

Phil. 2200

Notes #1: Introduction, irrationality

Agenda:

- Distribute syllabus, readings.
- Discuss course requirements.
- Irrationality.

I. The problem of political disagreement

- Features of political disagreements:
 - widespread
 - strong
 - persistent
- Harms:
 - Waste of resources
 - Bad policies
 - Conflict, violence
- Theories of political disagreements:
 - a. Miscalculation + inherent difficulty of issues
 - b. Ignorance, we haven't collected enough information to resolve issues
 - c. Divergent values
 - d. Irrationality

II. Ignorance & miscalculation theories do not explain:

- Persistence of political disagreements.
- Strength of political beliefs.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Correlations of political beliefs with race, sex, personality traits, etc.

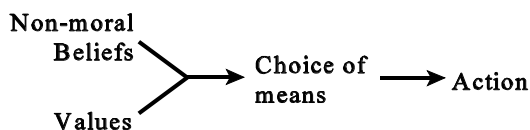
III. Divergent values theory does not explain:

- Why people disagree about values in the first place.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Factual disputes in politics. Examples:

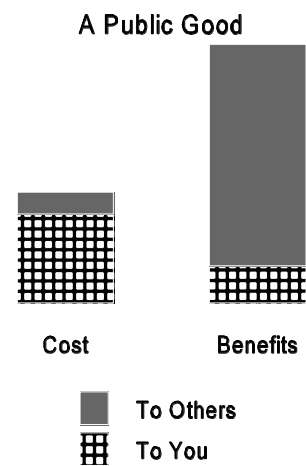
<u>Issue</u>	<u>Disputes</u>
Gun Control	P Do guns cause crime? P Are they effective means of self-defense? P Is there a risk of developing a tyrannical government? P Does private gun ownership reduce this risk?
Capital Punishment	P Does capital punishment deter crime? P How often are innocent people executed?
Capitalism vs. Socialism	P What determines prices in a market economy? P What are the effects of socialism? P Where do capitalists get their money?

IV. Rational ignorance & rational irrationality

- Two kinds of “rationality”:
 - *Instrumental rationality*: consists in choosing the correct means for pursuing your existing goals, whatever they are. The explanation of action:



- *Epistemic rationality*: consists in using correct (logical) reasoning, basing beliefs on evidence, avoiding fallacies, not contradicting oneself, and so on.
- The Theory of Rational Ignorance:
 - It is rational to remain ignorant when costs of collecting information exceed expected benefits.
 - *Example* information about political candidates & issues. Political information is a *public good*: a good for which the producer bears most of the cost, while others receive most of the benefits.
 - People in fact choose to remain ignorant in these cases.
 - └ 60% think foreign aid is one of the 2 largest items in the federal budget. In fact, it is <1% of the budget.¹
 - └ “During the 1992 presidential campaign 89 percent of the public knew that Vice President Quayle was feuding with the television character Murphy Brown, but only 19 percent could characterize Bill Clinton’s record on the environment... 86 percent of the public knew that the Bushes’ dog was named Millie, yet only 15 percent knew that both presidential candidates supported the death penalty. Judge Wapner (host of the television series ‘People’s Court’) was identified by more people than were Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist.”²



- The Theory of Rational Irrationality:
 - Assumes:
 - People have non-epistemic belief preferences: prefer to believe certain things, for reasons independent of the truth or epistemic rationality of those beliefs.
 - People have some control over what they believe.
 - People are generally instrumentally rational.
 - Therefore:
 - └ People choose to adopt epistemically irrational beliefs, when the “costs” of being rational are greater than the expected benefits.
 - └ This includes most political beliefs.

V. Sources of belief preferences

- People are biased by self-interest + interests of the group they prefer to identify with
- People adopt beliefs to accord with the self-image they want to project
- Political beliefs can serve as tools of social bonding.

¹ <www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/BFW/finding1.html>. Respondents were asked to pick the two largest items from the following list: foreign aid, defense, Social Security, food stamps, and Medicare. On average, foreign aid was estimated as 23% of the budget.

² Delli Carpini & Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* 101.

- People are biased towards other beliefs that cohere with their existing beliefs.

VI. Mechanisms of belief fixation

- a. Biased weighting of evidence: we attribute slightly more weight to each piece of evidence that supports our belief, and slightly less weight to each piece of evidence that undermines our belief, than it merits.
- b. Selective attention and energy: we spend more time/energy thinking about arguments supporting or beliefs than arguments criticizing them. But we spend more time looking for flaws in arguments opposing our beliefs than in arguments supporting them. This leads to:
 - └ Prospects for attaining the truth, with different intellectual traits:

	<u>Intelligence</u>	<u>Bias</u>	
1.	+	-	(best)
2.	-	-	
3.	-	+	
4.	+	+	(worst)

- c. Selection of evidence sources: we get political information from sources we already know we agree with.
 - └ Contrast this with scientific approach.
- d. We base beliefs on subjective, speculative, and anecdotal claims. These are more subject to bias.

