Contingent Relativism and Libertarian and Collectivist Meta-Narratives

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Abstract

In a recent op-ed essay in The Wall Street Journal, Charles Koch attacks collectivism and claims it is antithetical to the American Ideal. This essay explores the conflict between collectivism and individualism from a postmodern perspective and attempts to move beyond binary meta-narratives and employ a more holistic approach to analysis in order to find common ground from which to address the issues that affect the economic and social wellbeing of the American commonwealth.

Keywords: Collectivism; Libertarianism; Socialism; Capitalism; Postmodernism

1. Introduction

It is a debate that perhaps dates back to when our ancestors first realized they were able to grasp with opposable thumbs the natural resources surrounding them in abundance. Communitarianism versus individualism, collectivism versus liberalism, progressivism versus libertarianism, socialism versus capitalism—the labels abound, but at the root of the dichotomy, the question that needs answering is whether or not each member of a given society has, or is entitled to, access to the basic necessities of life. But perhaps that question is moot if the parties do not first agree that equal access is in fact a right. For if there are those who don't consider it as such, then we start from a point of divergence that may be too great to overcome.

Earlier this month, Charles Koch, CEO of Koch Industries, blew the dust off a word seldom used in the contemporary mainstream lexicon: Collectivism. In an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, Koch (2014) asserts, "The central belief and fatal conceit of the current [Obama] administration is that you are incapable of running your own life, but those in power are capable of running it for you. This is the essence of big government and collectivism" (para. 3). Of course, Koch is not the first person to express this opinion. He is just one of a long line of individuals who have weighed in on what Yuval Levin examines in his latest book *The Great Debate: Edmond Burke, Thomas Paine and the Birth of Right and Left*. In his preface, Levin (2014) writes, "The political right and left often seem to represent genuinely distinct points of view, and our national life seems almost by design to bring to the surface questions that divide them" (p. 48). Levin picks up the "great debate" earlier in its life in the 18th century, but certainly not at its birth. And for the sake of my particular endeavor in this essay, this is by no means a problem. While one approach may be to dig down through the dusty pages of history and try to find the first seed that sent its root plunging down into the fertile ground of social discourse, what purpose will that serve? One of my objectives is not to reconstruct the data looking for faults in the argument to prove one position superior to the other, but instead to determine whether the current environment is conducive to compromise, and whether, if commonalities in fact exist and were brought to the fore, they might help to build a bridge across the philosophical schism that currently separates our nation.

2. Getting Past Binary Arguments and Generalizations

To that end, I prefer instead to adopt the approach of postmodernists Deleuze and Guattari (1987), who co-opt the metaphor of germination and modify it accordingly. They observe:

Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree. Even a discipline as "advanced" as linguistics retains the root-tree as its fundamental image, and thus remains wedded to classical reflection…. This is as much as to say that this system of thought has never reached an understanding of multiplicity: in order to arrive at two following a spiritual method it must assume a strong principal unity. (p. 5)

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that perhaps another metaphor is more appropriate for characterizing the organic nature of evolving intellectual discourse, and by considering it, one may be less susceptible to the tendency to favoring one or the other facet of the binary. After all, while duality, in fact, represents two opposing points of view, they are each trained on a common subject; they are connected. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest the rhizome as a different way to conceive the evolution of discourse: "The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers" (p. 7). They observe, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). Perhaps this approach may be more productive.

Other postmodernist thinkers have also weighed in on placing too much emphasis on linear historical analysis. Michel Foucault (2010) suggests that a genealogical approach may yield a more exacting, less general impression of human experience:

Genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history— in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. (p. 76)

It is the antithesis to Foucault's genealogical approach—the reliance on the "meta-narrative"— that Foucault and other postmodernist thinkers caution against. Richard Rorty (1983) defines meta-narratives as "narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat" (p. 585). He continues, "These meta-narratives are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these or other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future" (Rorty, 1983, p. 587). To build on Rorty's definition, I would submit that in the process of constructing meta-narratives, the historian must rely on assumptions based on generalization and stereotype, and while an average may be a useful target in statistics, human nature is not nearly as formulaic.

