

## Commonsense Political Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Some concrete or specific political truths are obvious, evident, indeed self-evident, even though the relevant, indeed any, abstract or general principles are not. We might say that they are matters of common sense, meaning by the latter the mature and thoughtful judgments we all share and any serious theorizing, scientific or philosophical, must at least begin with and thus respect even if eventually reject. A number of examples are discussed.

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### POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Questioned, “What are you going to say when they ask you the political philosophy behind TVA?” Franklin Roosevelt replied, “I’ll tell them it’s neither fish nor fowl but whatever it is, it will taste awfully good to the people of the Tennessee Valley [1]”. The reply implied a distinction between concrete or specific political truths, in which Roosevelt often exhibited utmost confidence, and general political principles or theories, which he famously mistrusted, agreeing perhaps with Edmund Burke that they are condemned to “the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction [2]”. It also implied that some of these truths are obvious, evident, indeed self-evident, even if the relevant abstract or general principles (if any) are not.

We might say that they are matters of common sense, meaning by this the mature and thoughtful judgments we all share and any serious theorizing, scientific or philosophical, must at least begin with and thus respect even if eventually reject. Indeed, Richard Price defined common sense as the faculty of self-evident truths [3].

There may be abstract or general principles in politics that are true. But none so far seems to be *known* to be true, even in the loose everyday sense of “know.” At most, we only know concrete political facts. A superficially unkind yet appropriate way of expressing this would be that in politics principles really do not matter, only facts do, that in politics there is room only for data, none for ideology. If this is true of politics, presumably it would be true also of political philosophy. We would need to be satisfied with a politics and a political philosophy without principles, theories, or ideologies. Saying this may sound blasphemous, but to appeal to principles we know that we do not know to be true would surely be worse.

In his Foreword to the 2013 edition of Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Thomas Nagel writes of the “belief in the reality of the moral domain, as an area in which there are real questions with right and wrong answers.” He claims that “progress...toward discovering the [se] right answers” could be made by

“formulating hypotheses...and subjecting them to confirmation or disconfirmation by the intuitive moral credibility of their various substantive consequences....The method depends on taking seriously the evidential value of strong moral intuitions about concrete cases, including imaginary cases[4]”. Nagel informs us that “[T]hese convictions form the deep common element in...Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, Dworkin’s *Taking Rights Seriously*, Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars*, Thomson’s “A Defense of Abortion,” and Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.” But he does not explain how and why such “strong moral intuitions” should enjoy “moral credibility” and “evidential value.” He does not hold that they are Platonic awarenesses of moral Forms or Kantian a priori cognitions. Rather, they seem to be just personal convictions accompanied by strong moral feelings. But, as Mill remarked, “one of the most unequivocal cases of moral feeling” is “the *odium theologicum*, in a sincere bigot[5]”. More recently, Richard Brandt warned, “Various facts about the genesis of our moral beliefs militate against the mere appeal to intuitions in ethics[4]”. If this is clear in the case of moral feelings, it is even clearer in the case of political feelings. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, neither Locke nor Hume, neither Kant nor Hegel, neither Mill nor Marx, neither Russell nor Wittgenstein would have put much stock in their evidential value. But I am not proposing a return to any of their own views. There is a

third option. I shall call it commonsense political philosophy.

Political philosophy is not politics. Neither is it political science or even ethics. If politics is “public life and affairs involving matters of authority and government” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), clearly political philosophy is not politics: philosophers are not politicians, except *per accidens*. As to political science, insofar as it is science rather than philosophy, it belongs among the empirical disciplines, even if only some that are still developing – economics, sociology, anthropology – parts of which indeed it already includes. None of these disciplines has achieved the cognitive status enjoyed by physics or biology, but their method of investigation is the same as that of physics and biology; it is clear, plausible, and noncontroversial – that of empirical research.

In contrast, philosophers, whether in political philosophy or metaphysics, in epistemology or logic, in ethics or aesthetics, etc., do not engage in empirical research at all – most probably lack the needed inclination and perhaps talent for it. They also, it must be noted, lack special expertise regarding “concepts” or “ideas,” as well as regarding “meanings” or “uses” of words, the “workings of language.” As the exponents of the 17<sup>th</sup> century “new way of ideas” eventually learned, and some of the linguistic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are still learning, these too are empirical matters, investigated by psychologists and brain scientists in the case of ideas or concepts and by linguists and lexicographers in the case of meanings or uses of words. Philosophers, of course, have a good ear for the nuances of some segments of speech, as J. L. Austin famously did, but Austin himself insisted that such an ear was not a substitute for actual empirical research[7]. Philosophers are also good at argumentation, much as lawyers are, but this does not imply mastery of the subject matters under argumentation nor does it involve research in them – for those lawyers routinely call on experts, witnesses, detectives.

Human wellbeing, happiness, and prosperity have been the central concerns of both political philosophy and ethics. But they are empirical matters, and so are the means of achieving them. They lie, therefore, beyond the particular competence of political philosophy and ethics[8]. Indian utilitarians who hope to learn in American universities how to reduce suffering in India presumably go to colleges of agriculture, public health, and business administration, not philosophy departments. As John Rawls warned: “Those who write about [the idea of constitutional democracy] are not to be viewed as experts on a special subject, as may be the case with the sciences. Political philosophy has no special access to fundamental truths, or reasonable ideas, about justice and the common good, or to other basic notions[9]”.

