

MN4227 Reflective Essay

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Much of this course has spent time dealing with what various factions think the terms social responsibility, accountability, a corporation and the economy mean and the ways in which they are applied to one another. This essay topic now asks us to sum up and critically evaluate that discourse. There is something about these concepts which deeply bothers me – I have the intuitive feeling that there is something wrong with the assumptions which underpin the implied meanings which underwrite these terms.

Taking into account the essay guidelines about deep & advanced learning, I propose that the question itself, in its current form, is in my opinion inadvisable because the way in which the question is asked already imposes boundaries on the possible answers. It therefore seems to me that a semiological analysis is required (Jackson & Carter, 2006) in order to fully unpick the question, and then maybe propose an improved form which I shall leave unanswered.

The Semiotics of the modern ‘Left’ and ‘Right’¹

In my opinion, the modern *left* thinks legal regulation is required to stop one group of people mistreating another group or the environment which implies:

1. That most people cannot be trusted to behave well without intervention² i.e.; that they cannot regulate themselves (e.g.; market failures, “rule of law”).
2. That different groups of people all watching one another regulates misbehaviour³ (e.g.; oversight committees, Bentham’s Panopticon).
3. That government, as the representative of the people and the sole legitimate employer of violence, is uniquely empowered to enforce good behaviour for the benefit of all.

In my opinion, the modern *right* thinks that regulation impedes natural forces teaching people to not mistreat one another in the first place which implies:

1. That people are at their core rational and behave according to their own self-interest.
2. That therefore people wouldn’t naturally behave self-destructively or violently for the sheer hell of it in the long term, and if they did then natural selection would eliminate such elements over time.
3. That government, like all collections of people, will act no less in its own self-interest than any other group of people and therefore to deliberately give it special rights and privileges over others is at best unfair, at worst extremely dangerous (e.g.; leads to dictatorships).

It can be seen that the *left’s* wish for more regulation is associated with positive freedom (the freedom to become greater than oneself⁴) whereas the *right’s* wish for less regulation is associated with negative freedom (the freedom

¹ The political meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ changes over time, hence the qualification of modern. From now on for convenience I shall write *left* and *right* to distinguish from actual left or right.

² I know you question marked this statement in our group essay, but I still can’t see what’s wrong with it. Reading *Resurgence* or Bakan’s *The Corporation* there is a never ending stream of calls for new regulation or to increase funding to regulation enforcement government departments. Meanwhile, much of Friedman’s book talks in depth about why specific pieces of regulation are a very bad idea and that markets would be far better to fix problems unimpeded. It seems very obvious to me that this is an intervention vs. no intervention debate.

³ This principle underpins Montesquieu’s Constitutional Separation of Powers.

to be free from authority) – positive & negative freedom are discussed by Berlin (1979)⁵. The *left* thinks⁶ that the *right's* viewpoint is dangerous because it leads to loss of control and therefore social breakdown. The *right* thinks the *left's* view is dangerous because it compels people to behave other than they truly wish for themselves which leads to self-denial, thus deceit of oneself and others, and thus moral corruption & social breakdown (Friedman & Friedman, 1980).

Implied in both positions are differing views of what it is to be human, how information is exchanged and to be interpreted, and whether the natural state of groups of people is an ordered hierarchy maintained through threat of punishment for non-compliance or a competitive web of conflicting separate self-interested entities. These are large questions outside the scope of this essay – far more important is how *limited* our language is to begin with, partially because of these *left/right* discourse boundaries.

Separation & Conflict

The western *left/right* discourse partially delineated by the extremes of the above assumes the individuation of man; the existence of hegemony⁷; and that conflict is natural. Both positions outlined above are anthropocentric and do not place God⁸ at the centre of everything⁹. Both are very much based on *European* conceptualisations of our world and our society, but then Europe and China have been the two most systematically violent regions in history¹⁰ with competing factions continually using the latest technological advances in killing against one another over more than a thousand years.