While history provides us with a broad view of the great debate, it does very little to shed light on the experiences of those who have lived within its pages. If one relies too much on the generalities of history, Foucault (2010) suggests "he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (p. 87). As an example, Foucault (2010) observes that when the genealogist examines the history of reason:

…he learns that it was born in an altogether 'reasonable' fashion—from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition— the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason. (p. 87)

It is these "weapons of reason" that Charles Koch and others so proficiently wield in an effort to advance their own positions while obscuring those of their rivals in the great debate. In doing so, they create their own "truths," which Foucault (2010) characterizes as "the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history" (p. 79). "Truth and its original reign," Foucault (2010) claims, "has had a history within history from which we are barely emerging 'in the time of the shortest shadow,[1] when light no longer seems to flow from the depths of the sky or to arise from the first moments of the day" (p. 80). These "short shadows" are still cast by the harsh essentialist incandescence of the Enlightenment. The intensity of that light prohibits the diffusion that allows one to conceive of the various nuanced shades of gray between the extremes—exactly where one might find common ground, if in fact it exists.

3. The Contingency of Common Ground

One might argue that focusing on the common ground and ignoring the extremes of the meta-narrative is tantamount to relativism—a term used as a pejorative by critics of the postmodern aesthetic.

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1 Nietzsche, "How the True World Finally Became a Fable," *Twilight of Idols*.

Richard Rorty (1983) counters:

To accuse postmodernism of relativism is to try to put a meta-narrative in the postmodernist's mouth. One will do this if one identifies "holding a philosophical position" with having a meta-narrative available. If we insist on such a definition of "philosophy," then post-modernism is post-philosophical. But it would be better to change the definition. (p. 589)

Perhaps rather than redefining, we might simply modify the term. *Contingent* relativism could initially assume that the participants in the debate are essentially "moral" and "ethical." We would be giving each party "the benefit of the doubt," so to speak. We would then start from a position that considers each argument as morally and ethically "good," at least until we fully understand each argument and how its proponents will advance it. Once we have completed the preliminary analysis, we can then reevaluate the position from whatever perspective we wish and determine if in fact it coincides with the greater public good—a concept certainly antithetical to the postmodernist sensibility.

Such a contingency is not without precedent. Erin Kelly writes in the forward to John Rawls' (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* that:

Under the political and social conditions of free institutions, we encounter a plurality of distinct and incompatible doctrines, many of which are not unreasonable. Political liberalism acknowledges and responds to this 'fact of reasonable pluralism' by showing how a political conception can fit into various and even conflicting comprehensive doctrines: it is a possible object of an overlapping consensus between them. (p. xi)

Reasonable pluralism is most certainly the ocean upon which the American ship of state has sailed since its inception. Yet Rawls (2001) cautions:

A democratic society is hospitable to many communities within it, and indeed tries to be a social world within which diversity can flourish in amity and concord; but it is not itself a community, nor can it be in view of the fact of reasonable pluralism. For that would require the oppressive use of government power which is incompatible with basic democratic liberties. (p. 21)

And it is this perceived incompatibility that causes Koch (2014) to lament, "Those in power fail to see that more government means less liberty, and liberty is the essence of what it means to be American. Love of liberty is the American ideal" (p. 3). While one cannot effectively respond without knowing exactly how much government is too much government, Amitai Etzioni (1996) suggests that the libertarians' and communitarians' priorities "unnecessarily polarize the dialogue" (p. 161). He observes that liberties in the form of individual rights and responsibilities to the collective are "often corollaries, one assuming the other. For instance, the right to trial by a jury of one's peers is unsustainable without a duty of peers to serve on the jury" (Etzioni, 1996, p. 161). And if one expects the roads in the northern states to be clear in winter to accommodate commerce, one should be willing to contribute to their maintenance by supporting the commonwealth. "Individual rights and social responsibilities," Etzioni (1996) concludes, "just like individual liberties and social definitions of the common good, are not oppositional but complementary—or at least they can be made to be" (p. 161). *How* to make them complimentary is, of course, the objective of the great American experiment and the subject of the great debate. It requires the active and good-faith participation of all the stakeholders.

