

Pragmatism and Correctism

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There are two kinds of popular approaches to social events. One is “pragmatic,” according to which one should use statistical data and historical precedents in judging people and in making decisions on how to treat them. Example: throughout all of history, an army (say, Nazis) invading a country (say, Czechoslovakia) was greeted and spied for by many citizens of this country whose ethnicity was the same as that of the invaders. So it was a fair assumption, based on such evidence, that the Japanese residents of the west coast of USA during the WWII would be likely to greet the Japanese army should it invade, or would be prone to spying for it. As a result, from the pragmatist point of view they had to be interned, and this was what de facto happened.

The other view is dubbed “political correctness.” Applied to our example, it finds the internment in question appalling and immoral, and to justify this it denies the statistical probability of the Japanese Americans ever being disloyal to USA. You are a racist pig if you think otherwise, history be damned.

Appearing diametrically opposite, these two approaches have a common ground. I call it group thinking. A pragmatist says: you, an individual, belong to a group with statistically bad traits, so I will treat you, an individual, as if you had personally exhibited these traits. A “correctist” says: treating you, an individual, in this manner is appalling, so I deny that the group to which you belong has a statistical tendency to exhibit these traits. In a milder version of correctism, I admit the group tendency, but a priori explain it by past or existing oppression and injustices perpetrated on your group; and I advocate affirmative action to rectify them. It is still the same group thinking, because affirmative action means preferential treatment of a person due to her or his group identity.

It seems that a person with enlightened, liberal, humanist views should always prefer correctism, at least of the milder variety. The pragmatism is often advocated to post-hoc justify social biases, prejudices, and outright bigotry: I don’t want a Mexican to live in my neighborhood, so I gather and exaggerate crime statistics among the Mexican immigrants. By contrast, affirmative action is often unselfish and noble, at least at the outset: you know that women are scarce in math departments, so you institute a search aimed at identifying mathematically talented women and you encourage them to join math departments.

But the problems quickly pile up. Affirmative action often takes the form of reverse discrimination. You know that women are scarce in math departments, so you admit them to schools and offer them positions over the head of more talented men. A class of professional activists is created who promote their specific brands of affirmative action to advance their own careers. And, something almost universally true as well as universally ignored, the victims of oppression themselves show little if any moral superiority over their oppressors once the roles are reversed. Give an oppressed group the right to accuse their former oppressors with impunity, and you will get an avalanche of false accusations. Create a class of administrators whose role is to see that the formerly oppressed groups are fairly represented in a professional area, and you will get a decline in professional standards and preferential treatment for ideological activists. These are all well known truths. Try to argue that the US presidential candidates should not kowtow to pro-Israeli interest groups in order to be elected, and you will be immediately accused of antisemitism. Try to consider the possibility that the underrepresentation of the blacks in academia may be due to factors beyond suppression of

talented blacks, and you will be labeled a racist pig. Even if formulated as hypotheses and possibilities with all scientific caveats, such views will always be considered “radical,” whereas the politically correct views, even if demonstrably untenable or primitive, are perceived as “balanced.” Rational arguments sit very poorly with both the pragmatists and correctists. Righteous indignation and motive questioning sit very well with both. Both appeal to morality: the pragmatists, as a rule, to “traditional values,” the correctists to “progressive values.” Both deliberately lie to advance their positions. Both ostracize and damage people unfairly.

Is there a good way of escaping this symmetrical impasse? I am not sure of its practicality, but I think there is an ideal moral position that allows one to both accept statistical truths about groups and avoid discrimination and unfairness to individuals. Let us call it “antigroup morality”: systematically reject group thinking in judging individuals and in designing measures affecting them. Admit as a matter of intellectual honesty statistical regularities and historical facts, but refuse, as a moral imperative, to ever apply them to individuals. I think it is an approach that can be called truly enlightened, liberal, and humanist. Admit the truth that the Jews are statistically superior to the white gentiles in academic areas, but forget of this knowledge when assessing an individual Jew and an individual gentile for a faculty position. Do not lie that the Jews are not statistically smarter, just keep in mind that statistical regularities and historical analogies are not certainties when applied to this or that individual. Admit that women who used to be barred from doing math, sociology, and medicine, after having been “unbarred” have made spectacular statistical progress in sociology and medicine but not in math — and forget this knowledge when examining a woman and a man for a graduate program or position at a math department. Allow for the possibility that the Japanese Americans were statistically predisposed to switching their loyalty to an invading Japanese army — and (this is much more difficult, for obvious reasons) do not do anything at all to prevent this, lest your actions be unfair and immoral to this or that individual Japanese American.

There is nothing new or unusual in this approach. It is essentially identical to the cornerstone of Western jurisprudence, the presumption of innocence. My behavior appears suspicious to you because many criminals behave in the same way as I did, but you let me go free unless you have evidence that specifically I, rather than criminals behaving like me, committed this particular crime. By ignoring statistical evidence you are statistically bound to let a guilty person go free with nonnegligible probability, perhaps even a high one, but you do this because you morally abhor punishing an innocent person. This is a clean and rational position. Outside jurisprudence, however, it is very difficult to implement. I suspect in fact that it is impossible to implement until people get rid of religion, ethnocentrism, and patriotism — the prejudices and illnesses with which their groups infect them from their early childhood. Unlike other prejudices and illnesses, such as racism and sexism, they are held in high esteem and even viewed as morally imperative. In this lies their danger to all moral principles, especially to the “antigroup morality.” But I will not elaborate on this point here. Whether implementable in practice or not, I find the systematic rejection of group thinking morally defensible and superior to both pragmatism and political correctness.

Received: 12 June 2012

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