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The Four Pillars of Contemporary Political Philosophy

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ABSTRACT We can define all political theories pertinent in contemporary modern societies using a model based on only two variables. The first variable can be characterized as a spectrum between **economic right and left wing theories**. *The spectrum can be easily defined by a strictly economic tradeoff of the desired level of taxation juxtaposed to the desired level of social services.* The second variable can be defined as a distinction between **liberal-individualistic and communitarian conception of persons**. **This leads to four positions, the four pillars of contemporary political philosophy:** left wing liberalism (*popular liberalism*), right wing liberalism (*popular libertarianism*), left wing communitarianism (*popular socialist communitarianism*) and right wing communitarianism (the traditionalist stripe of *conservatism*). The problem is that the last of those positions has not been well presented in philosophical literature.

The Graph of Political Theories.

A. The Two Main Variables of Political Philosophy.

We can define all political theories pertinent in contemporary modern societies using a model based on only two variables.

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easily defined by a strictly economic tradeoff of the desired level of taxation juxtaposed to the desired level of social services.

v The second variable can be defined as a distinction between **liberal-individualistic and communitarian conception of persons.**

This looks like a simple argument, but it establishes a theoretical model with major philosophical implications. If accepted, this model defines four main political positions: left wing liberalism (*popular liberalism*), right wing liberalism (*popular libertarianism*), left wing communitarianism (*popular socialist communitarianism*) and right wing communitarianism (the traditionalist stripe of *conservatism*).

The last position is harder to classify than the other three since few philosophers call themselves right wing communitarians. However, some critics call conservatives by this name and, their intentions notwithstanding, it sounds like a fair description of the community oriented stripe of conservatism. The politically dominant definition of conservatism, which covers most politically right wing theories, is overly inclusive for a philosophical debate, whatever its practical value in political theory may be, since it blurs the distinction between conservatism and most forms of free-market libertarianism.

Two Additional Arguments.

In order to develop the main argument sketched out above I need to make two additional arguments:

The first additional argument is needed in order to justify the second variable (we do not need an analogous argument in order to justify the first variable since it is hardly controversial.). We need to demonstrate that individualistic philosophy of person proposed by liberalism is not the only acceptable starting point of modern democratic political philosophy. In this argument, which follows the old liberalism-communitarianism debate, I intend to show that the communitarian alternative is not only actually present in contemporary political

philosophy (this claim is obviously true) but also that it provides a theoretically justifiable alternative to liberalism.¹

The second additional argument is required in order to demonstrate that all four options presented by these two variables provide viable theoretical options. Three of the options created by the above variables describe important and theoretically worked out systems: left-wing liberalism has found at least two main formulations (the more moderate in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and a radical one in Ronald Dworkin's *Sovereign Virtue*), right wing liberalism (libertarianism) has its canonical philosophical defense in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* and left-wing communitarianism in Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*. Significantly, Nozick's and Walzer's book originated at Harvard as early responses to Rawls' theory of justice.

The following argument does not lead to my endorsement of the view I reconstruct. Yet, it is required for the model of two pillars, or the two variables, of political philosophy to work as a description of the main views. We need to demonstrate that a combination of right-wing economic policy and communitarianism in philosophy of person(s) is also a theoretically consistent option; moreover, it is actually present in social and political life. This claim is important due to a certain theoretical weakness of conservatism in contemporary political philosophy. Unlike libertarianism, communitarianism and liberalism, conservatism does not seem to have found its representative philosophically satisfactory account in the 20th. century. Michael Oakshott, Roger Scruton and Russell Kirk came close to achieving this goal and their work provides important insights into the contemporary conservative philosophy; yet, neither of them was able to present a philosophical defense of conservative political philosophy apart with

¹ The claim needs to take into account the fact that many political communitarian do accept a certain version of liberal individualism as an anthropological starting point of their philosophy of person.

the works on the other three main political trends. The theory of economically conservative communitarianism tends to concentrate on Burke's opposition to progressivism and makes a virtue of evading deeper systematic reflection. Its followers tend to conflate their opposition to social utopias (Oakshott's *errors of social constructivism*) with a rejection of systematic theoretical reflection. Michael Oakshott's and Russell Kirk's accounts are complementary in a way, since the former paid little attention to religious aspects of conservative sources of value essential to the philosophical grounding of most versions of conservatism. Oakshott's conservatism in political philosophy become overly process oriented to be representative of the whole trend; it is almost like methodological conservatism in philosophy of science. Its main characteristic is caution and resistance to change, unless a need for the change has been proven beyond doubt. On the other hand Kirk's defense of conservatism has been laid largely on religious grounds to the near exclusion of theoretical grounding of non-religious conservatism. Yet, there is a conservative philosophy apart from its theological background. Roger Scruton's work is more balanced in this regard, and his definition of conservatism has been consistent with many aspects of our proposal to define conservatism as right wing communitarianism. However, while identifying with British monarchism, Scruton highly values the role of the law and the government, whereas typical conservatives prefer reliance on informal social norms, such as the norms guiding a family, or a congregation.

