

A Political *a priori*?

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ABSTRACT: This essay speculates on how variations in political attitudes—and in particular differences in perceptions of, and reactions to, the COVID-19 pandemic—might in fact be rooted in variations in our *a priori* conceptions of the thing and our understandings of the place of the human in the world.

KEY WORDS: *a priori*, COVID-19, political division, essentialism, conventionalism

One of the more remarkable aspects of COVID-19 has been how progressives and conservatives have differed in their fundamental attitudes toward this event. While the former have been much more inclined to see it as a catastrophe justifiably demanding harsh measures, the latter have tended to characterize it as an exaggerated risk hardly justifying a devastating toll on people's livelihoods. The former have spoken of the virus as a "deadly infectious disease" and the latter as only a more aggressive version of the flu. The former might point to New York City, and the latter to Sweden. I don't refer here to 'extremists' or 'deniers,' but to variations in fundamental attitudes of laypeople—noticeable variations that seem to go well beyond mere differences of opinion. One might get the sense that progressives and conservatives had fundamentally different experiences of the event, that they literally saw different things.

It is not uncommon these days to seek the root of stark differences in political attitudes outside of political discourse itself. "A growing body of experimental research is finding evidence suggesting that, to some degree, political inclinations and ideological leanings may be tied to innate factors like a person's biology, physiology and genetics."¹ The goal of such reductionist programs is to look not only for causes, but also for organizing principles. Why are liberals typically proponents of bigger government, cosmopolitans, more suspicious of social hierarchies, likely to embrace more catastrophic climate change predictions, and inclined to see gender

as less dependent on biological markers? What links this cluster of ambiguously connected beliefs? Are there *other beliefs* that explain the clustering, or do we need to invoke something deeper?

In contrast to the above reductionist programs, I will offer a philosophical approach centered on the notion of the *a priori*. I will suggest that variations in our *understanding of being*, or in our *a priori* conception of the thing, may be the precondition and organizing principle of differences in political attitudes.

Consider the following exchange on a topic, gay marriage, which is now largely decided. In a typical argument about the subject (I remember such arguments in the 1990s)—after sparring over what a proper family should look like, or about equality and justice—the progressive would say in exasperation: “but concepts change, we can call whatever we want marriage!” And the conservative would respond: “but marriage is between a man and a woman, marriage is marriage!” I always felt that such dueling exclamations—more like empty expressions of frustration than arguments—revealed deeper attitudes.

To philosophers, this should evoke familiar disputes between conventionalists and essentialists. Classic essentialism insists that things have certain necessary attributes independent of our linguistic practices. An essentialist would claim a genuine metaphysical difference between natural classifications (e.g., mammals, reptiles) and non-natural classifications (e.g., by animal color). This corresponds to the idea that being a mammal is more essential to the whale than being blue. A conventionalist would counter that there is no ‘natural way’ to classify the world independently of human concerns—e.g., our preferences for simplicity and economy—and what we think of as ‘essential to the thing’ is actually a reflection of our own interests and activities: “Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word” (Quine). Or more dramatically: “There is no object beyond discourse” (Woolgar).

Rorty once wrote, “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.” Here we seem to be confronted with two such dueling pictures. On the one hand, the object as ‘formless goo,’ meaningless and valueless absent our legislative capacities, our ‘dominating gaze.’ On the other, the object as antecedently structured, possessing an essence that our conceptual activity needs to correctly capture and conform to²—this is the object as mystery.³ In the former, the human being is more centrally and dominantly placed in the world. In the latter, less so.

Might we say that laypeople, indeed everyone, already have such primordial schemas, however unarticulated and dim? Such schemas could be called *a priori* if they do not emerge from experience but organize it—if they are the unspoken boundary to thought. *Kant* famously invoked a universal *a priori*, and Foucault, an historical one. Heidegger generalized this notion to an ‘*understanding of being*’ that enables our commerce with entities, our being-in-the-world. May we

think of such an understanding of being as varying, even only slightly, between individuals? May we claim that such variations account, or are at least anterior to, any political orientation? How might I prove or even argue for this position? I'm not sure. Let me not argue for it but *suggest* it. Perhaps such an approach can help make sense of the clusters of attitudes that coalesce on each of the political sides. A word before I continue: the characterizations of the political views below, like the characterizations of philosophical positions above, may seem simplistic, reductive, almost caricatures. Space prevents me from delving deeper here than I do, but I ask the reader to be attuned to the kind of truth that caricatures can have.

A person who conceives the thing as fully susceptible to our conceptual capacities will obviously be more inclined to see gender difference as rooted in concepts, perceptions, and roles rather than in biology. Marriage could only be what we *call* 'marriage,' and there could be nothing more to it. Cultural relativism is more natural here since rival conceptual schemes cannot be advantageous vis-à-vis formless reality itself. And when we conceive of the real as no match for the 'dominating gaze' of the human mind, isn't it more natural also to think of the environment as no match for human activity in general?