When we say 'social responsibility' we mean that something must be responsible to society, which is defined by the dictionary¹¹ as "the body of *human beings* generally, associated or viewed as members of a community". One can

⁴ This is a subset of the more common definition that positive definitions of freedom require a group to act collectively for a commonly desired goal, which historically has usually required members to sacrifice their individual freedom for the greater freedom (Berlin, 1979).

⁵ I haven't read anyone who has explicitly said this except for the BBC's 2007 documentary *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* by Adam Curtis, however Dr. Crawford Spence of our School of Management has told me that his PhD thesis argues precisely the same.

⁶ Searching the World Socialist website (<http://www.wsws.org/>) for the word 'deregulation', I found 57 articles. Of the ten or so I briefly looked through, all claimed that society would suffer from whichever deregulation the article treated e.g.; 'The North American blackout: deregulation, profit and the decay of the social infrastructure' by Joseph Kay (2003).

⁷ The *left* views hegemony as something 'spontaneous' forming from a dialectic between managed and managers (Gramsci, 1929-1935) and in keeping with their central control philosophy it usually isn't a bad thing in itself. The *right* views hegemony much as monopoly, and while good in the short term in that it indicates some firm's triumph, in the long term it removes negative freedom and leads to abuse. Friedman (1980) thinks that given enough deregulation, monopolies dissipate on their own over time and therefore do not require regulation like the Sherman anti-trust legislation in the US.

⁸ I stress that this 'God' is the universal God. One can easily substitute the word 'Universe' if one so chooses with no loss of meaning.

⁹ Interestingly, members of my age group upon reviewing this essay for me immediately exclaimed "why on Earth *would* you put God at the centre of everything?" I had to remind them that for the majority of the world's population it is taken for granted that God is at the centre of everything – to which one replied "well that is why the West dominates the world. That is what held back and still holds back Islam". I find that fascinating, because secularism is associated with progress in the West, whereas ديس بطني (Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual father of militant Islam) held that secularism was precisely the root of the West's problem (Sayyid Qutb, 1964).

¹⁰ Just reading any random ten pages from Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* will suffice for the European argument (Gibbon, 1898). For China, try *A Military History of China* (Graff & Higham, 2002) which shows how China had developed fully automatic crossbows, gunpowder cannon and even shot over a thousand year period.

¹¹ This is from the Random House Unabridged dictionary.

clearly see the dependency of this term on humans, which therefore implies that mankind is somehow distinct from Nature. The very act of saying, or thinking it, removes us from the universal context which gives forth to us¹².

When we say 'accountability', how can one possibly *not* be accountable under the eyes of God? After all, the Universe sees all, including that which we *don't* do¹³. Even if one is an atheist, just the sheer notion of 'accountability' implies that individuals are separate, that one person must report to another, that one human being must judge whether the actions of another are good or bad – hardly a trusting act, so no wonder that conflict results!

When we say 'corporation', we mean some legal entity representing a combination of a group of people's efforts – once again dividing up human beings and separating them. Like Friedman (1980), I personally can see no difference between the customers of a corporation and its employees – unlike Friedman, I also personally can see no difference between those *not* involved with a corporation and those within it. Some rejoice that Nestlé aren't in some impoverished country, but in my mind whether you consume Nestlé made products or not, or even if they are available to you or not makes absolutely no difference. We are all One, so why keep drawing convenient boundaries so we can separate "us" from "them"? I cannot but conclude that our definition of the very word 'corporation' encourages the suffering corporations inflict by making us appear separate from others, our planet, and the Universe.