Political philosophy is neither politics nor political science, but also it is not ethics, partly because ethics is concerned with far more than political matters, but also because claims to true principles from which interesting conclusions may be drawn are much less plausible in political philosophy than in ethics. Political philosophy asks what a political social organism, especially the state, ought to be and do, ethics asks what an individual person ought to be and do. Both aim at telling us what is good and right. Thus, both face the challenges of moral skepticism (which says that even if there is such a matter of fact as being good or being right it is unknown and perhaps unknowable) and moral antirealism (which says that there is no such matter of fact). I have discussed skepticism and antirealism in ethics elsewhere in detail [10]. Suffice it here to say that though their opposites, moral cognitivism and moral realism, have always been suspect in ethics, in political philosophy they have seldom been even defended, except with unconvincing inferences from metaphysics (as in Plato), ethics (Bentham), economics (Marx), or thought experiments (Rawls). In ethics, for example, that happiness is good and pain bad, or Aquinas’s first principle of natural law, that “good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided,” are unlikely to be questioned. In political philosophy, even the thesis that justice is fairness remains controversial, unless intended as a trivial tautology by gerrymandering the senses of the Latinate “justice” and the Germanic “fair,” and ignoring the Latinate “equity.”

#### COMMON SENSE

In *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore wrote that a self-evident proposition is one that is evident though not by virtue of inference from other propositions, meaning by “evident,” we may suppose, “seen” to be true, *videre* being the Latin for “to see”[11]. In “A Defence of Common Sense,” he called such propositions “truisms” of common sense[12]. I shall just call them “obvious” (one of the senses of “obvious” is “plain or evident,” according to the *OED*), in order to avoid the technical and here irrelevant controversies in epistemology regarding the notion of evidence and especially of self-evidence. Sometimes, for stylistic reasons, I shall use the adverb “obviously.” I shall also point out occasionally that certain judgments are *not* parts of commonsense by prefacing them with “it is not obvious that.”

In “A Defence of Common Sense” Moore merely *listed* the propositions he found evident – he did not *argue* for them, presumably because he was convinced that none of the standard deductive and inductive arguments for them were successful and did not believe that better arguments might be found. By “common sense” he seemed to mean (no definition was offered) that suggested earlier: the mature and thoughtful judgments we all share and any serious theorizing, scientific or philosophical, must at least begin with and thus respect even if not accept. Most of

these judgments are concrete or specific, though some may be abstract or general, including those trivially entailed by an already endorsed concrete or specific judgment. Commonsense political philosophy focuses on judgments of the former kind. The reason is that it cannot find abstract or general political judgments it can confidently endorse, not even any significant ones that are entailed by concrete truths.

It is worth noting that epistemology, which was Moore's chief concern in "A Defence of Common Sense," is different in this respect. For example, the most notorious target of skepticism has been the proposition that there is an external world (material objects, bodies). The proposition is too *recherché* for common sense to consider, but it confidently accepts some of its concrete instances. In "Proof of an External World," for example, Moore claimed to know that he had two hands[13]. Since human hands are material objects, inhabitants of the external world, the proposition that there is an external material world is also true. Thus, abstract principles and theories may be endorsed by common sense when they are trivially, *obviously*, entailed by some of their concrete instances that it endorses.

But few, if any, concrete political truths or concrete instances that are obvious, evident, seem to entail significant abstract political principles or theories. It may be obvious that TVA would "taste awfully good" to the people of the Tennessee Valley, i.e., they would like it, but, as Roosevelt admitted, this does not entail any significant general principle. The enormous influence of Marx's *Capital* was due mainly to the numerous concrete examples he provided of obviously bad labor practices, not to the political and economic theories he expounded in the book, which remain controversial. The employment in factories of seven-year old children for twelve hours six days a week "tasted awfully" bad to virtually all his readers, but most remained unconvinced by Marx's theory of surplus value.

That the search for obviously true principles or theories in political philosophy is virtually hopeless should be evident. Skepticism, even antirealism, seems justified in its case. But, unless motivated by irrelevant epistemological or metaphysical considerations, neither skepticism nor antirealism would be plausible in the case of many concrete political truths. Commonsense political philosophy focuses on such truths. Earlier I remarked that political philosophy has been even less successful than ethics in resisting the skeptical challenge. Indeed, there do seem to be obvious concrete truths in both. But in ethics there seem to be also obviously true general principles, e.g., that happiness is good and pain bad[14]. In political philosophy there seem to be none. Ethics does often face the problem that there is no clarity about what concrete truths its obviously true general principles entail, i. e., how they

would apply[15]. Even if utilitarianism "tastes awfully good," this tells us little about whether TVA, rather than some other project, would taste awfully good. Political philosophy probably would face the same problem if it found obviously true general principles, but it faces also the problem that there is no clarity about what general principles might be entailed or even just "supported" by the obviously true concrete truths it does find. That TVA would taste awfully good tells us little about what significant political principles would taste awfully good. Not so in ethics. A particular headache easily convinces one that pain is bad.

In speaking of concrete truths and instances, and of abstract or general principles and theories, I am only following Nagel's informal use of "particular case" and "hypothesis" in the passage quoted earlier. Like Nagel's "particular cases," what I have called "concrete truths" need not be singular ("atomic") propositions and what I have called "concrete instances" need not be Russellian atomic facts. The contrast between concrete truths or instances and abstract principles or theories is broader than such formal distinctions in logic.

An important qualification must be added to the notion of common sense as the mature and thoughtful judgments we all share. Who are those "we"? Humans, of course, but surely not all humans – many are incapable of mature and thoughtful, or even any, judgments, infants for example. "We" can only refer to those *capable* of making such judgments, and moreover of making them *here* and *now*, in *this* context, in the *current* circumstances, not in distant countries or planets, or in the remote past or future, of which we know little and understand even less, nor of course in purely imaginary places, times, or circumstances that usually are of doubtful relevance. Common sense, so understood, is much like what Rawls meant by "human reason": "the shared powers of reasoned thought, judgment, and inference as these are exercised by any fully normal persons [after reaching the age of reason], that is, by all normal adult citizens [16]."

