
Ideas for a Cause - Principled Pragmatism

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In today's presentation I'll focus will be on the attitudes and assumptions we necessarily bring to the debate in and around harm reduction. Why? Because it's these attitudes and assumptions that can – and sometimes unknowingly – overwhelm us when confronted with the findings of research or the logic of an argument. On the other hand they may open us up to more serious consideration of public policy, noting as we should the importance not just of the suitability of any proposal and its capacity to do what is required but also its feasibility and acceptability, what we might call real world considerations (see UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, **Strategy Survival Guide**, July 2004).

I'll begin by taking you down a path to late 15th century Florence and use the ideas of the radical priest Savonarola and the public servant Machiavelli to illustrate the important distinction between fundamentalism and pragmatism. Awareness of and understanding of these alternative ways of looking upon and acting in the world remains central to a good political education, as does the distinction between idealism and realism. I'll argue that pragmatists are necessarily realists but idealists aren't necessarily fundamentalists. Yes, they have a more optimistic view as to what is possible in what they agree is "the real world" but certainly not a utopian and revolutionary view centred on the "perfectibility" of humanity. They conclude that progress is never easy but always possible if proper attention is paid to context and detail.

I'll outline the mixed bag of elements that are part and parcel of our approach to drugs, alcohol and smoking today- a bit for all but no more, a stalemate of sorts in which fundamentalists and pragmatists as well as idealists and realists are all at the table of decision. To take us forward I propose the reformist objective provided by the philosopher Karl Popper which puts the focus on the relief of avoidable suffering. Backing this up are the values concerning health and human rights developed at the international level at the conclusion of the Second World War by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations. I'll conclude by noting that whatever our philosophy about what's needed the final hurdle to change remains political, and that involves the questions related to power and influence, most importantly the winning and sustaining of support in the community.

The Rise and Fall of Savonarola

Let me begin by showing you a painting of the Piazza della Signoria in Florence in 1498. It is by Francesco di Lorenzo Rosselli and it shows the execution and firing of the radical priest Girolamo Savonarola. Overlooking the Piazza is the Palazzo Vecchio, the centre of government at the time and Niccolo Machiavelli's office when he was Secretary of the Republic.

What we see at this place is politics pure and simple the battle between the fundamentalists and the pragmatists. It's still being played out today - and will be tomorrow just as much as it was

yesterday. Savonarola wished for a heaven on earth, Machiavelli for the best we could do in an imperfect world.

Let me start with the priest Savonarola (1452-1498). His aims were simple and for someone with his politics very much uncomplicated; God's will, as he read it, was his mission for Florence. That entailed the consolidation of the republic against those who would destroy it, a broad-based land tax to replace the existing system and a State Loans Office charging significantly lower rates of interest than the private equivalent.

So far, so good you would say. But there was to be more, namely the elimination of vice itself. Political reform was to be but a preliminary to the real game - the purification of Florence according to God's will. His agenda has been described as follows:

“Moral reforms were designed to eliminate vices that might interfere with the religious revival necessary for the coming rule of God. Horse racing, gambling, and profanity were banned, as were profane songs and indecent dress. Offenders, including blasphemers and sexual deviants, were punished by torture. Savonarola organized young boys to help enforce his policies. These groups of children roamed the city collecting love songs, profane books, carnival masks, and other immoral items, which were piled into a pyramid sixty feet high and sixty feet on each side and burned as vanities (hence “bonfire of the vanities”)

(Online Library of Liberty)

For a period of time he was in effect the ruler of Florence with his supporters in government and backed up by a party, the Frateschi.

Given his claims to speak on behalf of God and his assault on the established church it was not surprising that he had his enemies including the Borgia Pope Alexander the VI, who eventually excommunicated him. His powerful enemies took power and his end came in a most inglorious manner, described by Richard Cavendish as follows:

“On Palm Sunday in 1498 St Mark's was attacked by a screaming mob and Savonarola was arrested by the Florentine authorities with two friars who were among his most ardent followers, Fra Dominico and Fra Salvestro. All three were cruelly tortured before being condemned as heretics and handed over to the secular arm by two papal commissioners, who came hotfoot from Rome for the purpose on 19 May”.

(History Today, 5 May 1998)

Florence had had enough of his extremism; he was hanged and then burnt at the stake; his ashes thrown into the river to be swept away. Not so his approach to politics whether it appears in

religious garb or whether as a “science of human history”. It’s still with us today and like its post-truth cousin on the march.

It’s the idea of **One Big Truth** to which each of us has to submit if our human essence is to be realised. Sometimes it leads to a personal and shared commitment at a local level to live out this truth, whatever the laws and mores of the time. Monasteries and communes come to mind. In this sense it may co-exist with a free society. Sometimes, however, it drives its adherents to the world of politics and the attempt to force the issue on a more often than not reluctant society. That’s when it can become ugly as we’ve seen throughout human history.

