

The Problem of Neutral Rhetoric

Every political argument makes a moral claim. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is one that those who craft our political rhetoric seem determined to obscure. We are inclined to appeal to concepts such as tolerance and freedom—which are, of course, moral concepts—as if they are ways to avoid reflecting on the moral merits of the policies under consideration. In every case, this is either the unwitting burying or the willful disguising of one's moral and philosophical commitments.

We try to avoid explicitly moral claims in our discourse, because we believe they are controversial; they initiate disagreement and are easily caricatured as pushy or extreme. Since the modern habit of mind is to see moral claims as subjective and largely impervious to practical reason, we see moral discourse as hopelessly mired in disagreement. To make a political argument based on an explicitly moral claim, then, is to appear to abandon objectivity and the hope of consensus.

Fearful of controversy, we shift our appeals away from moral correctness to concepts on which we believe there is consensus, such as freedom, tolerance, and equality. In making such appeals, we hope to free ourselves and our interlocutors from the burden of making a value judgment. The implicit argument is this: if you believe in a particular uncontroversial concept (and who doesn't!), then you must agree with my policy prescription. Thus, the façade of objectivity and the possibility of consensus are maintained. This approach also makes it easy to dismiss and caricature opponents as “enemies of the human race,” as Justice Scalia put it in his *Windsor* dissent.

Yet all sincere political arguments—that is, all advocacy that

is not undertaken knowingly to benefit a private or parochial interest at the expense of society as a whole—contain the express or implied claim that society will be better off if the proposed policy is executed. If the (sincere) advocate did not believe this basic premise, he would not defend the policy. Hence, any argument that obscures this substantive moral claim is either a dodge or a kind of self-deception.

The Appeal to Freedom

This is most obvious in generic appeals to “freedom” that avoid engaging with the merits of the action for which freedom is being argued. Think of abortion: those who favor the legality of the procedure couch their position in the language of the “freedom to choose” while sidestepping the nature of that choice. But this argument is never just about freedom as such. Rather, it entails the claim that society is better off with legal abortion than without it. There is no political position on abortion that is agnostic on the morality of abortion itself.

This is not just a phenomenon of the American left. Libertarianism is built on the hope of moral agnosticism about the behavior of fellow citizens. Consider gambling. Two years ago, I published an essay [here at Public Discourse](#) arguing against a proposal to bring video keno to Pennsylvania. The most strenuous objections I encountered were from conservative libertarians carrying the banner of freedom. But the argument in favor of the expansion of permitted activities is necessarily a claim about the nature of those activities—namely, that a commonwealth with video keno is morally superior to one without. Thus, it is not agnostic about keno whatsoever. (This is placing to one side the absurdity of a conservative libertarian favoring the creation of a new government monopoly, as the Pennsylvania proposal called for.)

Now, this is not to ignore the moral importance of freedom.

Implicit in the rhetorical appeal to freedom is the moral claim that having more permitted activities is, on the whole, better than having fewer. But this is only part of the argument; it also assumes that the presence of the newly permitted activity will not harm society to a degree that will overwhelm the moral benefits of expanding freedom. Therefore, the argument still makes a substantive moral claim about the policy, not just a claim about the merits of freedom in the abstract.

The Appeal to Tolerance

Another attempt to strip political discourse of explicit moral content is the appeal to tolerance. This is functionally similar to the appeal to freedom, but instead of forswearing moral judgment oneself, one demands one's interlocutor do so.

"Tolerance" has become a particularly powerful buzzword during the working-out of the political ramifications of the sexual revolution. There was a minor hubbub recently when MSNBC contributor and *Washington Post* writer Jonathan Capehart asserted that, when it comes to LGBT issues, tolerance is "[a one-way street](#)." This caused a stir, especially among social conservatives, who generally marshaled a two-fold response: (1) the remark demonstrates that the LGBT movement has always used the appeal for tolerance cynically, and now the façade is crumbling; and (2) the remark misunderstands the nature of tolerance, which necessarily goes two ways.

The first response is correct, but the second is not. Nobody really thinks tolerance is necessarily two-way; we tolerate a great deal of things whose inverse we censure. Social conservatives do not differ with Capehart on the abstract concept of tolerance, except perhaps at the margins of what, exactly, tolerance entails and precisely how much weight to give this social virtue. Rather, they disagree with him about what ought to be tolerated and what ought not to be tolerated. Toleration is not a value-neutral suspension of judgment; it

is freighted with judgment about what actions and principles are in keeping with a good and just society, and it is here that the substantial disagreement lies. Demanding tolerance is a sneaky way to evade robust discourse about the merits of one's principles.

The Appeal to Science

The most widely popular way to avoid moral discourse may be the appeal to science, whether natural or social. This phenomenon is exemplified by the rise of "explanatory journalism," such as [Ezra Klein's Vox project](#). The conceit of Vox and other practitioners of this art is that *if only* everyone understood all the facts, then consensus (or at least something near consensus) on public policy could be reached without appeal to pesky and divisive value judgments. But, of course, the presentation of those facts always smuggles in value judgments. Moreover, the idea that political disagreement is based in factual ignorance rather than distinct moral principles is itself a contested philosophical claim.

But more than that, science can never provide definitive answers to questions of how to organize society. For instance, [science has shown that life begins at conception](#). Disagreement about abortion is founded in part on ignorance about this question, but even if there were universal assent to this fact there would not be universal agreement about abortion. Science can provide the data, whether about climate change, family structure, or life itself; we must provide the value judgments that inform how we respond to those data.

Reclaiming Rhetoric

The best response to our morally stultified political discourse is simply to call it out—that is, to challenge those who try to evade moral discourse, whether or not they are aware of the evasion, by pointing out the moral assumptions

that underlie their positions. Even if one's interlocutor still fails to acknowledge his assumptions, it is the challenge itself that is important. Like a weed crowding out a garden, moral evasion thrives when it is ignored, and it soon becomes the accepted norm. We must always assert what should be obvious but has been forgotten: every political argument makes a moral claim.

To revitalize American politics, we must banish the conceit of moral agnosticism that allows rhetoricians and entire movements to disguise their deep ideological commitments and avoid robust moral discourse. And the first step to accomplishing this banishment is to challenge the vocabulary that is the linguistic foundation of liberal neutrality.

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