Excluded, therefore, would be young children, imbeciles, and the gravely senile. In the case of some specific matters, also excluded would be those who lack the relevant experience or education. To be seen as a truism of common sense, a proposition must be understood, and understanding often requires, not only some thoughtfulness and intelligence, but also relevant experience, perhaps even some education. That there is no greatest number may not be immediately obvious, but becomes so after some education and thoughtful reflection. An infant does not find  $2+2=4$  self-evident, but a first-grader might. First-graders probably would not find it self-evident that TVA "tastes awfully good," but thoughtful college students might. Perhaps not every truism requires thoughtfulness, intelligence, relevant experience, or education, but surely the

concrete truths that political philosophy considers interesting and important usually do.

Common sense must not be confused with certainty. The propositions it endorses can be questioned, as skepticism in epistemology has done for millennia. The endorsement is not a guarantee of truth. Nor is it always clear which propositions common sense endorses. Is “Cold weather causes catching a cold” among them? Or was it once but is no longer? An obviously, genuinely, controversial proposition would not be endorsed by common sense. But this does not mean that common sense endorses only familiar platitudes. There is no reason why novel, highly original propositions would not receive its endorsement, even if somewhat delayed.

Commonsense political philosophy is the philosophical collection, description, and discussion of concrete political truths that are obvious. It is such truths that common sense usually endorses in politics. My defense of it here does not imply defense of commonsense philosophy generally, e.g., also in epistemology and ethics, which has been ably undertaken by others, for example, most recently and notably by Noah Lemos[17]. I claim only that there are special reasons for accepting it in political philosophy. There do seem to be general, abstract theories or principles in epistemology and ethics that are obvious, indeed “self-evident.” But in political philosophy there seem to be none.

The commonsense political philosopher would not, of course, select concrete political truths haphazardly. They must be relevant to important political principles or theories. But this relevance would not be a deductive or inductive relation that could support inference. Political philosophy seems both incapable of finding convincing a priori arguments for abstract propositions and unqualified for the empirical research that might support them.

So conceived, commonsense political philosophy is somewhat analogous to what used to be called “natural history,” e.g., traditional botany and zoology, which concerned themselves with the description and classification of species of plants or animals on the basis of observed concrete facts about them, as contrasted with contemporary biology, which constructs theories that might explain such facts. By noting and describing certain species natural history might have aroused the contemporary biological interest in them, but this was not essential to it. Similarly, by noting and describing obvious political truths commonsense political philosophy may draw attention to some political principles and encourage some political ideologies, but this is not essential to it. And, like natural history, political philosophy may engage in classification, not of plants and animals of course, but of political truths, e.g., as “liberal” or “conservative,”

“progressive” or “reactionary,” “democratic” or “authoritarian.”

In section 3, I shall list some concrete political truths that are obvious and important. No claim to originality can be made about them. Virtually all may seem associated with a “liberal” or with a “conservative” political standpoint. But none has been selected because of such association. They are merely examples of obvious (“left,” “right,” or “center”) political truths. What I have called commonsense political philosophy must not be confused with what has been called commonsense conservatism, nor must it be confused with what has been called liberalism or progressivism. It must not be confused with any “ism.” My purpose here is not to defend a political view. The examples of obvious political truth I shall provide are intended solely for the purpose of illustration. What matters are whether they are indeed obvious, not what “slant” they might appear to display. It would be easy to list only examples with a conservative slant, and it would be just as easy to list only examples with a liberal slant. Indeed, in any serious political controversy one can find obvious truths of both kinds. If readers find my examples slanted, they are invited to add their own examples, which I am sure they can do easily.

Needless to say, a complete list of obvious political truths will not be attempted. It would be as challenging as a complete list of the species of animals or plants. I shall flag each example of an obvious political truth by italicizing the sentence expressing it, or a salient part of that sentence, in order to avoid confusion with the accompanying comments and explanations, which might not be obvious but are necessary in order to provide the context of the truth. None of these comments or explanations will be more than sketchy – each example deserves extended discussion, but this paper would not be the place for it.

Commonsense political philosophy is concerned with facts, even if only particular facts. But standard political philosophy has also performed another function of some importance to politics. It describes significant political possibilities, goals, perhaps ideals. This indeed was often the chief contribution of political philosophers. It will be the topic of section 4.

### **Some examples of obvious political truths**

#### ***Collectivism and Individualism***

There are two fundamental theses in political philosophy that seem in conflict. The first is that an individual wants to, and should, be independent, free, as much as possible from other individuals and from the state. Let’s call it individualism. The second thesis is that an individual has no identity except in relation to other individuals, whether a family, village, the state, a social class, or society as a whole. Let’s call it

collectivism. Individualism is a programmatic thesis; it is about what is desired or ought to be the case, not what *is* the case. Collectivism is a factual thesis; it is about what is the case, even if programmatic conclusions may be drawn from it, validly or invalidly. Both theses are too abstract for common sense, but several related particular truths are not.

Individualism must leave room for the obvious fact that *humans are social animals that their well-being and happiness depend on their living with and among other humans*. The city, the *polis*, i.e., the political society, was “first founded that we might live, but continued that we might live happily,” Aristotle wrote[18]. And collectivism must leave room for the no less obvious fact that *humans regard at least some degree of freedom as essential to their well-being and happiness*.

Collectivism goes beyond economic matters[19]. Indeed, *no one could be the person he or she is without the initial care by parents or other adults, without learning a language from others, and without the elementary knowledge acquired from others in the first few years of life*. But one’s economic dependence on others is also obvious. *Factory owners do not build their factory, the construction workers do. But the construction workers would not have even begun building the factory without the owners’ capital, ambition, and willingness to take risks, nor would the workers have completed the building project without managers, whether the owners themselves or persons hired by them. Somebody must buy the bricks and the wood (the owner, the “capitalist”), plan the construction (the architect), organize and supervise it (the engineers), and then manage the factory (the manager)*. All this is obvious. What are not obvious are the degree, kind, and extent of one’s dependence on others. The 19th century American slave and the 19th century American plantation owner were dependent on each other, but not in the same way or to the same degree. Moreover, *dependence on others need not be dependence on a state or a government. Collectivism may be true but socialism still false*.

