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Trump's Utilitarianism: Placing the Economy First is Anti-Democratic and Immoral¹

Trumps call to cease social distancing and “rev up the economy” is the most blatant confirmation of his anti-democratic and autocratic mentality. Such “Utilitarianism” claims that it seeks “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Despite the appeal to the “majority”, though, Utilitarianism is not only anti-democratic but also arrogantly immoral. It is anti-democratic because it denies the dignity owed to *every* citizen and treats persons as mere means for achieving “the greater good”. It is arrogantly immoral because, under the assumption that only consequences count (“we know a tree by its fruit”), it claims to know in advance what the fruits are going to be of a decision/action. Both assumptions ignore the limits to human reason and elevate the agent(s) of such decision taking to the throne of God.

John Stuart Mill's claim (*Utilitarianism* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001]: 23-24) that “we can learn from history” what the consequences of actions are going to be has two fatal flaws: 1) it assumes that agents have control over the dynamics of the consequences once they are set in motion; and 2) it acts on the basis of the important Santayanan insight that “those who ignore history are bound to repeat it” but makes the fateful error of ignoring the novelty of circumstances for which no prior experience is adequate. In this case, the coronavirus has no precedent.

That over which we unequivocally have control in our decision taking is the selection of the principle invoked to give ourselves “permission” to do what we intend to do. However, not every principle is a moral principle. In addition to moral principles, there are both technical and pragmatic rules to which we are accountable “if” and once we have decided to do something. For example, technical imperatives are the physical steps that one must adhere to “if” one wants to construct a house; pragmatic imperatives are the requirements of a social system “if” one would like to practice a profession. However, both sets of imperatives are subordinate to “moral” principles, which, in contrast to technical and pragmatic imperatives are not determined by the demands of a specific situation (including, a health or an economic crisis). This subordination is clear to all because everyone knows that one can do everything “properly” according to technical and/or pragmatic imperative and still not be virtuous. For example, cutting corners in the house construction and cheating on the certification exams of a profession. If the principle one chooses to give oneself “permission” to do something is *exclusively* self-interest (for example, material profit, physical pleasure), then it cannot be a *universal* principle (to be addressed below).

Furthermore, democracy is far more than simply “majority rule”. Democracy is grounded in the citizenry being involved in, and taking responsibility for, its governance to achieve the welfare of its citizenry. This is not simply an abstract ground that it is a “*good idea*” for citizens to be involved in governance – even not simply because this “good idea” appeals to the self-interest of wanting for the other what one wants for oneself. Rather, the

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grounding is extremely concrete and practical: Each human being is capable, consciously, of initiating sequences of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Not only is this the ultimate foundation of democracy, but it also is the very ground of individual *dignity*.

However, it is important that dignity be distinguished from an individual's "relative" *worth*. The latter is an economic metaphor that is grounded in exchange: something has worth when it can be given a "price", which is a substitute for the object of the exchange. Because no other "thing" nor individual can be substituted for her/him because no one can exercise creativity for another individual, there is no basis of exchange for the individual. Hence, s/he has no price, and no "relative" worth can be placed on her/him (see Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (AA IV: 428)).

Additionally, it is only because of this causal capacity, irreducible to but never separate, from nature, that it is possible for us to "hold ourselves accountable" for our actions. This is the meaning of "autonomous freedom" for Immanuel Kant. Without succumbing to speciesism (that humanity is a "superior" species – given our track record surely not a justified claim), it is clear that we don't hold other organisms or animals accountable for their "actions" precisely because they act instinctually, nowhere nearly deliberately as do human beings. The coronavirus is not immoral! It is amoral.

Because not every citizen in large scale communities/societies can be directly involved in every governance decision, democracy depends upon a representative system along with the separation of powers (legislative, executive, and judicial) in which persons are elected by "*universal* suffrage" to govern. Of course, suffrage is not technically universal and so-called "democratic" societies have long discriminated against minorities, women, and the un-propertied, but, if all too slowly, participation in governance has come to be extended to more and more in acknowledgment of human dignity. In other words, the ground for combating this discrimination is challenged and overcome, again, not simply because such discrimination is a "bad idea" but because of democracy's "grounding" in the dignity of every individual.

In a democracy, the citizenry, based on the dignity of each individual, has the right to expect that the government is devoted to the welfare of all, not just the few. However, in a democracy there is no authority above the government because the government *is the people*, and there is no political authority higher than the people. When the ruling representatives violate the welfare of the people, the appropriate response is *not* (!) revolution because that is an attack on "the sovereign" who is none other than *the people*, not merely because it would result in the deaths of persons (the snuffing of dignity) but because it results merely in a re-arrangement of the deck chairs on the ship of state. Rather, a democracy can bring about change only through *reform* achieved by the *will of the people* encouraged and expressed in a manner compatible with human dignity: the power of the pen and the selection of the representatives of its sovereignty (see Part II of "On the Common Saying: 'That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'" [AA VIII: 289-306] – given that Kant was writing under the censorship of an autocratic monarchy, it is important to read the entire section to get Kant's point, accurately).

The call to suspend social distancing and "rev up the economy" is anti-democratic because it ignores the welfare of those citizens whose lives would be sacrificed to a virus for the sake of the economic advantage of "the majority" – under the assumption that the decision takers know for certain that the consequence would be an improvement of the

economy and not an economic catastrophe caused by the resulting pandemic. Particularly when it comes to a pandemic, it is only the citizenry that can protect itself by imposing stringent enforcement of restrictions with respect to what in “normal” times are taken to be basic democratic rights: the right to assemblage and the pursuit of (economic) happiness.

