Battista, Jude

CO-350

Dr. Measor

Worldview Application

Three years ago, had you asked me, I would have confidently told you I was an empiricist through and through. None of this mushy-minded belief in special revelation or a blind allegiance to authority, thanks very much. No, it was cold, hard data for me. Probably just as well you did not ask as I was clearly a complete prat. During the next six semesters of mathematical study, I learned to construct towering skyscapes of logic, utterly <<unreachable>> from the surly bonds of <<empiricism>>. I battled through logic and proofs, struggling to find that gentle shift of perspective which lets all the disparate pieces slide together, offering the tiniest glimpse of Truth. It took some time to sink in, but during Core-250 I was forced to confront the horrifying realization that my treasured empiricism had been contaminated with a substantial dose of innatism. Probably just as well you did not ask, really.

Experience has left me skeptical of human nature. I have witnessed man’s inhumanity to man on a scale difficult to comprehend: atrocities fueled by xenophobia, desperation, and even boredom. Yet I also see people struggle daily to find a better version of themselves. While most such efforts are doomed, any success, no matter the rarity, is cause for hope. One of the best men I ever worked for grew up in rural West Virginia. In his own memorable turn of phrase he “only knew one word for African-Americans and it wasn’t hyphenated”. His induction to the military created massive cognitive dissonance. He could have rejected this wider world and retreated to his comfortable insularity, the revelation of his ignorance an affront to his dignity. He chose otherwise: to accept the painful reconstruction of his own worldview, at best an ungentle process in the Army. While Sergeant Smith’s example is uncommon in a world apparently devoted to entrenchment in the face of overwhelming evidence, it proves the possibility of finding better versions of ourselves. This leaves me with a pessimistically unconstrained view of human nature. I am unsure whether I have shifted my own nature, but at the very least I have seen alteration in my behavior.

Ethically, my story is much simpler: I have none. For better or worse, my ability to make moral judgements is compromised and unreliable. Instead I function within a framework of rules derived from people whose judgement I trust. If less flexible than an ethical system, the rules are more reliable than my own <<wetware>>. I learned early on that my duty was to protect my siblings. This created a sharp dichotomy between ‘my people’ and everyone else. Later, the military would formalize this into the Iron Rule: accomplish the mission and take care of your people. Over the years, I have accreted sufficient rules to function in most situations. Faced by a situation foreign to the ruleset, my method of last resort is to ask “what would Rob do?” Rob was my best friend and one of the finest men I have ever known. In retrospect, I believe he was a Natural Lawyer. The enduring lesson he left me was to place value on individuals, even those for whom I am neither responsible nor beholden. Eventually his influence began to soften, though not erase, my distinction between “us” and “other”. I still struggle to overcome ingrained biases against the other as my brain attempts to find reasons to reject them along with these lessons. In keeping with my belief in an unconstrained nature, I continue to seek a better version of myself. Progress is slow.

Ideologically, I am strongly libertarian. In part, this is driven by my pessimistic view of humanity. If humans are capable of unspeakable evil and “government is a body of people, usually notably ungoverned” (Whedon, 2002), then we are wise to be wary of any hierarchical aggregation of power. Accepting that humans are capable of growing beyond their worst selves, it is imperative they are given the freedom to grow. Since such growth is difficult and rare, we must protect it from the tyranny of the majority. I have also seen first-hand the tyranny that can result when the discrepancy in power between governor and governed grows too great and policy is simply dictated by force of arms.

Gun control is one of the most contentious issues in America, and the recent spate of mass shootings has crystallized the dialogue around AR-15 style rifles. As an empiricist, the narrow focus of the conversation troubles me. America undoubtedly has a shameful violence problem. According to the FBI, there were more than 15,000 murders across the nation in 2017. Of these, only 403 were reported to involve a rifle of any make. This indicates a significant Pareto principle problem. Even if we completely eliminated rifles from the population, the murder rate would drop by less than three percent. Should we choose to specifically address mass shootings while ignoring the vast majority of violence in the country, my own experience indicates that even rigorous gun control laws may not help. Any mass attack on civilians is functionally indistinguishable from a terrorist act. In other of the world, terrorist attacks with small arms are considered distinctly minor league as explosive devices can create more destruction more quickly and with less employment skill required. As a libertarian, I am reluctantly forced to agree with Mao Tse Tung’s maxim that all political power flows from the barrel of a gun. Considered in that light, it seems unwise to grant the government a complete monopoly on violence. While I do not anticipate a descent into tyranny in the United States’ immediate future, it is axiomatic that you plan for capabilities rather than intentions. Given the impossibility of eliminating criminal access to firearms, hydrogen peroxide, fertilizer, petroleum, and the other million paths to a mass casualty event, it seems more profitable to seek the cause of America’s violence problem instead of focusing on suppressing its symptoms.

