

The Civic Cross

The civic truth of the United States is democratic capitalism. Our civic life is pre-economic, derived from moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is democratic (small “d”) reasoning. The skills and discipline required to live as a citizen in a democracy are the foundation of our lives as moral creatures. There is no morality without our rational intuition for democratic self-organization. Indeed, as Americans, our moral universe is nothing other than the United States.

Capitalism, in contrast, has a factual, non-moral basis. Beyond what is further upstream at the civic level, there are no “moral principles” involved with capitalism. We know that unbridled consumerism leads to moral erosion. We also know that capitalism incentivizes productive behavior. Capitalism can succeed under—and is indifferent towards—both democratic and authoritarian regimes.

The classical American faithful to our democratic republic is different from the romantic American who can be seduced by authoritarian tyranny. Still, whether tyrannical or democratic, romantic or classical, Americans organically care about their material well-being, which means the subject of capitalism will produce a lot of heat. Naturally enough, since both democracy and capitalism lay claim to “freedom,” when contradictions arise between the two systems, many Americans end up choosing the wrong side.

In a sense, the divide between civics and economics—democracy and capitalism—is the divide between “values” and “facts.” Methodologies like economics, statistics, and game theory do an excellent job quantifying value, that is to say, making value more factual. While quantifying value has not eliminated moral imperatives (which are in fact civic imperatives), it does help us to deal with those imperatives more empirically. In other words, economic reasoning helps *stabilize* our civic and moral reasoning.

As finite human beings, there are always things we must take on faith, but with civic reasoning, principles are one thing and beliefs are another. Principles answer to reason and science, while beliefs are derived from the supposed sovereignty of our personhood. Here, too, the distinction between classical and romantic “types.” Nor are beliefs a matter of “faith.” Faith is an orientation of trust and goodwill; it does not, except among fools, trump *knowledge*. Beliefs are a set of ideas we hold to be true. To put it another way, “faith” is a verb while “beliefs” are nouns.

In a democracy, it is *not* morally respectable to believe a thing with all one’s might. Quite the opposite, it is imperious and silly. Devout belief is a way of flipping the finger at others. It says: “I am not listening, I am not learning, I have no responsibility to others beyond what flows from my own lights and the lights of those who see things like me.”

Similarly, it is dishonorable to allow beliefs to masquerade as “principle.” Principled reasoning requires that we have enough humility to recognize that what *feels* true to the core of our being may not, in fact, be true. A premise of principled reasoning, drawn from hard experience, is that one may be wrong, even about ultimate and fundamental things. Belief has no such requirement. Many believers are humble, of course, and many principled citizens are arrogant, but belief *itself* is arrogant, and principle *itself* is humble.

Beliefs are attractive because they provide clarity. Clarity can be a good thing, but *false* clarity is the most destructive moral force in the world. The Saudi terrorists who attacked our country in 2001 had no shortage of “moral clarity.” They committed great evils *believing* they were doing good. Beliefs will generate moral clarity all day long, but they do not create a flyspeck of moral legitimacy.

When it comes to important matters like God, country, and family, believers are not to be believed. Whatever their sincerity and basis decency, beliefs lead to unprincipled visions of the big picture. Towards that end, the “civic cross” is a useful way to keep our reasoning straight. As citizens, there is no way to get around pre-economic, civic imperatives, which is why democracy *is* the moral principle. The civic cross is a good way to circumvent the nonsense of morality confusing and cluttering our body politic.

Think of a graph, with a horizontal and vertical axis. The horizontal axis is economic. Broadly speaking, a national economy (Y) consists of two parts, the government (G) and the market (M), or $Y=G+M$. Since the economic continuum is quantitative, its distinctions are practical. Those practical realities include aggregative truths which shape and determine our lives, but that is different than the principles imposed by civic reasoning.



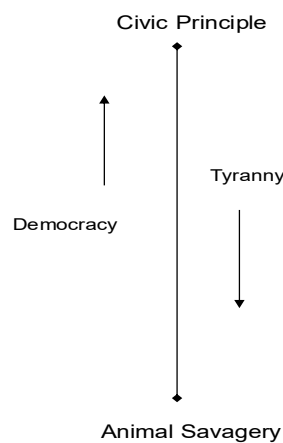
When we reflect upon the economic continuum, it is immediately obvious that the extreme in either case is undesirable. Unbridled markets reward scale. Over the longer arc of history, it may be that innovation supplants one set of oligarchs with another, but during that same arc of time, oligarchic power becomes more consolidated and entrenched. Oligarchic power comes at the price of eroding incomes and a decimated middle-class.

Conversely, unbridled government is the ‘absolute power which corrupts absolutely.’ Too much government leads to socialism, with its inefficiencies and vast cruelties. Those entrusted with the coercive power of government become indolent and self-satisfied. In the words of Scripture, they heap huge burdens on the backs of their brothers without lifting a finger to remove it. Like living in a home where children are allowed to play with knives, the rest of us must adapt to their heedlessness.

Due to the failures of our Constitution, the American body politic chokes with extremist nonsense. One can drive a truck between oligarchist “libertarianism” and overweening socialism. Between these two extremes, though, are workable realities: one party may wish to see more “M” while the other party wants more “G,” but both sides agree that economic growth, prosperity, and civic stability, requires *some* mix of M and G. The horizontal axis is where differences can be split, deals cut, and things learned.