4. Analogies as Meta-Narratives

Equipped with the postmodernist's perspective, let us continue delving further into the great debate between collectivists and individualists. Charles Koch (2014) instructs us in his op-ed that "A truly free society is based on a vision of respect for people and what they value. In a truly free society, any business that disrespects its customers will fail, and deserves to do so. The same should be true of any government that disrespects its citizens" (para. 3). The implication of the word "should" is that under the current administration, respect for people and what they value does not exist. This is a sweeping generalization (meta-narrative) that may serve Koch's immediate purpose, but does not stand up to serious scrutiny. Additionally, Koch's analogy is flawed because a) he is confusing an economic model (the free-market economy) with a social contract, and b) a "truly free society" is anarchy, but c) we live in a democracy, which by definition may put limits on rights in certain circumstances in order to maintain what Rawls (2001) calls a "well-ordered society" (p. xvii). I will explore this concept of a well-ordered society in greater detail shortly.

In a market-driven economy, customers are fungible. They can decide to frequent a business or not. And a business owner can decide to attract a particular demographic or not. A restaurant owner, for example, can choose not to cater to vegetarians by simply not including any meatless items on the menu. By doing so, she is not disrespecting her customers. Contingent relativism assumes that there is nothing nefarious in play; she has simply determined her target market and is accommodating it. But citizens in a democracy are not customers—they are its board of directors.

A democratic society is more analogous to a condominium complex, rather than a business, and management (comprised of elected occupant representatives) must accommodate "reasonable pluralism" with respect to the occupants. In the United States, the government must respect *all* citizens and what they value. As Rawls (2001) suggests, "we view democratic citizens not only as free and equal but as reasonable and rational, all having an equal share in the corporate political power of society, and all equally subject to the burdens of judgment" (p. 191). He continues, "There is, therefore, no reason why any citizen, or association of citizens, should have the right to use the state's power to favor a comprehensive doctrine, or to impose its implications on the rest" (Rawls, 2001, p.191). It is when our political representatives' *raison de'etre* becomes the imposition of a comprehensive doctrine on the rest that the well-ordered society is most stressed, and reasonable pluralism is stretched to the limit.

Avoiding that stress is certainly a challenge. Let us analyze Rawls's "well-ordered society" from a rhizomatic perspective. Rawls posits:

We need the idea of an overlapping consensus of comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines in order to formulate a more realistic conception of a well-ordered society, given the fact of pluralism of such doctrines in a liberal democracy. (p. xvii)

An essentialist approach to achieving a well-ordered society will not suffice, because the doctrines that define a society constitute a multiplicity, rather than a duality. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) maintain that, "Whenever a multiplicity is taken up in a structure, its growth is offset by a reduction in its laws of combination" (p. 6). But it is attention to, and an appreciation of, these "laws of combination" that are essential in order for a society to be well ordered.

This brings us back to where we began in the midst of the great debate, considering whether conditions are right to find common ground between collectivism and libertarianism. Etzioni (1996) supports his supposition that the two opposing positions are actually symbiotic by quoting Erich Loewy, who writes:

"Persons are social beings who… have obligations toward each other. Autonomy does not exist in a vacuum but is developed, enunciated, and ultimately exercised in our common life together. To deny the social nexus of autonomy is threatening both to the social nexus and to autonomy. Persons cannot truly be persons outside their social nexus or outside their community, and the community cannot exist, develop, thrive, and grow without the unique contributions of the individuals within it." (p. 156)

For Koch, there is no symbiosis. In his argument, he either assumes that the entire American population agrees with his favoring individualism over collectivism, or he is simply ignoring that there is, in fact, a plurality of views and a multiplicity of factors. It is this multiplicity of factors involved in Etzioni's symbiosis that I wish to explore next.