“*It takes a village*” does not entail equality of the villagers. *The village doctor is more important (needed, useful) than the village undertaker, and the opinions of the village teacher deserve more attention than those of the village street cleaner*. Becoming a doctor or a teacher is harder and takes longer than becoming an undertaker or a street cleaner and thus requires stronger incentives, including expectation of higher income.

Equality may seem a worthwhile political goal, but equality in what respect? Until the American Revolution it had been taken for granted that people were unequal in almost all respects. Then the Declaration of Independence announced, “We hold

these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” But *equality of rights is not equality of intelligence, physical strength, physical attractiveness, likeability, or even happiness*. We may be equal in possessing the right to *pursue* happiness, but we are not equal in *achieving* it. Equality of rights is not equality of outcomes, partly because there is no equality of opportunity. And *opportunity is very much a matter of luck, as well as of inherited talent and ability. We are not equally lucky, nor are we born with equal talents or abilities, just as we are not born equal in weight and height*.

An extreme form of collectivism is what is sometimes called globalism. The ultimate collective, it’s claimed, is the “international community,” the “world.” Globalism is usually contrasted with nationalism, or plain patriotism. (“Nationalism” may bring to mind “Nazism,” the ideology of the National Socialist German Workers Party, but it differs in meaning only superficially from “patriotism.”) A special strength of nationalism is that a nation ordinarily has a common language. *The world, of course, does not, nor does the European Union. Hence the difficulty of forming a world government or a United States of Europe*. The nation-state became attractive when the Church began losing its power and prestige. The recent popularity of nationalism as an explicit rejection of globalism is partly explained by the collapse of the League of Nations in the nineteen thirties and the glaring incompetence of the United Nations that eventually succeeded it (consider the membership of the UN Human Rights Committee).

So, *even if the slogan “it takes a village” is true, “it takes a world” need not be. Collectivism does not entail globalism. Of course, it also does not entail nationalism. There are all sorts of collectives*. Even more familiar than nationalism is what may be called nepotism, preferential treatment of members of one’s family. Almost no one would die for the globe, many are willing to die for their country, but even more people are willing to die for their families, especially their children.

I noted earlier that collectivism need not be socialism. Like collectivism and individualism, socialism is too abstract for common sense to pass judgment on it, especially since there are many forms of socialism. But several specific truths about its most extreme form, namely, communism as practiced in the former Soviet Union and its satellites, and today in Cuba and North Korea, readily lend themselves to such judgment.

*Even if it is true that “it takes a village,” it need not be true that one will or ought to remain in that village*. People vote not only with their ballots but also

with their feet. *They usually wish to emigrate from communist to capitalist, not from capitalist to communist, countries. Communist countries like the Soviet Union and East Germany in the past, or North Korea and Cuba today, in effect prohibit emigration, while capitalist countries are more likely to prohibit immigration. People usually flee from Cuba to the United States, not from the United States to Cuba. Homemade rafts still sail from Cuba to Florida, not from Florida to Cuba. East Germany built the Berlin wall to keep its citizens in, the United States wants to build a wall to keep Mexicans out. East Germans, not West Germans, climbed over the Berlin wall. The 2000 census in China counted 941 naturalized citizens, that same year there were 12.5 million naturalized citizens in the United States. Voting with feet occurs also when American corporations move to low-tax foreign countries, and residents of high-tax states like New York move to low-tax states like Florida. The trouble with socialism is simple and obvious: it does not work. As Churchill said, "socialism is the gospel of envy, its inherent virtue is the equal sharing of misery."*

Peter Singer writes, "Capitalism is very far from a perfect system, but so far we have yet to find anything that clearly does a better job of meeting human needs than a regulated capitalist economy coupled with a welfare and health care system that meets the basic needs of those who do not thrive in the capitalist economy [20]". The sentence summarizes the political ideology of today's "liberals" and "progressives." It is indeed obvious that *capitalism is very far from a perfect system*, but also obvious that *we have yet to find anything that clearly does a better job of meeting human needs*. It is not obvious, however, that there should be "a regulated capitalist economy coupled with a welfare and health care system that meets the basic needs of those who do not thrive in the capitalist economy." It all depends on the kinds and extent of the "regulations" and the kind of "basic needs" and ways of meeting them. The "regulations" may be such that the economy is in fact socialist (ownership of the means of production is an illusion if the owner's income is determined by the state and inheritability is severely limited or even denied), and the needs to be met may be so basic that even a slave-holding economy would satisfy them (slaves were fed, clothed, and housed, though presumably for their owner's economic benefit).

Some regulations, like limiting the size of soft-drink cups, seem just stupid. And what counts as basic health care changes annually. Is it that provided in CVS minute clinics? Or does it include MRI exams and brain surgery? How about immunotherapy? Shelter from the elements may be a basic need, but *what kind of shelter?* A tent, hut, one-bedroom apartment, three-bedroom house? Is owning or at least using an automobile a basic need? Is public transportation a basic need? If it is, is it a need for buses or for airplanes? *Is owning a radio, TV set, or cell phone a basic need?*

Seldom noticed but surely self-evident is that collectivism, not individualism, is the proper picture in the case of normal and certainly in advanced human cognition Elsewhere [21]. I have defended in some detail what I called cognitive collectivism: the view of knowledge as a social, often literally collaborative, achievement. It is especially evident today that *the cognitive disciplines are inherently social* and, at least to users of Wikipedia, that *so is virtually all cognition beyond the infantile stage*. Cognitive collectivism, of course, need have no political implications. The state is not the only "collective."

### Poverty

*The key words in political discussion – "democracy," "freedom," "poverty," "growth of the economy" "productivity," "prosperity," "rule of law" – are too vague to be employed in serious discussion without specifying the sense in which they are used.* For example, growth of the economy due to a larger labor force is obviously different from growth due to higher productivity per worker. The Soviet Union relied mostly on the former, Nazi Germany on the latter. And each can be accomplished in many, widely differing ways. The labor force can be increased by providing universal childcare so that more women can enter the work place, or by enforcing two-year labor conscription for all reaching the age of 18. Productivity can be increased by inventing and using new machines, or by offering bonuses for harder work.