VII. What should we do?

- Avoid using mechanisms in (VI).
- Collect information from variety of sources.
- Look for flaws in your own arguments.
- Be aware of cases where we are likely to be biased.
 - Moral-political issues
 - Emotional issues
 - Clustering of logically independent beliefs
 - Factual beliefs that occur prior to gathering evidence / are unaffected by evidence
- Remember:
 - Irrationality is not fully conscious.
 - Don't assume you are immune.
 - Conscious efforts may reduce it.
- Regard others' political claims with skepticism.
- Identify what sort of evidence is required to scientifically resolve a factual question, or test a factual claim. Ask whether one has such evidence.

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Notes #2: Liberal & Conservative Values

I. Introductory

- Non-metaphorical morality: “experiential morality”
 - Morality = promoting well-being, preventing harm.
 - Well-being: health, strength, happiness, wealth, cleanliness, standing upright, etc.
 - [Think about: Is this a correct moral theory?]
- People use metaphors to think about morality.

II. The Accounting Metaphor

- Well-being as wealth
- Must pay moral debts. Helps us understand:
 - Retribution, revenge
 - Restitution
 - Altruism
 - Turning the other cheek

II. The Strength Metaphor

- Good = upright
- Evil = falling
- Morality = strength. Two forms of strength:
 - Courage: Standing up to external threats
 - Self-control, strength of will: standing up to internal evils (temptation)
- The 7 deadly sins: greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, pride, envy, anger. These are internal evils, sources of temptation.
- Strength developed through discipline, self-denial.
 - But some people have bad essence, or ‘character’
- Leads to political positions:
 - Against affirmative action
 - Against welfare programs
 - Against giving condoms to teenagers
 - The “3 strikes, you’re out” law
 - Model citizens: Rich people & corporations
- Attitudes towards people who disagree:
 - They’re evil.
 - Do not give them respect. Just fight them.
 - Be ruthless.
 - Do not grant any truth to their side.
 - [Think about: Is this what conservatives think? Does this follow from the Strength metaphor?]

III. The Strict Father Metaphor

- Conservatives share: The Strict Father Model of the family
 - Father responsible for overall family policy
 - protecting family
 - setting a moral model
 - punishment.

- Father = central authority.
- Emotionally restrained.
- Once children are grown, they are on their own. Parents do not meddle.
- For conservatives, government = father. Citizens = children.
[Think about: Is this a good way to think about politics?]
- This leads to political positions:
 - Against feminism
 - Against homosexuality
 - Against abortion. Women who want abortions are immoral. Opposition to abortion isn't about protecting life, or the unborn.
 - Against gun control. Father has to protect family.

IV. Other accounts of conservatism

- Conservatives look to past traditions?
- Conservatives want less federal government?
- Conservatives just follow the Bible?
- Conservatives are selfish / tools of the rich?

V. The Nurturant Parent Metaphor

- Parent cares for and protects child. Interpersonal relationships are most important.
- Again, gov't = parents, citizens = children.
- Morality = empathy, nurturance.
- Fair distribution = (a) equal distribution, (b) impartial rule-based distribution, or (c) rights-based distribution.
- Leads to political positions:
 - Pro social programs
 - Regulation
 - Environmentalism
 - Feminism & gay rights
 - Abortion is nurturing for pregnant women
 - Multiculturalism. Parents celebrate their children's differences.
 - Affirmative action.
 - Art & the humanities should be supported.
 - Taxation: older children have to help younger children.

VI. Objections to Conservatism

- "Foundational pathology":
 - Every moral system is based on "experiential morality".
 - But the Moral Strength system allows one to harm others in the name of the principle that Morality is Strength.
 - Thus, conservatism contradicts its own foundations. [Think about: Is this true?]
- "Empirical pathology":
 - Children who are nurtured are more likely to grow up self-reliant.
 - So being a strict father does not achieve its own goals. [Think about: Does this show that conservative politics is wrong?]
- Conservatives are to blame for the Oklahoma city bombing.
 - [Think about: Is this fair? If it is, are there other things for which liberals are to blame?]

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Overview of Unit 1

At the end of unit 1, students should be able to explain:

These concepts:

- Instrumental rationality
- Epistemic rationality
- Non-epistemic belief preferences
- The accounting metaphor
- The moral strength metaphor
- Strict father morality
- Nurturant parent morality
- Experiential morality

These theories:

- Rational Ignorance
- Rational Irrationality
- Divergent values theory of disagreement
- Lakoff's explanation of conservative values

These arguments:

- Why disagreements are not explained by divergent values.
- Why disagreements are not explained by ignorance & miscalculation.
- Why irrationality is the worst social problem.
- The “foundational pathology” of conservatism.
- The “empirical pathology” of conservatism.

Students should know the positions advanced by these people:

- Huemer
- Lakoff