

Metaphysical Economics: The Deep Sources of our Disagreements

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Why do we disagree so much about politics and economics, and why are our disagreements so intractable? Do these disagreements turn on differences in economic or political theory? Is it just a question of technique, of varying opinions about the means to common ends? Or, if we do have disagreements over the ends as well, are those simply a matter of differing factional interests? Are they matter of taste, beyond all rational disputation?

The answer to all these questions is, No. Our political conflicts are rooted in differences in our metaphysical models of the world, which means that they are indeed deeply rooted, but they are not beyond the reach of reason to resolve. Roughly five hundred years ago, a consensus about metaphysics that had shaped the so-called “medieval” period (which is in fact simply the early period of our own civilization) began to break up. Since then, three fundamental models have contended for domination, which I will for convenience label by the name of prominent philosophical proponents: the Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Spinozan models. These three models propose to identify the fundamental elements of reality at different scales: the atomic (Cartesian), the cosmic (Spinozan), and the intermediate (Aristotelian). From the fall of Rome until the seventeenth century, the Aristotelian model, as embraced by Cicero, the Neo-Platonists, Boethius, and the scholastics, shaped the common understanding of the nature of reality. With the Scientific Revolution and the revolt against scholasticism, the metaphysical premises have been in a state of ongoing flux and controversy.

The Cartesian model of the world, first articulated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Rene Descartes (1596-1650), is both atomistic and dualistic. The fundamental elements of the world divide neatly into two kingdoms: that of microscopic atoms (or particles, fluids, or fields) and that of autonomous human selves. This dualism of matter and mind survives even in those modern Cartesians who think of themselves as ‘physicalists’ or reductive materialists (that is, those who insist that all of reality is, in the final analysis, nothing over and above the particles and their interactions), since some sort of dichotomy between fact and value, forces and meaning, or hardware and software persists.

In contrast, in the model of the Spinozans the only fundamental reality is the whole cosmos. For Spinozans, the whole is always prior and superior to its parts; for Cartesians, the reverse is true. In comparison to both of these, the Aristotelian model is much more complex. In some cases, wholes are prior to their parts (e.g., human beings are prior to their organic parts), and in some cases parts are prior to the wholes (e.g., the grains of sand are prior to a heap of sand). Moreover, there are different kinds of priority in play, such that a society or group may be both prior in some ways and posterior in others to its own members.

Classical liberalism and its contemporary version, libertarianism, are essentially Cartesian. They assume that the essence of a human being is to be an autonomous chooser. Consequently, they conceive of us as disembodied and ahistorical wills, interacting with each other and with the

physical environment. The working out of this perspective can be seen very clearly in the founders of modern liberalism, including Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), who try to justify the liberal state in terms of the self-interest of atomized individuals in a pre-social “state of nature”. The atomism survives, in a somewhat different form, in the utilitarian tradition, which sees individuals as primarily containers of pleasure or satisfaction, definable in terms of the mechanics of individual psychology, apart from our social context. The utilitarian tradition leads to a conception of liberalism in which the state acts as a neutral administrator, seeking impartially to maximize the freedom of individuals to satisfy their felt wants, be it for pizza or pornography.

Socialism and other forms of progressive leftism embody the Spinozan model. Socialists see the *whole* of human activity as the fundamental thing (in the social-political sphere). Society is a single, undivided and undying field of activity, with individual human beings existing merely as nodes within that network of activity. The goal for rational choice is the collective liberation of society from the 'dead hand of the past', from inherited but unexamined assumptions and constraints. Marxism is a relatively pure form of the Spinozan model, with an elite party as the vanguard of revolutionary change, aiming at a society in which all conflict and egoism have disappeared in the harmonious rule of collective reason. American progressives similarly prefer centralization and the rule of experts over local and democratic control as a matter of principle, and not merely convenience. When progressives call (as Hillary Clinton has) for a “politics of meaning”, they intend that all must seek their fulfillment in the whole. Clinton famously proclaimed that “it takes a village.” meaning not a literal village or hamlet (whose stubborn autonomy progressives see as a mere obstacle to change) but a national or global pseudo-village, in which the shamanate of social scientists predominate.

The Aristotelian model survives in the thought of social and paleo-conservatives, among neo-Thomists and natural law theorists, among distributists and defenders of the social market economy, and among neo-Agrarians, "crunchy cons" and fans of Wendell Berry. Such “conservatives” (to give them a simple label) take seriously the idea that human beings are *embodied* agents, located within both space and time. We are both historical and geographical beings, each with a particular history and a particular local community. We are also social and rational *animals*: it is in fact that animal nature that anchors us in space and time. We are not absolute choosers, either as individuals or as a whole society, but our choices are always dependent on a set of givens, both biological and cultural.