*Capitalist economies have been far more successful than socialist economies. But success in a capitalist economy might not include success for the least successful, the "poor."* It's obvious that *poverty is bad*. It's also obvious that *only those who have jobs benefit directly from higher wages, or from raising the minimum wage*. For most people, *the primary concern is having a good job. But the job would not come out of nothing. Someone must have the capital to pay you for your work. Both capital and labor are needed in an economy.*

Obviously, *it's the poor, not the middle class, who especially need aid*, but *politicians today usually promise to help the middle class*. Why? Surely, because *middle class voters are more likely to vote* and also *there are more of them*, at least in advanced countries. Yet, while "help the poor" is stirring as a political slogan, "help the middle class" is not. "Love your neighbor," Jesus preached, and he explicitly meant mainly the poor – "the meek shall inherit the earth." This is why Christianity provided left-leaning politics with a plausible ideal, even though *a Christian's ultimate duty to "fear and love the Lord" and ultimate goal to "go to heaven," not necessarily to help their neighbors fear and love the Lord and go to heaven* (this may be the duty and goal of the priest or minister). There are very few genuinely poor people in advanced countries today, so left-leaning politicians have shifted

their attention to the middle class. But *while many have been willing to die at the barricades for the poor, few have knowingly died for the middle class.* After all, it's the middle class that Marxists called the bourgeoisie!

A distinction must be made between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is bare subsistence: just enough food, clothes, and shelter to survive, what Marx said a worker must have today to be able to return to work tomorrow. Relative poverty is being at the bottom of the range of income and wealth in one's society and thus is a measure of inequality. But is it the bottom 10%, 20%, 30%...? *There is no objective answer – this is why such poverty is relative.* However the question is answered, *relative poverty is inevitable in any known society.* It is political malpractice to speak of fighting relative poverty, waging a “war” on it, unless what is meant is fighting for absolute equality of income and wealth. Such equality has never, and probably could not have, existed. Income and wealth need not consist in receiving and owning money. In a hunter-gatherer society, some are stronger or faster hunters and enjoy more food. In communist states, government and party officials enjoy numerous perks, including luxurious housing and means of transportation.

The World Bank defines “extreme poverty” as living on less than \$1.90 per day, and has announced that by the end of 2015 less than 10% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty. It had forecast that the proportion of the world's population in this category will fall from 12.8% in 2012 to 9.6% in 2015. If by “extreme poverty” the World Bank means absolute poverty, *\$1.90 per day would be too low for inhabitants of New York City (it would not provide enough food, clothes, and shelter to survive) but not for inhabitants of Bangladesh.*

In 2013, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 14.5% of Americans were poor. This surely is relative poverty. But what is the average age of these poor people? *It makes a lot of difference whether they are teenagers, middle-agers, or elderly.* In 2013, an American household of four, living on an annual income of \$23,624 (the stipulated poverty line), usually had enough money for food, clothing (even if second-hand), rent of a modest apartment, and a car (even if used), cell phone, TV set, refrigerator, and air-conditioner. Compare its quality of life with that of a rich household in medieval France, or the average household in Bangladesh today.

It's often said that the middle-class income has not risen in decades, even that “the poor get poorer while the rich get richer.” But something else, perhaps more important for the middle class as well as for the poor, has definitely risen: the quality of many items they purchase. *Today's cars, TVs, and refrigerators, are significantly better, more reliable, and less in need of*

*frequent repair than those of forty years ago. Add the intrinsic value of the recent advances in medicine, of the much higher life expectancy, and of items altogether unavailable forty years ago, like desktop and laptop computers, the Internet, email, cell phones, TV multi-channel networks, cheap pre-cooked food in supermarkets, cheap hamburgers at restaurant chains like McDonalds.* When the quality of possessions is taken into account, it is obvious that *the rich, the middle class, and the poor are all doing much better today than they did forty years ago.* On the other hand, *some of this quality is attainable only by means of the consumers' uncompensated labor. Computers need frequent attention by their users, email and internet access are too difficult for many, and technical support is often unhelpful, sometimes unavailable.*

Income inequality does not necessarily correlate with stagnating middle-class wages. From 1970 to 2000, it widened in America, but middle-class incomes still jumped 22.8% in real dollars. From 1980 to 2010, income gains (after taxes, and government transfers included) favored the wealthy but were still spread across all income brackets: indeed a 90% increase for the richest fifth quintile, but still a 53% increase for the bottom quintile, 41% for the second and third, and 49% for the fourth. Thus, *while income inequality may offend our sense of justice as equality, its actual impact on the middle class is small.*

*Redistribution of income or of wealth, however tempting and seemingly just, does not make a country more prosperous. Only economic growth does.* North Korea and Cuba are familiar examples of much redistribution but little growth. However, *growth can make a country very prosperous even if most of its population do not benefit from that growth.* Saudi Arabia is an example.

“The 400 richest billionaires in the country now have more wealth than the bottom half of income earners, representing some 150 million people,” we are told. But *what matters is how this wealth is used.* Most of it, e.g., Bill Gates' or Warren Buffett's, is used for philanthropic purposes, and arguably used more efficiently than it would be by a government agency. Carnegie built public libraries. The Ford and the Rockefeller foundations may waste much of their money, but not on Ford or Rockefeller family members. Little if any of a great wealth goes for buying palatial houses and enormous yachts, and perhaps none for consuming beluga caviar and fancy champagne! Imagine yourself winning one billion dollars in a lottery, and then ask, after spending, say, two hundred million on houses and yachts (and if you wish on caviar and champagne), what you would do with the remaining 800 millions.

