

*The*  
**Death**  
*of*  
**Ethics**  
*in*  
**Democracy**

Matthew John Reading

## **The Good Fight**

There has always been a fight between the political left and the political right. They are opposites. Opposites fight. Unfortunately the fight has changed. The two sides may be opposites, but they should also have something in common: an honest aspiration to help all of mankind.

The fight used to be liberty versus justice; both of which are important ethical ideals that are worth fighting for. So much in fact, the Pledge of Allegiance states that we are to have “liberty and justice for all.” This is the good fight.

## **Justice and the Left**

The left stands for justice, where justice is defined by the Principles of Justice originally written by John Rawls. The Principles of Justice essentially state the following:

*Everything should be equal for everyone.  
If there is any inequality, this should be  
designed to benefit the least advantaged.*

Simply put, everything should be *just*. This implies the same rights, the same opportunities, and the same quality of life for everyone. The

second part that allows for inequalities means, for example, a brain surgeon can be paid more than a waiter because this inequality will attract top talent to the position and ultimately benefit the least advantaged, the sick.

The ethical concept of justice can be held to be self evident. In an extreme form, we would observe pure communism where literally every person would have an equal right and share to everything. In a lesser form, we will still have equal rights and equal opportunity. Any ethical person would agree that this is a fundamentally important ideal to maintain in every society.

## **Liberty and the Right**

The right is the opposite of the left, and therefore stands for liberty. Liberty is a very simple concept.

*Every person should have complete  
freedom of choice. Restriction of this right  
solely exists to protect overlapping  
liberties.*

You should be allowed to talk to your friends about what you want. If you want to plant a flower in your yard, you can put it wherever you would like. Essentially you can do anything that you want.

According to the concept of liberty, the government should only exist in places where two liberties can not coexist. A prime example is a person's liberty to kill his annoying neighbor and the annoying neighbor's liberty to not be killed. Both liberties can not both be exercised. In this case, the government creates a law that states that you do not have the liberty to kill your neighbor.

You may say that this is nonsense, “Of course you can not kill your neighbor!” but situations can be more complex, and ethics must be applied. Every application of ethics will lead you to find that the liberty of life is more important than the liberty to kill in this particular case.

## **A Careful Balance**

Extremes of either ideal without the other would be ridiculous. In an extremely just society, every person's income would be completely taxed (that is if there was money at all). The government would provide education, health care, housing, food, and transportation equally to everyone. However, there would be no guarantee that you would be granted freedoms of speech, assembly, or other liberties. You would have communism.

An extreme liberty-based society would be quite the contrary. The government would tax none of your income and you would be free to do whatever you wanted. In fact, there may be no government at all. You would have anarchy. Liberty leads to freedom; justice leads to fairness.

We have been conditioned to think that both anarchy and communism are evil and should never be adopted. This is not true. The justice-liberty balance needs to be adjusted to the size of the governed body to allow for both fairness and liberty. The smaller the body, the more liberty; the larger the body, the more justice.

Consider the smallest body: a single person living in the forest. The only logical form of government would be anarchy. Any other government would be nonsense. This is also the only place where pure anarchy would work effectively. This is only valid because with a single person, there needs to be no justice.

As the body grows larger to two neighboring families, the government will still be quite anarchical. Basic laws (do not kill, steal, etc.) would be established to resolve the conflict of overlapping liberties. For issues concerning both parties, such as "where to build a neighborhood barn," democracy would be observed as each party would have an equal voice in the issue.

When the governed body grows too large, democracy becomes impractical and impossible. Imagine 100,000 residents of a large city meeting together to discuss the location of a new park. Thus a republic is adopted, where the

community selects someone to meet with the other representatives on their behalf.

Should the governed body become so large that a small minority could control the majority of the wealth while the majority may stay in poverty, then a form of socialism would be required to prevent the poor from becoming poorer. Otherwise the system would not be fair, and would not allow equal opportunity to its members.

Following this logic, we can see that for a government to oversee and body that is infinitely large, only communism would suffice.

It should be obvious by now that both liberty and justice are required for a healthy society. Justice without liberty would be confining, and liberty without justice would be chaos. The two rely on each other to maintain a balance.

The balance of justice and liberty is also applied to lawmaking for this very reason. The self-evident law that every person should have the right to free speech can be supported by both ethical schools of thought.

Justice would state that every person should have an equal right to speak. Limiting one person from saying what they are thinking would not be fair if another person was not limited. Since allowing everyone to say whatever they want is quite fair, justice would approve.