Naturally enough, given the material stakes, there is a lot of moralistic heat generated from the disputes on the Left/Right axis; in the end, there are no principles involved with the proper balance of G+M. There is only knowledge—what works and what does not work—and our own confession that we ourselves may be wrong, even about fundamental and ultimate things. *We do* know that when we adhere to science and scientific methods, our knowledge becomes less imperfect over time.

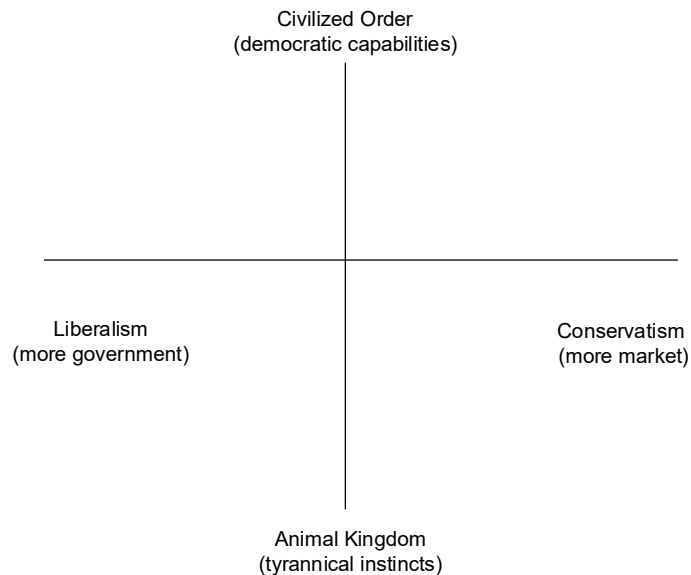
Up/Down Axis: Moral Continuum



The vertical axis is quite different. It takes the form of moral imperative. Its precepts are to be obeyed, though it is important to note that duty and certitude are different things. We are obliged, as citizens in a democracy, to be governable, that is, responsive to the will of the majority and its constituted government. We also know that, even though civic principle is grounded in absolute truth and vested with the authority of moral absolutes, human beings are often wrong, even about immutable moral laws.

Why should we turn our lives over to imperfect human reason? Because *our* morality, democracy itself, ensures that our imperfect civic principles become less imperfect. If democracy is properly constituted, then we will learn as we go. Democracy itself creates feedback mechanisms which guide us towards wisdom.

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Civic reasoning snaps into greater clarity when we combine the axes into a “civic cross.” Managing both the left/right “economic” continuum and the up/down “moral” continuum are necessary for good citizenship and a strong country. On the left/right axis, we have the repository of G + M knowledge; on the up/down axis, we have the repository of civic principles. The civic cross points to a world where knowledge and principle support one another.

The ideological divide between liberals and conservatives is a difference in *degree*. It involves the relationship between government and market—and can be bridged with normal democratic compromise. The psychological divide between tyranny and democracy is a difference in *type*. Whether liberal or conservative, democrats are one moral type, and authoritarians, whether liberal or conservative, are another moral type. Democracy may come at us in many forms, but anyone who does not respect majority rule is morally suspect.

To be sure, there are powerful differences between *social* liberalism and conservatism, but those are precisely the issues settled by democracy. Throughout the entire 19th century, there was a strong conviction that alcohol was at the root of abusive behavior, family dissolution, and even poverty itself. If we prohibited alcohol, the argument went, then we could eliminate those other things. After more than a century pitched debate, and about the time women received the universal right to vote, a supermajority was put together to change the constitution and outlaw alcohol consumption across the country. Over the next decade and a half, Americans came to

think that the criminal subculture unleashed by making booze illegal was worse than the evils incurred when it is legal. A longstanding, festering issue was resolved relatively quickly by democracy itself.

It is much the same way with other issues marking the social divide between liberals and conservatives. These include gun control, abortion, prayer in school, gay marriage, and so on. It is destructive for courts to resolve these issues. While we need the legal system to protect us from criminals without pandering to our ugliest instincts, it is the job of democracy, not judges, to decide social and economic matters. Democracy unleashes the debate, provides the macroeconomic power to enforce the resolution of the debate, and the means to monitor the effects for future discussions.

The civic cross carries a profound juxtaposition: economic knowledge can lead to broader moral well-being, and civic principle can lead to broader material well-being. A decent, remunerative job can improve one's moral character, as it gives him a stake in the moral universe known as the United States. Similarly, the vibrancy of democratic culture can improve one's material well-being. Government policy plays an indispensable role in the prosperity of a nation. Additionally, though less tangibly, the free and autonomous citizens of a self-governing democracy are much likelier to be clever and productive than the subjects of a despotic regime.

Still, just as our moral psychology differs from the profane realities of making a buck, we distinguish between the baseline morality of democracy itself and the practical realities of living as economic creatures. We are all democratic capitalists in our country, and when the two systems are in conflict, we choose democracy. We choose democracy, not because we want rescind human nature, but because, unlike tyranny, democracy makes the coercive aspect of politics answerable to those being coerced. Our democratic impulses are aligned with the impulse that might does *not* make right, an impulse which extends back to prehistoric times, was given voice by the likes of Socrates and Jesus, and found fuller expression in, among other places, the American republic. The civic cross is for those Americans who, for whatever good reasons, are having a difficult time distinguishing between genuine moral disputes and the moralistic flimflam used to manipulate us and steer us into decisions which harm our country.

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