

Amateur Perspective on Foundations of Political Philosophy

Ben Backus – July 23, 2018

All political beliefs are made up of just four morals. I came up with these morals by breaking down four belief systems into their truest components.

The moral of Individualism

All individuals deserve the freedom to serve themselves.

I.e. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

The moral of Collectivism

Members of a collective cannot expect to be served by the collective without also serving it.

I.e. The Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated.

The moral of Egalitarianism

A collective must value and respect all of its members.

I.e. All men are created equal

The moral of Elitism

Some people have more to offer to the collective, which makes them more valuable.

I.e. If everyone is special, no one is.¹

Unfortunately, politics are so divisive that independents thinkers are often pressured into pitting these morals against one another, as if they're mutually exclusive. Specifically, we tend to pit Individualism against Collectivism, and Egalitarianism against Elitism. It's worth noting that I defined these morals slightly differently from their "official" definitions. My definitions allow these ideologies to work together. But, the common definitions are written so that these morals stay mutually exclusive. Here are the "official" definitions:²

Individualism

The theory of giving each individual priority over the group they are in.

Collectivism

The theory of giving a group priority over each individual in it.

Elitism

The theory that the elite should be a dominating element in a society.

Egalitarianism

The theory that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

According to these definitions, Individualism and Collectivism clearly do not go together. And since it is impossible for anyone to be elite if all people are equal, clearly Elitism cannot go together with Egalitarianism. And that is why I reject these definitions. They make it impossible to appreciate the morals that each is founded on, even though each moral is undeniable.

¹ This is a quote from *The Incredibles*, which would be Ayn Rand's favorite Pixar movie.

² Definitions are still slightly abridged, but only to ensure that the contrast is as clear as possible.

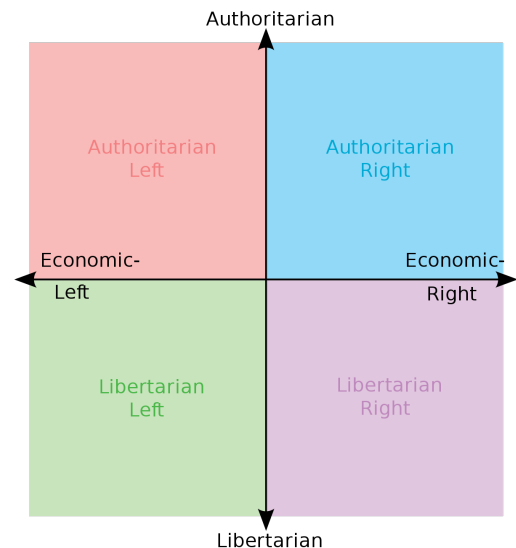
By setting up Elitism vs Egalitarianism, and Individualism vs Collectivism, we create incompatible political parties that force people to neglect half of the four morals. The political consequences of these two dilemmas can be represented by the following two matrices:

	Elitism	Egalitarianism
Individualism	Libertarianism	Liberalism
Collectivism	Conservatism	Communism

	Capitalism	Socialism
Democracy	Libertarianism	Liberalism
Autocracy	Conservatism	Communism

What I've just done is nothing new. I've simply recreated the "Political Compass" which is what Wikipedia calls the colorful graphic to the right. But instead of Libertarian vs Authoritarian, I put Individualism vs Collectivism. Instead of Economic-Left vs Economic-Right, I put Elitism vs Egalitarianism.

The Political Compass is a visualization of the modern political spectrum. Theoretically, anyone's political beliefs can be represented by a point on this graph. Its simplicity is appealing, but it perpetuates the fatal flaw of modern politics, which is that the different political ideologies must be morally opposed to one another. This flaw leads us to believe that there are no solutions that align with both parties' morals, only compromises. And neither party wants to compromise. Hence, the increasingly divisive political landscape.



In order to stop and reverse the rapid polarization of the American political landscape, we must learn how to unite Individualism with Collectivism, and Elitism with Egalitarianism.

Marrying Individualism to Collectivism

These two belief systems are normative (as opposed to evaluative). They dictate what you should do with your life. Individualism claims that you get to decide what you should do with your life. Alternatively, collectivism claims that you should spend your life doing what's best for your community. Of course, neither of these claims can be taken to their fullest extent. A radically individualistic society would devolve into anarchy: no one would feel any obligation to serve their community, and so all the wonders of civilization would perish. On the other hand, a radically collectivistic society would devolve into a hivemind, where no individual has any free-will. Clearly, the world needs a little bit of both.

