determine play; they leave a wide range open to judgement (otherwise, chess wouldn't be a very interesting game, would it?) Third, even these rules are not absolute, or to be followed blindly. Sometimes, when the situation calls for it, they should be broken. And there are no rules provided for identifying when the situation calls for it; you simply must use your best judgement.<sup>11</sup> Fourth, in spite of these qualifications, the rules are useful and true. Fifth, also in spite of the limitations stated, it is possible, even within the bounds of all known rules, to play chess better or worse - the lack of precise rules apparently does not mean that people can only move the pieces around arbitrarily or at random. How is this possible? Well, it would seem that to play chess well requires the use of intuitive judgement applied frequently to the particular circumstances of the game. Now this chess example is only an illustration of a general point. An intuitionist would tend to see the same sort of thing as applying to virtually all human activities - i.e., he would tend to think that in most things that one does, it is necessary to apply personal judgement to particular circumstances, in addition to keeping in mind certain general rules of thumb.

Now this is the view that I am going to argue fits in most easily with liberalism, for several reasons.

First, there is the point, inspired by Hayek, who complains against 'Cartesian rationalism' extensively<sup>12</sup>, that the rationalist idea that all knowledge is derived from and must be brought into accord with a limited number



of self-evident principles tends, when applied to the political realm, to inspire a certain confidence in the prospects for central social planning. If political and social truths follow the rationalistic model, then surely it should be possible for a central authority, grasping these few axioms, to figure out in detail the appropriate structure of society. Now, of course, this is another non-airtight argument. Rationalism does not logically compel one to support central planning, but the spirit of confidence in our ability to discover the system of the universe that rationalism stems from seems, at least on an emotional level, to comport with a spirit of confidence in the possibility of discovering/creating the system of society.

Second, there is the Hayekian point about the problem of access to information: a central authority would only have access to sufficient information for directing the economy and society in general if the important information existed in the form of a relatively few, simple rules that he could grasp and then impose on society. However, if the competent performance of most tasks that are important to human life requires intuitive judgements that are specific to the particular situation at hand, then only people familiar with - that is to say, the individuals in - those situations will be capable of making correct decisions about how these tasks are to be performed. Hence, central planning becomes impossible.

Third, intuitionism represents the best way to defend moral realism and the doctrine of natural rights. The proposition that people have a right to do as they wish with their own persons and property is certainly what one would call intuitively obvious. Comparatively, the other main theories about the source of knowledge of principles of natural rights render such knowledge far less secure. Empiricism, for instance, historically led to the logical positivists' famous denial, among other things, of the reality of moral knowledge. The basic reasoning was this: sense perceptions are the source material of empirical knowledge; but moral rights and values are entirely invisible, inaudible, intangible, etc.; there is no way of empirically verifying moral propositions; and, as empiricists think, all knowledge must be empirical; therefore, it is impossible to have knowledge of morality. Rationalists could claim that moral

principles are known innately, but this runs into two problems. First, observations show no evidence that newborn infants understand moral or political principles; people do not acquire knowledge of morality until several years later. Second, (as in the chess example) all known moral rules are not sufficient to determine in all cases whether an action is right or wrong, and nearly every moral principle that can be stated is susceptible to some plausible counter-examples. (For instance, is exhaling near someone and thereby creating a possibility of giving them germs a case of violating their rights? It probably depends on the probabilities involved, the seriousness of the possible disease, the feasibility of avoiding the other person, etc.; but this is an issue not addressed by a strict reading of libertarian theory. It requires common sense. Numerous similar cases subject to interpretation and/or application of personal judgement can always be adduced.) Therefore, the possibility of deciding what to do in any even slightly controversial case requires a capacity of moral intuition.

Fourth, as intuitionism specifically posits that all people have a capacity for exercising judgement which is not dependent on the prior possession of comprehensive rules, it engenders a confidence in the proposition that if people are allowed to act according to their judgement, without authority prescribing a single pre-given set of rules, disaster will not ensue. People will be able to act in an intelligent manner and not have to just behave randomly. There is an analogy here (though I would not want to press it too hard) between the classical liberal conception of spontaneous order, which lays out that social institutions are capable of being orderly without being governed by anyone, and the intuitionist conception of human activities involving the use of judgement, which claims that these activities are capable of proceeding in an intelligent and non-random (orderly) manner without being governed by a few mechanical rules. Neither conception logically entails the other, but there is a psychological similarity between them. Both are at odds with what Hayek calls "Cartesian constructivism."

Fifth, the proposition that people should not follow laws or authority blindly but should exercise their personal judgement, being prepared to violate

authoritative edicts when the situation calls for it, a very liberal idea, has much in common with the intuitionist analysis I described above. It is saved from the objection that in that case people would violate laws whenever they felt like it and there would be total chaos, by the intuitionist theory that generalizes on the idea that the fact that good chess players violate the general rules of good play occasionally does not mean that they are just moving pieces around at random. Likewise, a critical attitude towards edicts issued by authority does not mean that we just do anything we feel like.