5. *Visualizing the Conflict*

One might argue that the social and political zeitgeist in America swings back and forth as a pendulum between collectivism and individualism, but that again suggests a dualistic model. In reality, the two extremes are not, or should not, be the focus of the debate. They are the objects—the extreme points at which the bob of the pendulum pauses momentarily before retreating to the opposite extreme. The subject is the bob itself, and for our purposes, the bob is not a singularity. Instead, it is comprised of all the transactions conducted in a well-ordered society. But the regularity with which the bob swings from one extreme to the next does not accurately depict the spasmodic shifts from right to left and back throughout our history; therefore, the metaphor is weak.

Rather than a pendulum, Etzioni uses centrifugal and centripetal forces to illustrate the effects of collectivism and individualism (respectively) on a society. He writes, "If the communities pull too far in the centripetal direction (as they did in the Soviet Union), the historical role of social critics (intellectuals, the press, dissenters) is to enhance the centrifugal forces and vice versa" (Etzioni, 1996, p.157).

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The image of society spinning out of control or closing in on itself is striking and better illustrates the multiple factors in play and the destructive nature of both extremes. "To prevent the wholeness from smothering diversity," Etzioni (1996) suggests, "there must be a philosophy of pluralism, an open climate for dissent, and an opportunity for subcommunities to retain their identity and share in the setting of larger group goals" (p. 165). And conversely, I would add, to prevent the individualist from starving the community, that same philosophy of pluralism and open climate for dissent is just as necessary, as is an opportunity for the community to foster a sense of unity within the various subcommunities.

It is this sense of unity across subcommunities which seems to have been deteriorating in the United States for the past 50 years or more. Politicians and pundits on the right have constructed meta-narratives that divide instead of unify. For instance, they claim welfare recipients are more likely to use drugs (*Washington Post*, 2012). Children of the poor have no work ethic (Huisenga, 2014). Meanwhile, Democrats on the far left paint the wealthy with broad strokes as selfish and heartless. Both sides justly accuse the other of practicing "the politics of division," and neither side is willing to take a step back. Richard Rorty (1983) has zeroed in on the strategy in play by both Republican and Democratic extremists when he writes, "One cannot be irresponsible toward a community of which one does not think of oneself as a member" (p. 583). These meta-narratives propagated by extremists on both sides have driven wedges between various constituencies within the collective so that they no longer recognize their neighbors as being part of the same society.

6. Finding Commonality in Rational Advantage

While the great debate has raged on for centuries, an underlying recognition of the value of community and diversity was once characteristic of both positions. Edmond Burke and Thomas Paine, the main protagonists in Levin's *The Great Debate,* are often quoted delivering positions that are quite compatible with regard to the value of community. Burke, who throughout his life promoted the libertarian point of view, states, "'the government of human beings… is a matter of not applying cold rules and principles, but of tending to warm sentiments and attachments to produce the strongest and best unified community possible'" (Levin, 2014, p. 346). Meanwhile, his intellectual adversary Thomas Paine submits, "'A nation… is composed of distinct, unconnected individuals, [and]… public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals; on the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected'" (Levin, 2014, p. 964). While each of these statements holds true to the owners' ideologies, they also suggest a common interest in promoting, cultivating, or sustaining an environment in which community can flourish. Levin (2014) observes that over time:

Burke and Paine had forced one another to get to the core of their differences: a dispute about what makes a government legitimate, what is the individual's place in the larger society, and how each generation should think about those who came before and those who will come after. (p. 892)

The difference between the discourse then and now is that today, it is no longer a dialogue. It is, instead, two separate monologues.