I believe that the solution lies within marrying Immanuel Kant to Ayn Rand.³ Kant brilliantly came up with the generalization principle, and went on to claim that the best morals are generalizable. What it means is that you should treat others the way you would like to be

³ Not a literal marriage. They're both dead.

treated. It's the Golden Rule!⁴ But, there is room for error in this principle. And the best way to show you why is by talking about promises.

Promises work because we expect people to keep their promises. If nobody ever kept their promises, nobody would make promises to begin with. But we need promises to function as a society. Banks would not exist without promises. So, it is crucial for our society that everyone keeps their promises. EXCEPT that not everyone keeps their promises. In fact, we all have broken a promise or two. So, why does anyone still make promises if they may very well be broken?

This is where Ayn Rand comes in. Rand wants everyone to act selfishly. However, the way that she defines selfish is a lot more nuanced than critics give her credit for. Ayn Rand tortures the words selfish and selfless to get them to say whatever she wants them to say. So, she says that she wants everyone to act selfishly all the time, but she's using "selfish" extremely liberally when she says so. Either way, Ayn Rand brilliantly demonstrated the counterintuitive virtue of selfishness in her novels. Essentially, she demands that every individual owns their own life, and so one's only duty is to oneself. And that's the puzzle piece that explain the gap in Kant's generalization principle.

Tying that back into promises: Why do we make promises if they could be broken? Because, while you might expect the other person to keep their promise, you know that you have broken promises before, and you were forgiven. So, if the promise is broken, you can forgive. But why break a promise? Because your life is your own. Generally, what's good for society is good for you, so it is in your best interest to keep your promises. However, if you determine that something else is more important to you than keeping your promise, then you must break your promise.

Finally, I have come up with a compliment to Kant's generalization principle: The individualization principle. It can be explained like this:

If the generalization principle is to:
"Treat others the way you would like to be treated"

Then the individualization principle is to:
"Treat yourself the way others would like to be treated."

The purpose of the individualization principle is to fill in the gap left by the generalization principle. Just because an action can be generalized, and should be generalized, does not mean it must be enacted by the full population. There is room for some small portion of the population to not enact said action without significant penalty to themselves or the general population. This is the crux of the individualization principle. It can be expressed in a variety of ways, but Ayn Rand is most responsible for inciting my thinking here. She believed that every member of a collective should have complete autonomy over their actions. That the masses could not morally compel an individual to do something for the greater good when it goes against the individual's self interest. If they decide that it is in their self interest to do something for the greater good, then they will. Which is why most people will continue to keep their promises, and enact other actions which are generalizable. That karma comes back around—very indirectly—but in that way, it benefits the individual. However, at times it will not be in their best interest.

⁴ It's not actually the golden rule. I'm grossly oversimplifying.

Reconciling Elitism with Egalitarianism

These two belief systems are evaluative (as opposed to normative). They dictate how to evaluate a person's life. This last statement would already sound controversial to a modern strict egalitarian, as the conventional beliefs of egalitarian nowadays presuppose that all human life (perhaps all life) is equally valuable. So, to them, it is a cardinal sin to even consider the possibility that different people should be valued more or less. However, a strict elitist would react with the same vitriol if I were to propose that all people are of completely equal value, considering how some truly despicable humans—Hitler, Stalin, Mao—have existed. Not to mention how unfair it would be to treat moochers and leeches as if they are just important to the collective as anyone who works many jobs or has risked their own personal fortune multiple times. Egalitarians believe elitists are heartless and arrogant. Elitists believe egalitarians are delusional and grossly counterproductive.

But, to be strictly an egalitarian or elitist is to open oneself up to either an impossible and inhumane lifestyle or a web of contradictions. Egalitarians can have no self-worth without jumping through hoops to prove that “everyone is special in their own way” as if there are eight billion and counting equally important categories for measuring success, for which each human can lay claim to one. A true egalitarian exists in either a state of total ego death, or egregious selfishness. For why would one serve society if all actions are equally meaningful, and therefore meaningless. But also, why would one serve oneself if oneself mattered no more than anyone else? There would be no reason to be selfish or selfless. The fullest extent of egalitarianism is a life and world devoid of meaning or purpose.