It has become a commonplace today that the claim for *universal* moral principles is either a remnant of colonialism or an attempt to *force* Western values on the rest of the world. This rhetoric confuses technical/pragmatic imperatives for *categorical* imperatives. The latter are not derived from the external world but are self-imposed, internally, by the individual because of her/his autonomous freedom to do things that nature on its own cannot do.

Furthermore, much ink has been spilled trying to prove that a particular principle is universal. However, the question to ask is not, “how do we prove that we’re acting on a *universal* principle?” This question is no more capable of being adequately answered than we can prove that there are *universal* physical laws. John Rawls’ efforts to develop strategies for even a satisfactory determine whether a principle is universal only lead to what Jennifer Uleman calls “cold-fish” morality with the process of determination taking so long that there is no longer a relevant context to apply the principle (see *An Introduction to Kant’s Moral Philosophy* [Cambridge University Press, 2010]). The more appropriate question is: “how do we determine that we’re *not* acting out of merely self-interest?”

Moral principles are analogous to physical “laws”. We are incapable of proving that either set of “laws” always applies in all situations and at all times. Rejecting universal principles because we cannot prove them, though, is like saying that we can ignore gravity because we can’t prove that it functions everywhere. We must assume that it does if we are to understand physics at all. Nonetheless, there is at least one crucial difference between physical “laws” and moral principles. The failure to adhere to the former has obviously perceptible, empirical *consequences* in the physical world (thus we can test our physical laws against empirical consequences). Such failure can be witnessed by any possible observer and, moreover, these perceptible consequences are entirely independent of the agent who ignores the physical law.

Moral principles, as well, are not perceptible, but their consequences are *inseparable from the agent who invokes them*. In other words, both their application and their consequences can be adequately *known* only inwardly by the individual. One cannot determine by the consequences what the moral principle was upon which the individual chose to act. Only the individual can know! Furthermore, the individual does not choose a *moral principle* based on its *consequences* in the physical world. As was observed above, we don’t have adequate control over the consequences for them to be a criterion for morality. Yet, the individual knows when s/he has given her-/himself “permission” or accepts the “imperative” of a “this ‘ought’ to be done”. The “reward” or “punishment” is not the *empirical consequences* of the action but the knowledge that one chose to act on a moral principle (the “reward” of “happiness” as compatible with our highest capacities) or purely out of self-interest (the “punishment” of one’s knowledge that one failed oneself as well as others).

Given that it is impossible to determine clearly whether or not one has acted out of self-interest (see the opening paragraphs of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (AA IV: 406-408), where he notes that “we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives”), how does one know that one is not acting *merely* out of self-interest? There are broad moral principles that transcend self-interest. Among these broader, universal principles are: not lying, not committing suicide out

of financial collapse and/or loss of honor in the prime of life, developing one's talents, responding to the suffering of others,² not intentionally testifying falsely against another,³ keeping promises,⁴ not taking advantage of the inexperience of others,⁵ proper care of animals,⁶ ecological concern for nature (the material basis for all theoretical and practical reason),⁷ and more. We have the capacity to invoke such principles only if it is possible for us to act independently of self-interest.

Nonetheless, rather than establish an objective list of such wide principles (in contrast to narrow technical and pragmatic imperatives driven by one's circumstances), which would in any case be open to much interpretation, Kant proposed in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (AA IV: 421, 429, 431) three criteria for evaluating the principle. These criteria can be applied instantaneously:

- 1) Act on the basis of a principle that you would want to be *universal* as if it were a law of nature (negatively: if I am acting exclusively based on self-interest, I am definitely not acting in accordance with a universal principle);
- 2) only allow oneself and the other to be treated as an *end* and never merely as a *mere means*; and
- 3) acknowledge all other beings capable of exercising autonomous freedom as possessing the capacity and the obligation to determine the principle on which s/he acts *for themselves*.

In the *Critique of Judgment* (AA V: 294-295), he adds three additional maxims for the elucidating of "fundamental principles":

- a) the *unprejudiced* maxim of the understanding: think for oneself;
- b) the *broadened* maxim of judgment: "think from the perspective of the other"; and
- c) the *consistent* maxim of reason: "think in accord with oneself".

In his *Lecture on Moral Philosophy* (1774/5) (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), he indicated that the consistency meant by this last maxim is to think in accordance with one's freedom (180). A thoughtful analysis of these criteria demonstrate that they are all anchored in and have a coherent structure because humanity possesses indelible dignity, which is consequence of each person having the capacity of autonomous freedom.

We should put our confidence in the creative potential of people, not in hedonistic and impulsive, material consumption, much less follow the blind lead of an egomaniac. The creative potential of people will get us through every crisis, perhaps even with a sense of deep personal satisfaction, if not pride. The latter hedonism and impulsive consumption by itself are misanthropic, anti-democratic, and immensely destructive of persons and the environment!

² These four moral principles are Kant's examples of duties owed to oneself and to the other as *categorical imperatives* in Section II of the *Groundwork*.

³ This moral principle is discussed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (AA V: 30, 155-156) to illustrate that moral principles are universal because everyone recoils in horror over the false testimony. The discussion of this moral principle is preceded by an account of humanity's ability to control even its most powerful, physical interest: sexuality (AA V: 30).

⁴ See the *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI: 219-210.

⁵ See the *Groundwork* AA IV: 397.

⁶ See the *Metaphysics of Morals*., AA VI: 443-444.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, AA VI: 443.