Exactly how can we return to and encourage a more cooperative and collaborative discourse? Rawls (2001) suggests:

The central organizing idea of social cooperation has at least three essential features: (a) Social cooperation is distinct from merely socially coordinated activity—for example, activity coordinated by orders issued by an absolute central authority. Rather, social cooperation is guided by publicly recognized rules and procedures which those cooperating accept as appropriate to regulate their conduct. (b) The idea of cooperation includes the idea of fair terms of cooperation: these are terms each participant may reasonably accept, and sometimes should accept, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them. Fair terms of cooperation specify an idea of reciprocity, or mutuality: all who do their part as the recognized rules require are to benefit as specified by a public and agreed-upon standard. (c) The idea of cooperation also includes the idea of each participant's rational advantage, or good. The idea of rational advantage specifies what it is that those engaged in cooperation are seeking to advance from the standpoint of their own good. (p. 6)

Can "rational advantage" be realized for any participant in such a polarized debate? For example, is there any compromise that the opponents of the Affordable Care Act would accept? In fact, isn't the Affordable Care Act itself a compromise between those who would have preferred a total collectivist solution (i.e., universal coverage), or at least a "public option," and those who would have preferred an individual be solely responsible for their own healthcare?

Or, to reference another contemporary issue, is there no longer room for compromise between those who advocate for collective bargaining and those who support the so-called "right to work" movement? Can there be no commonality between those who define the "job creators" as business owners and investment bankers and those who attribute that by-product to the middle-class consumer? Is there no point of convergence between those who consider government assistance for displaced workers and those who advocate a "bootstrap" strategy?

7. Conclusion

Today, the great debate is neither great nor a debate. It has been co-opted by parties who have no interest in tolerance, diversity, pluralism (reasonable or otherwise), consensus, cooperation, or symbiosis. There is no longer any attempt to consider the other party's "rational advantage." It is not difficult to envision what the "well-ordered society" would look like from the extremists' perspective. Extremists on either end of the political and ideological spectrum would sacrifice tolerance, diversity, pluralism, consensus, cooperation, and symbiosis for idealistic purity, and in the process, destroy the great American experiment and abandon the best and most promising aspects of the Enlightenment. Equality would no longer be a virtue to which society must aspire, but either an inconvenience that one must ignore, or a mandate that would relegate all participants to eternal mediocrity. The social contract would be one based on a comprehensive doctrine of intolerance, conformity, and injustice. As Rawls (2001) rightly asks, "how can we affirm a comprehensive doctrine as true or reasonable and yet hold that it would not be reasonable to use the state's power to require others' acceptance of it or compliance with the special laws it might sanction?" (p. 60). And how then could it be compatible with Koch's concept of a "truly free society"? While Koch (2014) claims, "Collectivists (those who stand for government control of the means of production and how people live their lives) promise heaven but deliver hell" (para. 4), so far neither party has actually prevailed, and we have neither experienced "hell" nor "heaven." Instead, the minor victories and losses for less extremist parties on either side of the great debate have kept our society spinning and oscillating like a pulsar as centrifugal force allows us to careen toward the individualists' anarchic "true freedom," and then the compensating centripetal force brings us back toward the collectivists' central community. It has hardly been a "well-ordered society," but it has been a work in progress. And throughout its existence, there has been a grudging symbiosis that has produced both the highest living standards, as well as the greatest income disparities in its history.

President Obama, who usually waxes eloquent, botched an attempt at explaining this symbiotic relationship in the run up to the 2012 election. He said:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges, and if you have a business, you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. (Obama, 2012, n.p.)

The President was ham-handedly describing the many transactions that take place in a civil society in which citizens fulfill their social responsibilities by providing the wherewithal that allows their fellow citizens to exercise their individual liberties and build successful businesses and lead productive lives. And while some political theories are difficult to follow, even while poorly conveyed, this one seems rather simple. For opponents of the president to object is disingenuous at best and moronic at worst. Eliminating the latter, one may conclude that the extremist element within the public discourse on the right has no desire to find common ground. Equality for them is merely a way to justify their advantage over the disadvantaged. "All things being equal," they posit, "our success is the result not of any advantage, but of our superior work ethic, intellect, religion, or genes." Being "truly free" means being free to exploit those they see as inferior for their own gain. And this may be the point at which contingent relativism must be abandoned, and the postmodern perspective provides little if any optimism. More important, this may indicate an irreconcilable difference within the body politic, which will not bode well for either a healthy prognosis of the great American experiment or a rational conclusion to the Great Debate.

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