



EXPLAINING NORMATIVE DRIFT

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WHY NORMATIVE DRIFT?

- Normative beliefs, practices, etc. change over time. Why?
 - My interest: “normative drift” (not “moral progress”)
 - Not just morality: religion, politics, etiquette, etc.
 - Not just progress: regress and stagnation
- Huemer: “Modern humans are *far* more liberal than those of earlier ages.... How are we to explain all this?”
 - Two kinds of explanations: realist and non-realist
- Plan: sum up Huemer’s realist explanation of liberalization, offer an alternate non-realist (but not *anti*-realist!) explanation of normative drift in general and liberalization in particular

LIBERALIZATION

- **“The trend toward liberalization is consistent across many issues. War, murder, slavery, democracy, women’s suffrage, racial segregation, torture, execution, colonization: on all these issues we have seen dramatic attitude shifts.... This trend has been ongoing for millennia, accelerating in the last two centuries ... and it affects virtually every country on Earth.”**
 - **Liberal values: equality, dignity, freedom, etc.**
 - **“The liberalization of human values over time does not look like a random process. It ... calls out for an explanation.”**

NON-REALIST EXPLANATIONS?

- **Evolution?**
 - But (among other things) “the shift in values has been far too rapid to be explained by biological evolution.”
- **Culture?**
 - But why would cultures all over the world liberalize in many of the same ways at roughly the same time?
- “What I will do ... is simply to present my own realistic account, leaving it to the anti-realists to attempt to devise a better explanation.”

HUEMER'S REALIST EXPLANATION

- **Moral progress analogous to scientific progress**
 - “[I]f liberalism is the (approximate) moral truth, we should expect eventual convergence on liberal values.”
 - Liberalization therefore “positive evidence” of moral realism
- **“Why was slavery abolished? Because slavery was unjust. Why has democracy spread to ever more countries over the past two centuries? Because democracy is better than other systems of government. ... Why has liberalism in general triumphed in human history? Because liberalism is correct. These, I suggest, are the most simple and natural explanations.”**

REASONS FOR DOUBT

- **Theoretical concerns**
 - **Anti-realist or skeptical (or illiberal) sympathies**
- **Unanswered questions**
 - **Why has liberalization accelerated when and where it has (most notably, during the Enlightenment in Northwestern Europe)?**
 - **Why has liberalization occurred so unevenly around the world?**
- **A non-realist explanation could be simpler, more unified, etc.**
- **Hunch: History is (at least mostly) amoral. Moral facts play at best a minor role in explanations of historical trends; an antirealist could write an adequate history of liberalization.**

EXPLAINING NORMATIVE DRIFT

- **Normative commitments are sensitive to social changes.**
 - **Economic: “inclusivism” a luxury good (Buchanan and Powell)**
 - **What would we do in a zombie apocalypse? Deliberalize.**
 - **Technological: birth control and the Sexual Revolution**
 - **Political, religious, etc.**
- **Normative commitments are important social signals (cf. Hanson).**
 - **Shared normative commitments stabilize and strengthen all kinds of groups, from families to NATO.**
 - **Normative commitments can confer status.**
 - **Communist commitments in the Soviet Union, etc.**



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EXPLAINING NORMATIVE DRIFT

- Normative commitments are sensitive to signaling costs.
 - Normative beliefs are more variable than normative practices because beliefs are cheaper signals.
 - “Charitable” political beliefs vs. charitable giving
 - Pro-Trump signals cheaper in West Virginia than in DC
- Normative drift usually occurs gradually within normative traditions as different values are reinterpreted, reprioritized, etc.
 - Equality, justice, etc. reinterpreted since Aristotle’s time
- Upshot: Normative commitments drift somewhat predictably in response to changing social conditions.

EXPLAINING LIBERALIZATION

- But what about liberalization in particular?
 - In a nutshell: economic progress, Christianity, and politics
- Economic and technological progress
 - Economic inefficiency of many illiberal (e.g., feudal) norms
 - Capitalism fundamentally liberal (cf. Anderson)
- Reinterpretation (and eventual secularization) of Christian values
 - Quakers, Puritans, etc. early social reformers (cf. Anderson)
- Other factors: less cousin marriage in NW Europe (so weaker ingroup preference), “influencer” psychology, etc.
- Most important: the *political* triumph of liberalism

EXPLAINING LIBERALIZATION

- **Huemer: “[L]iberalism triumphed on many different issues over the past few centuries.”**
 - **Me: Not just metaphorically! George III lost. The South lost. The Axis lost. The Soviet Union lost.**
 - **What if they’d won? The world would be much less liberal.**
- **Liberalization is in large part the product of the economic, political, and military success of liberal regimes.**
 - **Liberalism is strongest where they have been most successful.**
 - **The promotion of liberal values helps legitimate their power.**
 - **Prediction: Liberalism’s future success will turn on theirs.**



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WHAT'S THE UPSHOT?

- **Liberalization can be explained without appeal to moral realism.**
- **We need to understand normative drift to understand our world.**
 - **Influence on normative drift is a kind of political power.**
 - **The political economy of culture: Agents have incentives to take on and promote certain normative commitments.**
 - **Political systems which do not account for this kind of political power are prone to disruption.**
 - **Social, political, and economic conditions can either incentivize or disincentivize certain normative commitments.**
 - **Can we (and should we) incentivize good commitments?**