One challenge to our main model would be to define contemporary conservatism in a way *prima facie* defensible against the main arguments coming from liberal, libertarian and left-wing communitarian theorists.

B. First Sketch of a Theoretical Model.

To present our main argument in some more detail, we start with a thesis that all of the political theories acceptable in a democracy can be characterized by a simple model, which is able to put every actual theory in a certain place taking into account the theoretical consequences of its claims. Many real-life political programs contain less than consistent claims, but every consistent political theory can be assigned a given unique place within this model.² As stated above the model is based merely on two variables:

The first variable is defined on a spectrum between egalitarian distributive theories and those based on entitlements; the latter rely on primary distribution of resources in a market economy, the former on their re-distribution through taxation or other political means. This variable may be characterized as ranging from the **economic left** which requires high social services provided by the state and in order to obtain them is willing to accept high taxation (or other forms of state ownership of the resources) to the **economic right** that accepts no re-distributive taxation but is able to accept ultra-minimal services provided by the state (often some kind of external military protection and scaled down diplomatic service).

The second variable is defined as a spectrum between **individualist** and **communitarian** conceptions of the source of value in a society. This variable is more philosophical and therefore more elusive than the first one. It can be cast as the anthropological basis for the distinction

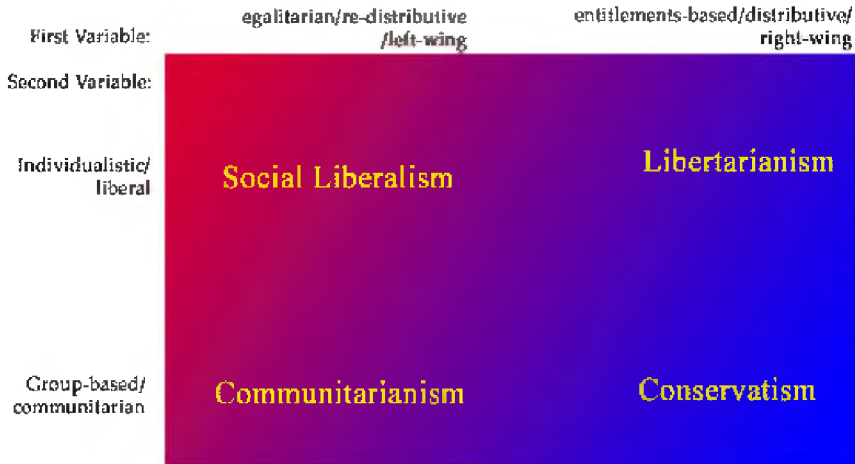
²The model may need to leave out some theories that lie outside of the scope of democratic choice broadly understood, for instance certain kinds of dictatorship – this is to be expected since those actually existing kinds of government often lack of consistent theoretical grounding in terms of socially acceptable values although they may rely on some other theoretical basis such a *de facto* acceptance of the rule of the strongest for their own benefit, or belief in unchecked divine authority of the ruler. No such political theories are acceptable in a modern democracy.

between liberalism and communitarianism. This distinction is not clearly defined in contemporary political philosophy; the discipline presents us with a number of imperfect ways to define this distinction but no proposal seems satisfactory for the present purpose. Once the distinction is made clear, we can see that there are two radically different systems of political philosophy, one that follows the philosophical presumptions of individualistic liberalism, the other one that follows from communitarian assumptions.

There is nothing new in the liberal-communitarian distinction in political philosophy. Nevertheless, liberal political philosophy has a much deeper grounding in moral theory than communitarianism; there is a better fit between the structure of impartial, agent centered, value presumed by liberalism than with the priorities given to one's community presumed to different degrees by various strands of communitarianism. (Defense of communitarianism requires some work in moral theory along the lines of Sheffler, ethics of care and even Aristotle.) This discrepancy seems to be the main reason why liberal individualism seems theoretically more respectable and is perceived as possessing a stronger grounding than communitarianism. Being more philosophical, the second variable seems to have been overlooked in some of the main works in contemporary political philosophy.

C. The Graph.

Based on these two variable, however underdefined at this point, we can draw the following graph of possible political theories.



The graph illustrates the main political theories: Social Liberalism, Communitarianism, Libertarianism and Conservatism that are defined by the four variables sketched out above. If there is any discussion time left, we shall discuss defining characteristics of each position in much more detail. Part II of the book is devoted to the presentation of a moral theory appropriate for conservatism as right wing communitarianism. We develop a framework based on Aristotle's idea of *zoon politicoon*, the framework which allows for community based, thick relationships, family values and other traditional virtues which do not need to be viewed as dangers to peaceful cooperation among individuals and communities.

D. Conclusions

The model of the four pillars of political philosophy allows us to view all those four positions as viable potential frameworks of political theory in a modern society; each with their strengths and shortcomings.

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