Machiavelli and the Real World

It was only about one month after the death of Savonarola that Niccolo Machiavelli (1467-1527) began his career as a public servant in charge of the production of official Florentine government documents. He moved up the system as a most respected advisor until 1512 when the Medici returned and the republic was dissolved. He was accused of being a conspirator and left to retire to the country but not before being tortured by the new regime. Power and its use and abuse was a subject about which he had real insight!

Machiavelli is, of course, someone we all know as the person who believed the end justifies the means; “whatever it takes” as they say in NSW. Indeed, he did believe in that but we should note as well that he did have a view about the ends that were to be preferred. Security in the face of chaos was important, so was liberty and incentives for industry. He saw a republic as best able to achieve these ends. In the **Discourses** (1517) he explained that the people of “countries and provinces living in liberty” have gained enormously from knowing they are “born free and not as slaves” and who “may, through their own exceptional ability, become leaders in the city”. Also, he notes, “it comes about that men competing with each other think about both private and public benefits, and both increase at a miraculous rate”.

What stands out in Machiavelli’s thinking wasn’t this personal belief but rather his realistic take on the world of politics, in **The Prince** (1513) he wrote:

“There’s such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation”.

It followed that politics was about how best to hold things together in an imperfect world.

From Machiavelli there’s good and bad. There’s leaders and followers. There’s rationality and stupidity. There’s generosity and self-interest. There’s strength and there’s weakness. There’s hope and there’s fear. And when it comes to the choices we make, he made the following observation, again in **The Prince**:

“Men are so thoughtless. They’ll opt for a diet that tastes good without realising there’s a hidden poison in it”.

As we know some even do or consume things knowing there's poison involved!

Machiavelli encourages, indeed urges upon us to ask: What does it mean to live, not just in a world of difference, but in a world where rationality, generosity, strength of character and commitment to principle co-exist with their opposites? What does it mean to live in a world where some are conservative and some risk-takers? It's a powerful argument that takes us to what we call "politics" – how to make things happen in the real world of conflicting ideas and interests. It's about influence and power and involves human psychology and human rationality, with the former all too often trumping the latter. What this meant for Machiavelli in the Florence of his time was one thing, what it means for us today another - but the guiding principle is the same.

Idealists and Realists

When reflecting on Savonarola and Machiavelli I'm left with two distinctions, that between fundamentalism and pragmatism and that between idealism and realism. For fundamentalists it's all too easy – there are certain values in relation to which there can be no compromises if the truth is to be realized. Helping or forcing people to say no is always seen as the overriding objective. It works for some and therefore can do so for all – so long as the faith and discipline are there. Counter to this view isn't necessarily a rejection of ideas as an agent for change but rather a recognition of the need for realism in their pursuit. Such a realism is born of two lessons from experience – first, that ideas themselves clash and there isn't actually **One Big Truth** and, second, that what we seek and what we can achieve are two different things. Put these elements together, and add a view as to what matters for human beings, and you get principled pragmatism.

Ideas about what should matter motivate people to action. They energise the society. They create movements for change and I would argue that there is an important realism involved in recognising this power that ideas have. This fact of life many a conservative regime has forgotten in their futile efforts to hold back change. We are reminded of this when in France and seeing the revolutionary slogan adorning government buildings – liberty, equality and fraternity.

What we want are ideas that best reflect the common good, that reduce harms and the suffering they cause. To this end we've built on Machiavelli's insight that there is a real world out there that's to be respected and inquired into when considering what to do. Take drug use as an example. Despite the law people continue to use. Sometimes they seek pleasure, even enlightenment, and sometimes they seek to avoid the pain associated with their lives. Some are addicted, some aren't. It's a safe assumption to say this is how things are and will always be, an attraction to mind altering substances being a feature of human nature. It's also a world today saturated with the findings of scientific endeavour. There may very well not be **One Big Truth** but there are certainly many smaller ones that we have uncovered to guide us in our efforts to live a healthy life and build a better world.

We have truckloads of information about the causes and transmission of illness. So too in respect of the many risks involved in how we live and work and in what we inhale and consume as human beings. We've been told about the actual and potential consequences of smoking tobacco, drinking too much, the taking of drugs, overeating and under-exercising. Issues related to freedom are raised, as are issues related to health and well-being of individuals and their communities.

How individuals deal with all of this information is one thing, how governments do quite another. Certainly, medical science is at play when we visit our doctor. Doctors have their pills and medications to offer but also their evidence-based advice on whether behaviours need to be altered or modified in some way. When it comes to governments and the laws and policies needed to improve health outcomes overall, it's a most complicated environment. It's the real world about which Machiavelli spoke. Sitting at the table will be ideologues for whom the issue is a settled one. They are the fundamentalists, the true believers for whom no more evidence is needed. They may be radical libertarians or hard-line communitarians at war against what they see as sinful behaviour or human weakness. Then we have the vested interests with a cause to defend or promote. Their interests may be personal or commercial. Always present too are the populists for whom the latest opinion poll is the best guide to what should or shouldn't be done. Finally, there's the researchers armed with the latest evidence about what the different options would deliver in practice. The political leader at the head of the table is required to deliver some sort of consensus. It's all politics and that means negotiation and compromise and more often than not what most if not all of the participants would think to be second or even third-best solutions.