### Democracy

Democracy has been the sacred cow of political philosophy in recent decades. It was not always so. Plato's contempt for it in the *Republic* and Aristotle's in *Politics* are familiar. Even Jefferson, who seemed committed to democracy, avoided using the word [22]. The reason is evident. *That the people should decide, directly or indirectly, who would make governmental decisions about peace and war, prosperity and poverty, civil order or disorder, seems as absurd as that they, rather than, say, professors of medicine, should decide by voting who would be awarded a medical degree. Would you have voters, rather than a surgeon, decide whether and how you should undergo surgery?* We do not elect physicians, airplane pilots, or ship captains. No ship is run democratically – the captain (especially of a war-ship) has almost absolute power. Why should the ship of state be run differently?

At least until the American revolution, it had been generally agreed that a country should be governed by the “best people,” the “aristocrats” (in Aristotle's Greek sense), who, if not selected by God, as kings claimed to be, are endowed with superior wisdom and strength, though perhaps inherited by virtue of their “noble birth.” Later, especially during the chaotic 1920s and 1930s, when democratic regimes came to power in Germany, Italy, France, and other European countries, most voters found them to be incompetent, and the fascists or the communists, especially in Germany, to many seemed preferable. Only because of the horrors of German Nazism and Soviet communism did the idea that democracy is the only good form of government become fixed in the decades that followed.

Whatever the particular form of the democratic government may be, the Platonic contempt for it would remain. *Is it not absurd to advocate democracy in countries where most potential voters are illiterate?* Ability to read surely is the bare minimum of being educated. Don't voters need some education, some knowledge of, say, history, geography, economics? If they do, what would be its minimum? How many might possess it, and who would they be?

Moreover, even if literate and sufficiently educated, voters have no independent, direct access to the facts they think they know. *What opinions they hold and therefore how they vote is almost entirely dependent on what they see, hear, and read from others.* But this is not true only in a democracy. It is the unavoidable consequence of what I have called cognitive collectivism. You can vote on your own, but you cannot know anything on your own, at least anything beyond what infants know.

Much discussion of democracy is marred by the careless, usually mawkishly sentimental, often intentionally misleading, partisan use of “we” and “the

people.” “Democracy” means “rule by the people.” American democracy is rule of America by the American people. But *there is no such thing as the American people unless we irrelevantly mean the set of absolutely all Americans*, and even this may be unclear: is it the set of all residents (legal and illegal), or all legal residents, or all citizens, or all citizens who are at least 18 years old, or all voters, or all voters who actually vote?

The same can be said about appeals to “who (or what) we are” and to “what America is.” (A TV commercial for a women's lotion claims that its use will “reveal what makes you.”) *“The will of the people” means (at best) the will of the majority of those who actually voted, though often it is only the will of the largest minority.* Similar remarks can be made about appeals to “the international community.” If the phrase stood for the United Nations, little if anything can be said to be desired or willed by all of its members. The phrase could refer to the set of all nations, even all human beings, but then it would be of little practical use.

It's common to insist that in a democracy all eligible voters ought to vote, that it is their duty, and that governments must facilitate voting by making it as easy as possible. But it's obvious that *eligible voters often fail to understand the ballot or make mistakes when voting, that many have no thoughtful, or even any, opinions about, let alone knowledge of, the issues or the candidates to be voted on, let alone of the consequences (intended or unintended, on themselves or on others) of their candidates' winning.*

The usual argument for democracy is that a democratic government would do what is best for the people, at least for the majority of them. The counterargument is that, *at best, a democratic government would do only what the majority of the people who voted believe is best for them. Often, they do not know what is best for them; what they believe is best for them is often not what is best for them.*

*In a democracy, it is the voters, not the people, who rule.* But who is eligible to vote? Presumably, *not babies. Twelve-years old? Fifteen-years old? Illiterates? Imbeciles? Senile seniors?* Moreover, what determines the outcome of democratic elections is not just the support of the eligible voters but also getting them to actually vote. *What ultimately counts is not just the people's or even the voters' preference but also voter turnout.* Hitler became chancellor of Germany when his National Socialist German Workers Party (“Nazi”) won the July 1932 election with 37.4% of those voting, and the March 1933 election with 43.9%. The total voter turnout for the Truman-Dewey presidential race in 1948 was only 51.1%, and for the Clinton-Dole race in 1996 it was 49%. New York City Mayor De Blasio was elected with 85% of the vote, but



only 17% of the eligible voters voted. Common sense is likely to deny that such results represent the popular will. The truth is that *in a democracy the government represents not the "people" but at most only the majority and often just a plurality of those who actually voted, usually just a fraction of those eligible to vote, themselves a fraction of the people.* Hence Democrats' insistence on early voting and Republicans' opposition to it. Rousseau's saying that in a democracy the government represents the "general will" only generates obscurity, and it has been abused by nondemocratic regimes, such as those in the USSR and Nazi Germany, which claimed that they represent the general will and therefore that they were democratic and their citizens free.

In June 2014, most Americans opposed military action against the new Islamic State, but after seeing on TV the beheadings of two journalists they came to support such action. This example makes obvious *the defects of direct* (or, as Madison called it, "pure") *democracy*: the people making decisions of state directly, presumably by voting or perhaps just being polled ("government by plebiscite"), as contrasted with representative democracy: the people "making" such decisions by electing those who actually would make them, their "representatives." Major decisions of state must not be made frivolously, as they doubtless would be in a direct democracy. This is why, *in no modern democratic state are the people governed by "the people."* *They are governed by representatives of the people* [23]. The nature, quality, and extent of the "representation" have been the common topics of criticism of democracy.

Churchill defended democracy by saying that it is "the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." This was not a resounding defense. He also said that "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." Nonetheless, Churchill's defense of democracy, even if not resounding, does remain. It could well be endorsed by historically informed common sense. Churchill did not deny, however, that there are forms of government that have not been and probably could not be tried which might be better than democracy. In section 4 I shall mention some of them.