Dr. Donohue and Ms. Boulouta strongly disagree with my conclusion. Using the mass shooting database compiled by Mother Jones, they tracked such shootings from 1984 to 2018. Of specific interest is the ten-year period from 1994 to 2004 when the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act banned AR-15 style rifles and high capacity magazines within the United States. The authors found that in the decade prior to the ban, there were eight mass shooting events with 81 deaths. During the ban decade, they counted six mass shootings with 49 deaths. In the ten years following the expiration of the ban, they reported 219 killings in mass shootings, with a further 271 people killed between 2014 and 2019. The article dismisses the idea that mental illness drove the increase in shootings, instead focusing on ready access to “increasingly powerful weapons”. The authors do give credence to the theory that gun industry advertisements take advantage of “troubled young men” to sell their product, and connect these sales tactics to mass shooting events. They point out that the “deeply troubled” Adam Lanza killed 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School using a Bushmaster semiautomatic rifle, while the shooters at both Parkland and Dayton “possessed traits that would have disqualified them” from owning firearms in other countries. The authors conclude that the federal government should ban assault weapons, limit high capacity magazines, revoke gun manufacturers’ liability protections, and expand background checks on gun purchasers.

In this article, the authors have adopted an extremely authoritarian point of view. Not only do they advocate for the government to limit the people’s freedom of action, but they call for the federal government to limit the states’ freedom of action. The article explicitly states “there is no reason think this ghastly trend will abate without concerted government effort”. Furthermore, when analyzing the likelihood of such effort being put forth, they only consider federal agents: the President, the Senate, and the United States Supreme Court. In contrast, given that the prior ban appeared to save approximately 3.2 lives per year, a Libertarian would argue that the inhibition of liberty inherent to the government’s intervention outweighs the potential benefit. Even should a Libertarian agree to the necessity of government action, they are likely to advocate for involvement at the local or state level. Due to their more granular nature such scopes are less likely to overreach the problem and create an ill-fitting policy guaranteed to chafe in some places and sag in others.

While the use of numeric statistics suggests an empiric approach, the authors primarily address the issue of mass shootings from an intuitionist epistemology. Given the repeated mention of “increasingly potent” or “increasingly powerful” weapons available to shooters, we may assume that this has particular import to the authors. This is an interesting focus, since the primary assault weapon available in the United States is the AR-15 whose military version has been in service in the 1960’s. The major change to the AR-15 in the decades since has been to introduce a shorter barrel in emulation of the military’s adoption of the M-4, reducing muzzle velocity and lethality. The authors choose not to offer a source, empiric evidence, or reasoning from first principles to support their statement, leaving the reader to conclude the authors’ source must be personal revelation. This pattern recurs throughout the article. In particular, the authors assert that mental illness rates are not correlated with mass shooting rates while simultaneously claiming that more than twenty percent of the mass shooting casualties were caused by three “deeply troubled” individuals. In the absence of even token external support for these statements, the reader is forced to conclude that the authors have intuited these things. An empiricist would look at the data gathered by the author and wonder why enacting the ban was only accompanied by 32 fewer mass deaths over the course of a decade, but its expiration was accompanied by 71 additional deaths over the next decade. An innatist with an interest in math and statistics might wonder about the presence of a third variable contributing to or driving the recent rise in mass shootings.

Libertarianism excels at protecting the rights of the individual. In this case, it helps ensure that the rights of a minority are not trampled by the frightened rush of the majority. This is particularly important given the knowledge disparity between partisans of each viewpoint, as competitive shooters, veterans, and hunters all have a vested interest in upholding the current interpretation of the Second Amendment. However, libertarian systems protect the minority by creating a fundamentally weaker government than its authoritarian counterpart. In the event that an effective solution to America’s violence addiction can be found, a libertarian government would be markedly less effective at implementing it if, indeed, it could do so at all.

An empiric approach to a problem excels at analyzing the issue and perhaps diagnosing the core malignancy at its heart. This is the best epistemology for providing metrics by which we can measure both the scope of the problem initially as well as the progress our policy makes towards resolving it. Its reliance on data makes it effective in public debate as the source of the knowledge may often be readily publicized, though there is no guarantee of a universally accepted interpretation of that data. Empiricism is however, almost entirely descriptive, offering little to no ability to prescribe a policy capable of resolving the issue. This imbalance renders it better suited to measuring and justifying a policy rather than creating one.