



You can bicker, you can bicker! You can talk, you can talk!
– From Meredith Wilson’s “The Music Man” (1962)

DEONTOLOGY AND CONSEQUENTIALISM – DON’T BE AFRAID, IT’S NOT A DISEASE!

Stephen L. Bakke  January 1, 2012

As Usual, I Got Some “Push Back”!

Last fall I received an interesting challenge from someone I have known for a long time, and who doesn’t give me too much trouble – usually. But he apparently got hung up on a report I wrote in July 2011 about “liberal and conservative thought.” That led to a series of emails which are faithfully reproduced here – except where I have had to correct his typos, grammar and spelling. Mine was impeccable from the start, of course! This exchange did actually happen, just like this! It’s NOT made up. Just a couple of “embellishments.” **So here we go with my first posting in 2012.**

Let’s have some fun with this “high-brow” conversation! Banter, mocking, disapproval, sarcasm, disgust – all are welcome!

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

All Men Are Created Equal!

Does that Mean that All Men are Equal?

Is This a Question of Ethics?

First let me quote from the section of my report to which my “correspondent” initially refers to:

[There are many] sources of conflict between the competing philosophies dominating our nation. I believe [they] have all been “spawned,” in some way, from one of these three “mother issues”:

- *The Definition of Equality*
- *The Role of the U.S. Government in our Lives*
- *The Role for the United States in the International Community*

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,

That is a copy of the line actually penned by Thomas Jefferson and appearing in the Declaration of Independence. **The concept of equality was prominent in the minds of our Founders** as they envisioned a government created by “We the People of the United States.” **Nevertheless, the meaning of “equality” has become a point of disagreement for these competing philosophies.**

*The definition of equality for a person on **the Right** would emphasize the concept of **equal opportunity**. **The Left** focuses on **equality of the result**. Liberals tend to infer unequal opportunities when observing unequal outcomes – i.e. some believe strongly that equal outcomes result if people have truly equal opportunities. This is known as egalitarianism.*

Next let me present **very** brief definitions of the terms being recklessly bantered about by Charlie and “yours truly” (thanks Wikipedia!):

Deontology: *An approach to ethics that judges the morality of an action based on the actions’ adherence to a rule or rules. Deontologists look at rules and duties. It is sometimes described as “duty” or “obligation” or “rule” –based ethics, because rules “bind you to your duty.”*

Consequentialism: *A class of ethical theories holding that the consequences of one’s conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgment about the rightness of that conduct. Thus, from a consequentialist’s standpoint, a morally right act (or omission) is one that will produce a good outcome, or consequence.*

An “Ology” and an “Ism”

Dear Steve: I have read your paper on the differences between liberals and conservatives twice (Liberal and Conservative - Two World Views - The Basis for Their Differences – July 2011) I hardly ever read things twice (especially your “stuff”) but there is just something about that discussion that I can’t get my head around. Of your three main differences, the “equal opportunity vs. equal outcome” discussion resonates loudest. And it started me thinking about my years at Georgetown University (I know you tried but couldn’t get admitted there) back in the “60’s” when the Jesuits were beating the ignorance out of me. We had endless discussions in ethics about the difference between **deontology and consequentialism**.

Consequentialists would say that one’s actions/behaviors must be guided by the consequences of those actions. **Deontologists** believe their actions and behaviors must be guided by rules which bind one to act regardless of the consequences. Thus, conservatives will think first about the consequences of more debt from deficit spending to fund social programs while liberals believe the social spending is a moral imperative which must be acted on no matter what the consequences.

I would be interested in what you and your reader’s think about this as a major, or at least additional, difference between Liberals and Conservatives. – Charlie

Steve Replied: I believe the concepts of Consequentialism and Deontology fit comfortably within what I believe is my earlier report's goal of reducing liberal and conservative differences to the lowest common denominators.