### **Abortion**

Peter Singer noted the validity of the argument "It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. A human foetus is an innocent human being. Therefore it is wrong to kill a human foetus[24]". But then he added, "one cannot plausibly argue that a foetus is either rational or self-conscious," presumably in order to meet the objection that, even if a foetus is a human being, it is not a *person*. It may be obvious that *a foetus is neither rational nor self-conscious*, but it is also obvious that *not all infants or even adults are rational*

*or self-conscious*. Singer acknowledged that "A prematurely born infant may well be *less* developed in these respects [being rational or self-conscious] than a foetus nearing the end of its normal term, and it seems peculiar to hold that we may not kill the premature infant, but may kill the more developed foetus." He announced that "it needs to be shown why mere membership of a given biological species should be a sufficient basis for a right to life [1]".

In a recent book, Nicholas Rescher writes: "To be a person is...to regard oneself as a unit of worth and bearer of rights [26]". Now, obviously, *a foetus is not a person in this sense. It does not regard itself as a unit of worth and bearer of rights – it does not regard itself as anything.* But then *neither an infant nor even many adults do*, and so they too would not be persons in this sense.

It is obvious to anyone with knowledge of the biological facts that *human life begins at conception*. Therefore, *a human foetus is a human being, and abortion is homicide*. But common sense also holds that *homicide is not always impermissible*: soldiers killing enemy soldiers in battle, police justifiably shooting criminals fatally, civilians killing in self-defense, perhaps capital punishment, perhaps suicide (assisted or not), etc. None is regarded as murder, which by definition is impermissible homicide. So, *there is permissible homicide*. Therefore, *it is not obvious that abortion, though homicide, is never permissible*.

The relationship of the pregnant woman to her fetus is not significantly different from that of a mother to her one-year old child. So, *abortion is sometimes justified only if infanticide is sometimes justified*. Nevertheless, *the parents, especially the mother, do have a special relationship to the fetus* – so special as to distinguish the pro-choice position regarding abortion from other pro-homicide positions (e.g., regarding capital punishment). *The parents are the source and ground of the fetus's existence*. The relationship is akin to that believed to hold between God and his creatures [27]. Of course, the parents have this relationship also to the born infant. Birth is a change of location, not a metamorphosis,

So, we cannot say that abortion is wrong because it is a kind of homicide. But neither can we say that it is not wrong because the pregnant woman "owns" her fetus, that it is a part of her body, and therefore she has the right to kill it. To say this would be like saying that since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century slaveholders owned their slaves, who were a part of their estates, they had the right to kill them. In any case, *a pregnant woman does not own her fetus as she owns her hat, hair, or even her heart. The fetus is a living human organism that happens to be temporarily located in her body*.

*The New York Times* quotes a female gynecologist saying, "I'm not voting for any politician who has inordinate interest in what goes on in my vagina." But the issue of abortion is not about what goes on in the pregnant woman's vagina or any other part of her body. It's about the possibility of her killing, with or without assistance, another human being. What's noteworthy in Singer's remarks quoted earlier is the absence of the phrases "pro-life" and "pro-choice," both of which are simplistic and misleading [28]. *A mother has no more the moral right to choose whether her baby, born or unborn, will live than slaveholders had the moral right, to choose whether their slaves will live, even if they did have the legal right to do so.*

"No abortion except in the case of rape or incest," some say. But how about saying "no infanticide except in the case of rape or incest"? The third major "exception," the life of the mother, calls for a very different discussion, namely, whether there are circumstances in which one human life should be sacrificed in order to save another human life. Common sense would agree that *there are such circumstances, for example in self-defense*, but it says little about other circumstances.

The attraction of the "pro-choice" position may be due to confusing the fetus with "private" bodily parts, and pregnancy with other bodily states, especially and not surprisingly those involving sexuality. The alleged right to choose abortion may appear tied to the alleged "right to privacy" regarding one's sexual parts, states, and behavior. That this is confusion should be obvious. Pregnancy involves the life of another human being, and choice regarding one's own bodily parts and states is not choice whether to kill a human being, unless it is oneself.

What motivates the confusion is the general obsession with sex, common among adolescents but hardly unknown in adults. Sexual behavior is a standard object of disagreement, denunciation, derision, or dismay. *Nothing seems obvious about it.* Opinions about sexual behavior do seem relative to age, gender, place in history, geographical location, ethnicity, and much else. An uncovered female ankle often caused a stir in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century bikinis became common swimwear. Homosexual behavior was illegal in the United States until the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but today even same-sex marriage is legal, a constitutional right according to the Supreme Court. Much in sexual relations, attitudes, and opinions is faddish, and common sense today abstains from making pronouncements about them. But *abortion is not a sexual matter, despite its causal antecedents.*

#### **POLITICAL IDEALS AND POSSIBILITIES**

Much of traditional political philosophy has been concerned, not with political *facts* and thus truths, but with political *possibilities*. Plato's ideal republic,

Hobbes's social contract in a state of nature, Marx's communist society that emerges from a socialist state and Rawls's original position behind a veil of ignorance are familiar examples. They are noteworthy even when divorced from the theories and arguments surrounding them, the difficulties of which – e.g., of Plato's metaphysical claims about the Form of the Good, Hobbes's psychological assumptions, Marx's sketchy descriptions of communism, the intricacies of Rawls's "veil of ignorance" – are also familiar and have been much discussed but are irrelevant to our concerns here.