What we are left with here in Australia today is a strange, some might say unholy, mix of elements (for a summary as it relates to illicit drugs, alcohol and tobacco see Ingrid van Beek, "Harm Reduction: Reducing the Harms From Drug Use" in **Drug Use in Australian Society** edited by Alison Ritter, Trevor King and Margaret Hamilton, 2013). With drugs fundamentalism is still part of the mix. Prohibition is still with us but now along with doses of demand and harm reduction. With smoking it's no-holds barred regulation, demand-reduction and a heated dispute about harm reduction. With alcohol it's bits and pieces of regulation but little else. All the voices pointed to above have-and do-exercise some influence on the law and policy and what we see is a sort of stalemate when it comes to collective purpose. However, it's not a stalemate without internal pressures for change. This raises the question – how should the various proposals for change be evaluated? Is there a stronger sense of purpose we could bring to the table that is both acceptable?

How to judge policy

We need to start with a degree of idealism, the view that change is possible; difficult yes but not impossible and more likely than not to be delivered in stages, some more structural than others. In terms of ends we can draw upon the health and human rights objectives laid down by the World Health Organizationⁱ and the United Nationsⁱⁱ in 1948. In and of itself that leads us to a questioning of the criminalisation of drug use which, as the Global Commission on Drug Policy have put it, "undermines the right to privacy, personal autonomy and human dignity" (**Advancing Drug Policy Reform - A New Approach to Decriminalisation**, 2016 report). Add to that the evidence we have as to the ineffectiveness of the prohibition regime to tackle the negative health consequences and personal harm that can result from drug use. So it is that harm reduction has entered the picture to ensure better outcomes when it comes to both the rights and health of people.

It's an effective approach because it involves both a health and a human rights approach, not one in the absence of the other. When it comes to providing content to the health side of the argument, the late Karl Popper, one of the 20th century's greatest intellectual campaigners against all forms

of extremism, left and right, put it in well in his 1945 classic **The Open Society and Its Enemies**. He urged the political class to focus their efforts “on the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness”. It’s true, of course, that the positive psychology movement has provided us with a range of indicators that help build a happier society, including access to health services that help us tackle diseaseⁱⁱⁱ. This being said happiness for the individual remains an elusive target, much contested and necessarily personal: a flawed goal for any government respectful of human difference but attractive perhaps for fundamentalist politicians with their view that it is one type of life, and one only, that will produce happiness. With these considerations in mind Popper believed it much better for all if governments focussed on reducing demonstrated harm and suffering. That’s something the opening up of inquiry through the Enlightenment has defined for us as freedom from oppression, freedom from discrimination, freedom from fear, freedom from avoidable harm, and perhaps most of all the freedom to survive.

This leads us to ask the following questions when considering any policy proposal: **Does it lead to a reduction in death and clearly identifiable harm and suffering? If yes, does it have other consequences which need to be taken into account when considering the details of design, implementation and delivery?**

It means looking at all aspects of an issue, including the human realities involved. It means being principled and pragmatic; searching for the policy mix that works given those realities as they express themselves today. Will or will not more people be alive and be able to make the best of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Will that world be that much better for those for whom habits are hard to break? It takes us beyond the all or nothing simplifications of fundamentalism and urges us to put ourselves in the shoes of others, perhaps less fortunate and/or more troubled than ourselves.

This all being said it will still remain the case and the greatest hurdle to clear won’t be the evidence-based quality of the proposal itself, but rather it’s acceptability to the people and their government. As the great physicist Albert Einstein put it when asked at Princeton in 1946 - why is it that when the mind of man has stretched so far as to discover the structure of the atom, we have been unable to devise the political means to keep the atom from destroying us? His reply:

“That is simple, my friend. It is because politics is more difficult than physics”.

More difficult, I would add, not just because of the fickleness and contrariness of human nature but also because of the prejudices of those who advise and those who seek to govern. Only through constant and consistent effort in the interests of harm reduction, issue by issue and step by step, can we expect to break the back of these prejudices.

ⁱ “Health is a state of physical, mental and social well-being in which disease and infirmity are absent”

ⁱⁱ “Human rights’ refers to the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law. Human rights are the foundation of human existence and coexistence.”

ⁱⁱⁱ One list of requirements is as follows: “To live in a democratic and stable society that provides material resources to meet needs, to have supportive family and friends, to have rewarding and engaging work and adequate income, to be reasonably healthy and have treatment available in case of mental problems, to have important goals related to one’s values, and to have a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose, and meaning to one’s life”. Ed Diener and Martin Seligman in **Psychological Science in the Public Interest**, Vol 5, No 1, 2004, p. 25.