Meanwhile, elitists must never believe that their self-worth is intrinsic. Their lives are only as valuable as the long list of chores they must complete. For if the world were full of elitists, one could never stop doing chores for humanity without risking watching their value dropping below the threshold worth of basic human rights. Alternatively, a radical elitist could socially engineer society so that they are a member of an elite class due to some intrinsic quality of theirs. An elitist could wield racism, sexism, classism, etc. to their grossest advantage, redefining what's good for society as what's good for them and other members of their arbitrarily defined elite class. The fullest extent of elitism is either a life ruthlessly indebted to serving society, or a society ruthlessly indebted to serving a few select individuals.

Elitism and egalitarianism break down and get corrupted when taken to their fullest extents. Clearly, neither provides an accurate model of reality. To radically obey either belief system is to be hopelessly naïve. But, each belief system reflects a fundamental truth about the nature of morality. They resonate with morals that we all subconsciously hold and respect. Nobody is solely an elitist or an egalitarian, and to say so is to be openly delusional. The only reasonable conclusion one can draw is that these two belief systems must be reconciled with one another. But, since their definitions have been skewed so as to mutually exclusive, it is not the belief systems that must be balanced in tandem, but the morals they reflect, which I defined at the beginning of this essay.

Reconciling these morals is as simple as defining a floor for the value of a human life without defining a ceiling. As I see it, egalitarians set the floor at the same value as the ceiling, bolstering the perceived worth of some people, while drastically reducing the worth of most. Meanwhile, elitists set no ceiling and no floor. Imperialism is a wonderfully disturbing demonstration of this. In the 1800s, the imperial powers treated humans all over the globe as livestock, enslaving and brutalizing indigenous populations in order to serve an arbitrarily defined elite: white capitalists. It is this fundamental flaw with elitism that explains how capitalism has

created more wealth than ever throughout all of human history, while also implementing some of the gravest of injustices anyone has ever faced.

The allure of communism—and thus egalitarianism—has never been stronger, due to the glaring crimes of capitalism that have appeared throughout the last few centuries. However, such an emotional reaction is not at all necessary, and certainly not possible considering how massively prosperous capitalism has been for humanity. One cannot excuse the grave injustices we have faced—and still face—in a world that has yet to raise the floor for all humanity, but the technological advantages that have been made are far too staggering to abandon. We have the potential to elevate all of society with the technology that exists today. The solution to preventing further injustice is not to put a cap on capitalism. It is just not possible.

What is possible, though, is raising and bolstering the floor that defines a person's worth. We can do so without putting a lid on human potential, which is what egalitarians seek, via communism. But, perhaps such a balance can be best described in metaphor.

People are like mountains. Some are higher than others, but we are all connected down on the ocean floor. Below the ocean floor, we are all the same. But, many of us have risen out of the ocean, through water and into the sky, where there is no limit in sight to how high we can go. A mountain's ceiling is set by nature—gravity and other forces of the earth—not by the mountains around it. Some mountains will reach higher than others. And, at some point, there will be a tallest mountain. But even that mountain will not have touched the ceiling. Every mountain shares the same floor, but none should ever be able to reach the ceiling.

Furthermore, some mountains will start from the ocean floor, and others will grow up in a towering mountain range. The mountain that started from the bottom has more distance to cover if it wants to peak higher than the ones that started in mountain ranges, but none of the other mountains can stop it from doing so.

Egalitarians want to say that none of the mountains can peak above the surface of the ocean. They believe that every mountain should grow outward, not up, so as to raise the ocean floor rather than taste the sky. Egalitarians hate islands. They want the world to live underwater. They believe that it is too unfair that some mountains will never peak, and so it is unjust for any mountain to peak. So they expect every mountain to remain at an even level, so that there are effectively no mountains, only an ocean floor. And as smooth as that ocean floor may be, it will never breach the ocean's surface.

Meanwhile, elitists expect the mountains to dig trenches in the ocean floor when they could not grow taller otherwise. They believe that the purpose of a mountain is grow taller no matter what. Even if that means that the mountains deprive themselves of their majesty in their pursuit of height—they become narrow stalagmites that briefly poke through to the heavens, only to collapse when a more ambitious mountain topples and crumples their meager foundation. Elitists expect the mountains to pull the earth apart in order to grow taller. They will dig trenches until the ocean's floor is nonexistent, and the earth is hollow, and what was once a planet is now a fragile but astronomical egg-shell.