In summary, then, a philosophical system incorporating a dualistic philosophy of mind, an intuitionistic theory of knowledge, and a libertarian moral and political theory - all of which the author happens to endorse - makes a particularly cohesive combination. But there is a last question whose answer this paper would feel incomplete without, which we must now turn to.

**What reason is there for thinking these ideas true?**

There are numerous reasons for rejecting the materialist picture of the universe, most of which we have not space to consider here. To start with, the view is practically a *reductio ad absurdum* of itself. To say that there is no such thing as consciousness is to contravene the experiences that all of us have all the time - we all experience beliefs, sensations, emotions, and so on. The more moderate theory that consciousness is a physical process is a bit less absurd but still paradoxical. For someone to claim that a feeling or a thought is a physical thing argues against his having an understanding of the meaning of the word "physical." If anything could count as not being physical, I would surely think that a mental experience would be the paradigmatic example. And if we survey the various concepts that we have from physics, we shall find no tincture of anything that could encompass the nature of the mind. There is position, speed, mass, force, electric charge, and a few other, similar notions. What materialism must claim at the least is that some combination and arrangement of the things these concepts refer to is sufficient, not merely to cause, but to

constitute, to be the same thing as, having a thought, sensation, or other experience. This is hard to swallow. If someone did not know, for example, what pain was, no description of physiology, chemistry, and physics, however intricate and precise, would suffice to explain it to him. This has to be, surely, because pain involves something else other than physical characteristics, and that is, namely, what it feels like, which is not contained in any physical description.

The foremost reason for believing in freedom of the will is our common experience and common sense. We all frequently find ourselves confronted with multiple alternatives that we choose between. Apparently, we all frequently also believe that these alternatives are actually available to us; otherwise, we would not deliberate between them. Now for some philosophical or other kind of argument to refute these opinions, it would have at the least to proceed from premises which have a greater degree of initial plausibility than the thing that they are supposed to refute. But the initial plausibility of the proposition, for example, that someone (me) has a choice about what this paper says, seems to me to be about as great as the initial plausibility of anything, and greater than that of any philosophical theory.

The main reason for rejecting the rationalist theory of knowledge is that it is at odds with observation. Newborn infants do not understand abstract principles of logic, ethics, or anything else. Those things do not enter their minds. One could posit unconscious knowledge, but even this is not particularly plausible. That I have an unconscious knowledge of the axioms of set theory, all genetically pre-programmed, for instance, does not seem likely to me. There is no evidence of the existence of innate knowledge or ideas - of course, if they were unconscious then I suppose there wouldn't be any evidence of them. But the burden of proof is on who asserts the positive.

The main problem with empiricism is that it fails to account for most of the knowledge that we obviously have. For example, mathematical knowledge doesn't fit the empirical model, so empiricists were forced to invent dubious theories of the nature of mathematics such that the discipline supposedly remains useful without containing any genuine knowledge. The same is true of ethics.<sup>13</sup> And a strict empiricism logically leads, as it famously led David Hume,<sup>14</sup> to an

extensive skepticism at the least concerning everything which is not immediately observable. Hume's problem, the so-called problem of induction, was essentially this: in order for me to make any generalizations from experience concerning causal principles or laws of nature, I have to be justified in assuming that the future will resemble the past. But if empiricism is true, then I can only be justified in believing this on the basis of experience. Therefore, I would have to generalize from observations that the future generally resembles the past - but then the argument is circular. In short, the problem is that one cannot justify the principle that inductive inference is valid empirically, for that would be circular. Therefore, either some non-empirical justification is possible, in which case empiricism is false, or it is impossible to know that inductive inference is valid. Hume accepted the latter conclusion, though later empiricists were to attempt to sweep the issue under the rug by not talking about it.

Finally, a word or two is in order about what reasons there are for accepting classical liberal political values. I think the main reason is similar to the arguments I have just adduced for the other philosophical theories - namely, it follows common sense. Classical liberal political values are really only the application to the political realm of the same morals that are almost universally accepted by people for the conduct of their private lives: that is, people generally do not attack each other, and, moreover, they believe that it would be wrong to do so; they generally agree that it is right to keep one's promises; and they think that one should not steal other people's property. These propositions are intuitively obvious. Now all we have to do is to apply them generally and consistently, considering a government as a group of mortal people just like the rest of us, and we wind up with, in all probability, a government that is hardly a government at all, which is not entitled to do most of the things characteristic of government. This political view is simply an application, a special case, of general common sense moral principles.