People on the right tend to hold that certain social orders and hierarchies are inevitable, typically grounding this position on natural law, economics, or tradition. Obviously, these justifications presuppose a conception of the real as transcending our conventions and interests. Conversely, the leftist suspicion of social hierarchies, which are seen as expressions of mere power or caprice, fits well with a conception of the thing as formless and valueless in itself. Perceived imbalance (e.g., that there are more men than women in tech) must be rooted in traditions and institutions. In fact, any putatively 'natural' or 'inevitable' difference is exactly not that because nothing could be natural or inevitable in this way, in principle. That is why an organized conscious effort (i.e., big government) is needed to dismantle what is surely arbitrary. Understanding reality as formless, the world as lacking value and meaning, leaves little room for God. Hence God is more at home on the right. As the thing, the real, recedes, the human takes its place, flourishing into the anthropocentrism of "man is the measure of all things."

Perhaps the most significant difference between progressives and conservatives is their attitude toward change, and more broadly toward time. Conservatives look back on the past as a source of truth, while progressives tend to look forward to a more perfect future. Can we understand this fundamental difference in terms of the *a priori* variations we have outlined? Conceiving the object as formless goo means that any imbalance or injustice must be attributed to our evaluative and conceptual apparatus, precisely the apparatus we have inherited from the past. Hence progressives tend to regard tradition with more suspicion. If, on the other hand, the object is a mystery transcending our human activities, if it *already* has structure *prior* to our practices and interests, then our orientation already gives

priority to the past. The thing is what it was, what it always was, and past experience of it is rather a source of wisdom than something to be discarded.

We began by considering the polarized reaction to COVID-19. Can the considerations above help understand the political alignment on this issue? Since quarantines and lockdowns are never hermetic, and since the virus has its own natural range of expansion and contraction, the question arises: how much of the virus behavior we witnessed depended on our efforts (e.g., lockdowns, masks) and how much on the virus's natural behavior (e.g., seasonality, saturation)? It is not surprising that progressives tended to see greater causality in the former and conservatives in the latter. Furthermore, the pandemic has been hailed as a world transforming event ever since its appearance, but almost exclusively by progressives. The many op-eds which claimed that the world would never be the same typically saw the event as an opportunity,⁴ while conservatives couldn't wait for the whole thing just to go away. We've seen above how differences in our understanding of being can condition different attitudes toward change such as these.

So what claim am I making? I'm certainly not trying to reduce, e.g., progressives' sensitivity to justice, to some *a priori*, ontological, conception of the thing. Yet how one thinks about justice, what one considers an injustice, may presuppose such a conception. I'm also not reiterating the well-known fact that political groups often adopt and appropriate philosophical ideas. Rather, I'm suggesting that variations in our understanding of being are *enacted* in our political attitudes. The *a priori* is derived from the Greek *proteron*, which means "anterior," "primary." The claim here is that the clusters of beliefs and attitudes that coalesce on the political sides may indicate anterior understandings that are not themselves political.⁵ If true, this could explain the perplexing fact that no one has ever argued someone out of their political views. It also might explain why people in the humanities and the arts—the clergy of the 'human world'—are so overwhelmingly progressive. On one side stands this human-centric world, the world of "man is the measure of all things," the urban world, the progressive world. And on the other stands the world of those for whom the thing—in its mystery, its hidden essences—looms large.⁶

What would the implications of this account be for the structure of political discourse? If disagreements between the political sides involve *a priori* principles, then they could not be decided by appealing to experience (or data, or facts)—such is the nature of the *a priori*. Perhaps we might rather say that people on the two political sides, at least to some degree, live in two different worlds. If this is the case, then it is philosophers who could help bring these worlds together by unearthing the underlying conditions, the unarticulated 'pictures and metaphors,' the *a priori* conceptions of the thing and of the place of the human in the world, that sustain our articulated beliefs.

NOTES

1. Glueck, “Left, Right: Politics’s Brain Science.”
2. In causal theories of reference, for example, the essence of the object (e.g., that this liquid is H₂O) is involved in determining the meaning of the concept.
3. The anti-conventionalist position does not need to be naïve realism. For Heidegger—hardly a naïve realist—that which is other than the human is not out there passively awaiting human legislation but is the mystery of all mysteries.
4. See, e.g., *Le Monde*, “Please, Let’s Not Go Back to Normal.”
5. Or perhaps, conversely: our *a priori* ontological commitments are already political!
6. Urban/rural is one of the strongest predictors of progressive/conservative attitudes.

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