For Aristotelians (as for Cartesians), individual human beings are metaphysically primary – society consists in the activities of individuals – individuals are not constituted by the prior activity of society. Individuals are not mere phases in a more fundamental social process. However, Aristotelians recognize that human beings deeply internalize their social environments, since belonging to groups meets a fundamental human need. Each human being incorporates within a plurality of ‘selves’, each essentially belonging to some external practice (of family, church, state, friendship, club, and so on). These internal selves do not act selfishly: insofar as they exist at all, they act with the appropriate social end in view. For this reason, conservatives favor a world full of varied, intermediate institutions – church, school, guild, club, local government, college, charity – each respected by the others and by the state.

In order to make this a bit more concrete, let me focus on just two phenomena: private property and the market. Conservatives see these phenomena, along with marriage, law, and religion, as anthropological universals. At the same time, they recognize the legitimacy of an infinite variety in their concrete realization.

Classical liberals and libertarians reject such variety. For them, true property can take only one form: Locke's model mixing of one's labor with unclaimed matter. As a metaphysician, I object to the naive realism about artifacts that such a model requires. Artifacts (the products of human art) have no existence apart from contingent social practices. They cannot be identified with a particular set of atoms or quarks, since artifacts are materially in flux. My automobile today comprises a significantly different set of particles than it did a week ago. There is no principle of persistence for items of property apart from the particular ways in which we (both individually and collectively) interact with our environment. What counts as the *same car*, the *same plot of land*, or the *same building* depends on those contingent practices. If I own some farmland, do I automatically own the minerals deep beneath it, or the ether through which radio waves pass, or the airspace above it? There is no principled answer to these questions, without examining in detail the practices into which my farming enters. In addition, our practices can give rise to property rights in things (like inventions, ideas, and compositions) that have no material existence at all. Therefore, we cannot have natural rights to ownership that are prior to the customs and settled arrangements of our society.

Socialists take all notions of private property to be mere illusions, products of 'false consciousness'. For them, there is nothing but activity, and all activity is ultimately social. No one ever does anything -- it is always *we* who are acting, never I. "You didn't make that," as Obama said to the country's entrepreneurs. This flies in the face of our everyday experience as agents. We do in fact make things and do things, as individuals, and our makings and doings are the basis for a variety of natural rights against others, even against the rest of society.

For conservatives, respect for property is always respect for ongoing human activity. Human activity is always the activity of one or more human agents, and it always unfolds over time, in some cases, over many generations. Human activities take up room in both space and time, and they involve the consumption of free energy and become entangled with particular bits of matter, shaped in appropriate ways. Respect for the property of others is a respect for the ongoingness of human activity. There's a kind of golden rule here: I would want others to respect the ongoingness of my activity and the joint activities in which I participate, and consequently, I and my partners must respect the activities of others. When possible, we should seek to engage in our pursuits in a way that does not interfere with the pursuits of others. Where mutual interference is unavoidable, we should seek a fair and amicable way of resolving the potential conflict. This necessitates the development of a common law of concrete property rights and the establishment of both contract and exchange. The intergenerational nature of human activity provides the conservative with a basis for respecting both inheritance and natural family integrity, which liberals see as threats to the inherent right of all individuals to begin from the same starting point, and which progressives see as mere hangovers from the flawed arrangements of the past.

Socialists see society as monistic and simple. Ultimately, all human activity is the activity of a single subject, Humanity or the State. Consequently, there is no limit to the degree to which

“my” supposed activity may be regulated or micromanaged by “others”. Nor can smaller platoons legitimately resist the control of the whole.

Conservatives see human life as complex, involving the interaction of individuals and of groups of greatly varying sizes and durations, from a pick-up basketball game to the United Nations. Each has legitimate rights against the others, rights that must take the form of a stable and predictable system of property rights and voluntary exchanges.

All activity involves an agent’s exercising certain basic causal *powers* (our fundamental capacities for action, like motor skills or the ability to speak). The exercise of a power is always, by its very essence, directed toward some end. Insofar as a human being is a unified and persisting agent, all of his or her actions must be directed toward a single, enduring end or goal, which Aristotle and the scholastics labeled ‘happiness’. Human action is *human* only by virtue of being directed toward happiness. It is the existence of happiness as an objective end that makes the human will and meaningful human choice possible, not the other way around (as both liberals and progressives imagine).