I remarked earlier that theories in political philosophy rest on neither plausible a priori arguments nor genuine empirical evidence. I have argued elsewhere that this is true indeed of all philosophical theories, except those in logic, metaphysics-as-logic (such as Russell's logical atomism), and epistemology-as-logic, the appraisal of the legitimacy of philosophically interesting nonformal inferences (such as those from perception to the existence of bodies)[29]. But when political theories describe political possibilities, often presenting them as political ideals, of what "ought to be the case," they cannot even pretend to be asserting facts and thus to be true, except in the dubious senses of irreducibly deontological fact and truth [30]. They are attempts at advocacy, not knowledge. Perhaps surprisingly, in this respect such political theories are analogous to religious claims. The standard objection to religion has been exactly like my objection to philosophical theories: that it rests neither on plausible a priori arguments nor on empirical evidence. Its most familiar version, made popular today by authors such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, appeals to science [31]. A judgment explicitly and intentionally expressing only faith, religious or not, is by definition invulnerable to empirical evidence, and therefore to the scientific objection. And so also, though for very different reasons, is the epistemological proposition that there is not an external world: any objection to it that is based on scientific data, presumably about the external world, would be question-begging. In this respect, genuine religious faith is like the unquestioning acceptance by common sense of the existence of concrete instances of the external world, such as Moore's hands.

But the theories explicitly proposing political ideals differ from the expressions of religious faith because they do not claim to be revealed truths. And they differ from the epistemological proposition that there is an external world because no political ideal so far proposed enjoys unwavering acceptance by common sense, as some of the concrete instances of that proposition do. Although each ideal may be related to obvious concrete truths, none of them entails it. That seven-year old children should not work in a factory for twelve hours six days a week may be obvious, but it does not entail that communism is preferable to capitalism.

It's not clear why philosophers should describe political ideals; many nonphilosophers, from poets and novelists to journalists and politicians, have often done it better and more effectively. At any rate, the first response of common sense to a proposed political ideal is likely to be that it is impractical, unrealizable –after all, it is an *ideal*. But *whether the ideal is really unrealizable is usually an empirical question*, properly answerable by economists, psychologists, physicians, etc., sometimes plain common sense, not by philosophers. So are also the related questions, if the ideal were realizable, by what means would it be realized, and whether its realization would have undesirable (even if unintended) consequences. It is obvious that *raising wages is desirable*, but also obvious that *beyond a certain level it would result in higher unemployment*. It is obvious that *health is desirable*, but *it is not obvious that every woman should have an annual mammogram or every man an annual exam of the prostate*.

Brought down to earth, Plato's thesis was that the rulers of a state ought to be the citizens best qualified in respect of erudition, intellect, and morality. This ideal is not unreasonable but it is unrealistic. The most casual acquaintance with top civil servants (e.g., the President, members of Congress, Supreme Court justices) suggests that they are unlikely to be really the *best* in any of these respects. And even if they were, the average citizen in a large country faces directly, not its top civil servants, but IRS employees, police officers, city commissioners, school board members, etc. Would these also need to be the *best* qualified for their positions? Surely, the likelihood of realizing this ideal is almost infinitesimal. The goal can only be that these officials be *qualified* for their positions. (Hegel just held that professional civil servants ought to be educated).

Plato argued that the philosopher-king's chief qualification was wisdom, supreme knowledge. But political history often gives credit also to other desirable characteristics. For example, in everyday life we often encounter people who are unusually good, successful, at "sizing up" character, yet not because of superior knowledge. And plain likeability and good salesmanship are usually also needed for political success.

That the Marxist ideal of a communist society (classless and egalitarian, but maximally productive) is not realizable seems to have been proved by the history of the countries that attempted it. USSR, North Korea, and Cuba are not inspiring examples. But this history has little relevance to the realizability of the more moderate socialist ideal, roughly that of the democratic welfare state, which was realized in many countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whether this was to the lasting benefit of their populations is still an open question, but it is an empirical, not philosophical question.

As to Rawls's ideal – a society formed in accordance with rules selected by all but behind a veil of ignorance – it is obviously not realizable since the veil of ignorance is not.

All three ideals, however, suggest more modest political goals that are not unrealizable: in Plato's case, that *political leaders should be erudite, smart, and moral*, in Marx's that *we ought to care for the needy*, and in Rawls's that *undeserved ("unfair") inequality is to be avoided*. Would these goals be endorsed by common sense, would they be considered *obviously* desirable? It might seem that they would, but often they have not been. Not so long ago, most people believed that a king, even if not erudite, smart, or moral, had a divine right to rule. Concern for the poor, though common, was often limited by religious considerations and relegated to churches. Inequality of opportunity, however undeserved, has always been vigorously protected by most parents for their children. Yet the *general desirability of government competence, help for the needy, and fair treatment* does seem to be part of common sense, the mature and thoughtful judgments that all of us capable of such judgments share *here and now*. What those judgments would be elsewhere or in the future, however, is not for common sense to say, nor probably for science or indeed anyone.

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16. John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 2.
17. Noah Lemos, *Common Sense. A Contemporary Defense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Lemos uses “particularism” for a position in epistemology associated with Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and especially R.M. Chisholm, who is credited with inventing it. My use of “particular” here presupposes no epistemological position.
18. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b.
19. In *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy* I argue for what I call cognitive collectivism as a reason for rejecting skepticism about the external world. The skeptic’s view presupposes the existence of other people, especially philosophers, and of a public language. Cognitive collectivism does not imply what might be called cognitive egalitarianism, i.e., that all views are true and equally worthwhile or that all cognizers are equally important. For example, although we all depend on others for learning to speak, we speak of different matters and with different abilities and perspectives.
20. Peter Singer, Edward Lewis, *Ethics and the Left*. 16 March, 2010.
21. *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy*, Chapter Two. See also my “Epistemology Dehumanized,” in Quentin Smith, ed., *Epistemology: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
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23. A representative democracy frequently comes dangerously close to *being a* direct democracy when government decisions are made in response to poll results.
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29. See *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy*. Logic is an exception insofar as it is essentially mathematical (even in its applications: addition remains a mathematical and therefore a priori operation even when applied to empirical matters), If conceived as “the art of persuasion,” logic would be, at least in part, psychological and therefore empirical.
30. The attraction of utilitarianism, whether Mill’s or Moore’s, has always been that it does not leave its “ought-statements” hanging dry but reduces them to “is-statements” about optimizing action.
31. Notoriously, the objection ignores the sophisticated distinction between faith and reason in traditional theology, such as Thomas Aquinas’s.