Liberty would agree. Liberty states that a person should have the right to say anything. A law should only exist if it interferes with another person's right to not listen, but a person can remove their presence from the speaker. However, a person's right to keep another person from speaking is not ethical, so the law can stand: the freedom of speech.

On more difficult issues justice and liberty may not as easily agree, such as in the case of taxation. Liberty would be against it; you should have freedom with your money. Justice would be for it, to keep society fair. This is exactly the debate between the left and the right. In issues such as these, a careful compromise is required to guarantee that there will be liberty and justice for all.

## A Moral Crisis

It has been predicted by philosophers for centuries that when science begins to explain the unexplainable facets of reality, individuals feel that their cultural beliefs may be untrue. They will become irrational beings and blindly and instinctually fight to maintain that their moral beliefs are true. We see this today.

The irony comes in the fact that science is indeed beginning to explain the unexplainable physical realm, but is not denying the existence of a supernatural realm nor is it denying the moral beliefs of today.

This could be damaging in that it could allow a corrupt and unethical official to use this to become elected. Instead of the ethical concepts of justice and liberty, this official could promote unethical ideas such as lowering taxes for only the wealthy or writing laws to limit self-evident liberties. Neither of these could be supported by justice or liberty. The trick is that this official would publicly announce a stand for moral uprightness and writing these morals into law. The people that feel that their moral beliefs are under attack would be quick to vote for such a candidate, regardless of the other platform. They would do this under the reasoning that moral values are more important than social structure. What these people will not realize is that regardless of which is more important, government exists for social structure and does not exist for a moral guideline.

To make things worse, the majority of the public assumes that the line between ethics and morality is loosely drawn or that the two terms are synonymous, which they are not. Morals are what are right and wrong according to culture. Ethics is what is right and wrong according to reason and philosophy. As a rule, morals and ethics agree. This should not be surprising since each is intended to maintain social uprightness in the community; however, morals change with culture, ethics do not. As an example, consider mathematics in contrast to the English language.

English was not designed. It is the result of thousands of years of people communicating through speech. Over time, it has evolved into

the form that we observe today. Linguists like to find trends that the language follows. They are not rules because in many cases the trend is not followed. Trend: *I before E except after C*. Exception: *neighbor*. You can not prove how English works or try to make it better. It already exists, so all you can do is describe it.

Mathematics, in a sense, is also a language. What makes it different is that the entire notation was designed with reason in mind. It is expected that every statement *should* be proved, and if you can find a more elegant way to come to the same result then it is equally valid.

Imagine trying to argue the existence of gravity with poetry. You may be able to come up with some interesting passages that move the soul, but for a really convincing argument you would need to use equations and proofs. In this analogy, the English language represents morals while math represents ethics. The same concept can be applied to government. If you want to argue what is right and wrong, you need to debate with ethics. Arguing morals will get you nowhere since morals are already written and are based on culture, not reason. Law writers should not be influenced by their moral convictions, but rather ethical ones. This may seem like a fine line, but it is important. Consider that in some cultures cannibalism is morally acceptable, yet would not make an ethical law.

## The New Fight

It seems that politics today is moving farther and farther away from debate about ethics and moving ever closer to a debate of morals *versus* ethics. In my opinion, this is no longer a debate between the left and the right. It is between the left/right and some new direction; let us say “down.” This new debate is horizontal versus vertical, if you will.

The horizontal side stands for ethics and with multiple ethical theories can essentially prove what should and should not be law. The vertical side stands for morals which already

exist and can not be reevaluated. It is not a debate at all when one side is trying to use reason and the other side is not.

The verticalists try very hard to prove their position with their morality, yet this is a very ends-justify-the-means type of thinking. “Morals exist therefore they are correct.” This is an invalid statement, yet because of the moral crisis many individuals are falling in line behind this manner of thinking as they so desperately want to believe that their morals are *ultimately* correct, when in fact they are only culturally so.

## **The Return to Ethics**

Basing a government on culturally sensitive morals is not *just* because it will only accommodate the beliefs and values of the specific culture that is crafting policy. This is not fair to cultures that have different moral beliefs. It does not follow the principles of *liberty*, as you are not free to follow your personal moral beliefs but you are confined to follow the morals of the group that drafted the laws.

As an entire society we need to wake up and realize that we have been arguing about the unarguable; no culture’s values are inherently superior to another’s, so there is no point in quarrelling about it. We do, however, need to get back to arguing about something worthwhile: justice versus liberty.

It is absurd that anyone needs to even mention that *reason* is currently battling it out with *feeling* when it comes to governmental philosophy. Therefore, when you discuss politics with other people, try and keep the debate about ethics. Only then can we ensure that we will have an indivisible nation with liberty and justice for all.