Consequently, not all human activity is on an equal par. Activity can be defective in a variety of ways: through ignorance, through mistakes in reasoning, through the partial disintegration of the person by virtue of bad habits, addictions, or corrupted desires. Thus, human activities are not equally deserving of respect. Some activities are in fact so opposed to happiness that they should be suppressed, by force if necessary. This includes abuse of other people, but also abuse of animals or of the natural environment. It also includes actions that destroy one’s own capacity for rationality and virtue, like the use of addictive substances or the consumption of violent pornography. There is a distinction between liberty (equal protection for all activity well-ordered to human felicity) and license (equal protection for all activity, no matter how misdirected). For prudential reasons, it is unwise to attempt to use the coercion of the state to suppress all vice, but it is wise to suppress the most harmful forms of misdirected activity, and it is perfectly reasonable, in cases of conflict, to favor wholesome activity over disordered.

Socialists are united with liberals in rejecting the teleology of such Aristotelian philosophy. They assume that we human beings, collectively, create the values that we pursue by simply pursuing them. Socialists adopt a monistic conception of the world: there is nothing outside the One to divert it from its course. Consequently, value consists simply in movement. What will be is good: the further in the future, the better. This is why progressives are always worried about being “on the right side of history”. This is an untenable position, because reflective progressives must realize that anything that they can say now will ultimately be falsified by History. The Islamic State may be “on the wrong side of history” (as Obama argues), but so, in the end, must be Obama and his progressive allies. Just as today’s progressives are embarrassed by the backwardness of yesterday’s, so too will tomorrow’s progressives disown today’s. Conservatives, in contrast, since they celebrate the ‘democracy of the dead’, belong to a fellowship that, precisely by being appropriately rooted in history, is able to span the millennia.

Classical liberals can be subjectivists about value – even constructivists like Nietzsche. They can also be value realists, but they must locate value within the mind – either in the form of pleasure, or knowledge, or tranquility, or some combination of these. External actions and liberties are

always secondary. External action has value only expressively. This is why liberals value freedom of thought and freedom of expression and care little about “economic” or commercial freedom. In contrast, conservatives value the sheer physicality of human activity: place matters, home matters, matter matters. Conservatives reject the divorcing of spiritual values (like free speech, self-expression, or intimating the “meaning of existence”) from the material values of making and doing, buying and selling, since conservatives see humanity as the incarnation of the spiritual in the material. The owners of a bakery express themselves by making wedding cakes for this wedding and not for that one, just as much as journalists express themselves by writing this editorial and not that one.

There are a number of ways to evaluate the truth of a metaphysical model. One way is to consider the results of adopting it: is it adequate to represent and guide human action? The fruits of the Aristotelian model include: property, the market, contracts, corporations, the university, science, the common law, the rule of law, checks and balances, political representation, and limited, constitutional government. Classical liberalism has given us laissez-faire economics, the factory, Social Darwinism, technology, the modern nation-state, empire, total war, mass democracy, secularization, global trade, recreational drugs, abortion, and the hook-up culture. Socialism has yielded Communism, fascism, bureaucracy, regulation, the welfare state, totalitarian democracy, abolition of the family, and the suppression of individual initiative and expression. Conservatives will argue that the first set better embodies the richest and stablest set of values.

Can metaphysical disputes be resolved? Not entirely, but the weight of argument, both empirical and rational, can swing in favor of one or another. Among analytic philosophers, the Aristotelian model has been steadily gaining strength over the last thirty years. Results from quantum theories of macro-phenomena, like chemical bonding, superconductivity, and phase transitions, point to exactly the sort of emergence of new causal powers at the scale of medium-sized objects that would strengthen and confirm the Aristotelian model. The failure of the unity-of-science paradigm of the 20th century has also improved the relative position of Aristotelianism. Alexander Pruss and I have recently argued (in *Putting Powers to Work*, edited by Jonathan Jacobs) that functionalism, which is by far the most promising of the materialists’ projects for reducing mind to matter, cannot work except by incorporating an Aristotelian conception of causal powers, with its associated teleology.

In addition, the last forty years have seen a remarkable renaissance in religious philosophy, including a revival of classical arguments for God’s existence (begun by Richard Swinburne and carried forward in recent years by Pruss, Timothy O’Connor, Alvin Plantinga, and many others). It is possible to be an agnostic and a conservative, but theism provides a powerful antidote to the reductionist tendencies of both Cartesians and Spinozans.

The English philosopher Roger Scruton has over the last twenty years been developing in a series of books and essays a comprehensive conservative philosophy, building on the pioneering work of Russell Kirk, Richard M. Weaver, Robert Nisbet, and many others. As the metaphysical and scientific climate shifts away from atomistic reductionism, and as the undeniable reality of individual action makes itself known, such conservative philosophy will gain in strength. I

believe that we are at the early stages of a renaissance in political philosophy, one that reconnects us with our civilization's deepest roots.