Lastly, I find the notion of 'developed economies' the most silly, but for nothing to do with the judgement of what is developed or not. The western economy, like all economies, draws resources in from its surroundings, transforms them and outputs them elsewhere¹⁴. However, equally, there are many things economies *don't* draw in even though they could if they so chose e.g.; before anyone knew what it was, no one was mining for uranium even though it is all around us encased in granite, and now that we do know the value of uranium the effort required to do so is impossibly high for most deposits. A similar situation exists with 'developing economies': contemporary stone-age societies are no less part of developed economies because that developed economy has chosen not to draw it in. Indeed, there is a clear historical pattern that developed economies simply ignore the primitive people unless it becomes known that the primitive people have something that they want (O' Brien & Clesse, 2002).

I would imagine that my inclusion of things as yet unknown when setting boundaries will cause most readers difficulty – after all, how can I say that a primitive society is part of an economy when that economy doesn't know of its existence yet? In short, this depends on how one conceptualises time: if time is a progressive linear sequence of static moments, then yes my inclusion is ridiculous. If on the other hand we see time as a dynamic non-linear reduction of potential¹⁵, then all potential futures can define the present¹⁶ and so any potential future knowledge of the primitive society by that economy must be included.

¹² We all know we cannot exist without our planet to support us through food, water, air etc. However, our planet wouldn't have a stable orbit or sunlight without our solar system. And our solar system could not continue to exist without our galaxy to support it etc. Thus, our context is not just everything which surrounds us without which we would die, but also *everything* in our past which has, and has *not* happened which has led to right now.

¹³ A quantum computer works by creating potential futures for all possible solutions to a problem and then *choosing* the future with the correct solution (Kaye, Laflamme, & Mosca, 2006) thus allowing arbitrarily complex problems to be solved in zero time. This is possible because the immediate future influences the present at the quantum level so it is actually possible to see very slightly into the future. We have had working (but primitive) quantum computers for nearly fifteen years now, so this is hardly a new technology.

¹⁴ As is obvious from the Greek words οἶκος meaning house, and νέμω meaning distribute/manage. Moving things requires dissipation of energy which is limited, thus "to economise" implies management of scarcity.

¹⁵ This is the standard thermal physics viewpoint (Kittel & Kroemer, 1980).

¹⁶ This is certainly the modern Historiographical viewpoint, though of course it is the expected potential future rather than the actual potential future (Carr, 1967).

Conclusion

I do not wish to conclude this essay in a post-structuralist morass of relativism i.e.; to say that it's all too complex & relative to one's viewpoint to sensibly ask the question at all. What I do want to conclude is that the Western definition of social responsibility and accountability are oxymorons – through their assumptions of separateness and conflict, they make their intent impossible by giving forth to destructiveness, alienation and the precise problems they are supposed to address.

We are not separate unless we choose to perceive it that way¹⁷, and conflict is not inevitable: the first civilisation of the Americas, Caral, was completely peaceful from beginning to end over a 600 year period. They built pyramids equal to that of Egypt using no slavery, no violence and barely knew disease apart from occasional famine (Shady, Haas, & Creamer, 2001).

Gandhi said that the seven blunders from which grow the violence that plagues the world are¹⁸:

- Wealth without Work
- Pleasure without Conscience
- Knowledge without Character
- Commerce without Morality
- Science without Humanity
- Worship without Sacrifice
- Politics without Principles

This seems a far better beginning point to me than starting from the traditional Western worldview. It suggests the wider question “How do we start treating everything in our world with respect?” which does not assume conflict or that any of us are in any way separate from anything. It is certainly far more open ended in what its answer can be – and therefore, in my opinion, is a far more productive question to ask.

¹⁷ Every piece of matter in the Universe has some heat which causes it to radiate energy, thus cooling it down. If it is surrounded by other things of the same temperature, then the exchange of energy balances itself out and things maintain their temperature. Now remember that mass is energy, so two people standing next to one another *are literally exchanging mass between them* and you can calculate just how much mass is exchanged per second between two people. Even at the psychological level, our conversations and mental interactions transform one another's ideas and thoughts as they are exchanged between us.

¹⁸ From a talisman given to his grandson Arun in 1948 (Gandhi, 2008).

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