One basic assumption behind my theory is that conservatives insist on accountability – i.e. they evaluate policies in terms of practicality, reality, and likely ultimate result. This is consistent with the tenets of consequentialism which say that actions must be guided by consequences. Conservatives know (through experience and study of history) that “equality of outcome” is an impossible consequence due to the basic laws of human nature and the myriad of variables involved. **Hence a consequentialist's insistence on evaluating results is satisfied by conservative insistence on looking at realistic predictions and applying basic measures of accountability.**

A liberal's tendency to minimize the importance of such objective evaluations leads to my underlying opinion that liberals believe strict accountability to be callous and inconvenient. Hence, since they are bound by their rule that they need to act without evaluation of consequences, liberals are perfectly comfortable discounting human experience as reflected in history. Liberals' intentions are “noble” in their eyes and that's the most important thing. **Liberals don't consider it necessary to ask the question: “Will we ever achieve equal outcome (or some other desired result)?” Conservatives often ask: “How can liberals keep doing the same things while expecting different results?”**

Apply a similar evaluation to international relationships. I believe that moral and situational relativism is applied by liberals as they attempt to evaluate international situations and establish policies. For example, history tells us that “speaking softly and carrying a big stick” works well for national security. Yet in spite of logic, liberals introduce concepts of moral and situational equivalencies and continue to insist: “Our pacifist/liberal/idealistic principles must be followed” – and the following question doesn't have to be asked: “How is the U.S. (and even freedom and liberty around the globe) going to be better off?” Such considerations are somehow irrelevant to a liberal, as it would be for a Deontologist.

Given these thoughts, **I respectfully submit that your sophisticated presentation of complex ethically theories don't actually add a fourth basic difference between liberals and conservatives.** However, your examples do provide very valid points which help explain the validity of my oversimplified explanation. Thanks for that!

What say you?

Charlie Wrote: I need to think a bit on your comments (imagine elevator music OK, that's enough time). I try to think of liberals and conservatives outside of politics and the political arena. In fact, from a political point of view, both act like Consequentialists one could say that everything a politician does is based on the consequence of getting re-elected or making their individual constituents happy. Excepting the Tea Party folks of course... (Joke)

Steve Wrote: I would argue you are mixing up consequences/accountability with personal gain. The first has to do with the original stated objective e.g. create jobs, the second with one's personal reward. I repeat: We conservatives often ask: “How can liberals keep doing the same things while expecting different results?” That's something liberals never have to face because they don't have to ask the question.

Are you changing your position? You originally wrote: “Thus, conservatives will think first about the consequences of more debt from deficit spending to fund social programs **while liberals believe the social spending is a moral imperative which must be acted on no matter what the consequences.**”

Charlie Wrote: Not at all. I’m not changing my position nor mixing up consequences/accountability with personal gain. As you well know, I tend to think of everything in the most basic of form. So, with conservatives, take away all the modifiers no *political* conservatives, no *economic* conservatives, no *religious* or *social* conservatives just conservatives. Then apply this statement... “a conservative is guided in thought, word and deed by consequences; thus, that individual operates within the concept of Consequentialism.” To me, this is a logical and useful way to identify an individual as a conservative.

Now think of liberals (pure liberals). If, as you say, “they don’t have to ask the question...” about the consequences of their thoughts, words and deeds, what do they think of? “Imperatives from a higher authority” they say. **Baloney says I – that’s merely an excuse for doing what they want without fear of criticism or consequence!** You probably have some liberal friends out there who will disagree. They will all justify their position by giving examples where action was taken without regard to the obvious negative consequences. But each example will be based on social, religious, economic or political issues which add noisy information (not historically proven facts) as justification. That is ignorant behavior..... it ignores the most fundamental principles and borders on insanity. In fact it makes me crazy..... liberals always do what they have always done and expect that they will not get what they have always gotten negative consequences!

I’m not sayin’ I’m just sayin’

Steve Reflected: You know what? I actually have very little disagreement with what you have written since our initial exchange (except for the hyperbole from both of us that may unnecessarily inflame my liberal friends). Go back to the first email. I think we have drifted off your initial premise. I believe you wanted to add another basic difference to the three I gave. I really believe there are only three! My original response was only to opine that your added concepts of **Consequentialism and Deontology actually are easily comprehended by my basic concepts of differences.** Can we agree on that? If so, there is no debate.

Charlie Concluded: Nope, I don’t agree! Not yet! You’re not quite seeing my original point. Can some of your readers provide some insight?!



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