

Governing Least: A Litany of Insight

Dan Moller's *Governing Least* is packed with random insights and philosophic wit. Some highlights:

Why so much political philosophy sounds desperate:

Only those already unsympathetic to utilitarianism are likely to be swayed by Rawls's brief observations. Those who begin their political philosophy by defending the morality of rights don't so much preach to the choir as exorcize the elect.

Why so much political philosophy sounds so blind:

The reason France does not require aid is not because some external group took pity on the French, but that they were able to generate exponential economic growth themselves. This makes it puzzling that philosophers write long books about aid without mentioning economic growth, and generally seem to imply that the path to escaping poverty lies through individual altruism. Why ignore the only mechanism that has ever succeeded in lifting millions of people out of poverty when thinking about poverty?

A great explanation of the Theory of the Second-Best:

Suppose that a company enjoys monopoly powers that we cannot immediately remove under the present regulatory regime, but that one of its upstart rivals enjoys a market-distorting state subsidy which we can remove. It is a fallacy to infer that market efficiency will be improved by at least killing the subsidy— the reverse may well be true— just as it is fallacious to reason that if our military lacks both bombs and bombers the second-best solution is at least to build the bombers.

Why predictable outcomes can co-exist with abundant opportunity:

The data on intergenerational mobility or its absence is sobering, to say the least. In the United States, sometimes this leads commentators to call into question the traditional self-conception of America as a “land of opportunity.” It’s hardly a land of opportunity if outcomes are determined at birth, runs the criticism.

Let us consider this reasoning in more detail. The critic seems to reason as follows: If there were anything like equality of opportunity, then we couldn’t predict outcomes at birth, but we can, and so the land of opportunity is a myth. Let us assume the standard to meet here isn’t exact equality of opportunity for every single citizen. Could there still be reasonably high levels of opportunity despite outcomes— including bad ones— being highly predictable from the start? The critic seems to assume the following principle:

Predictability defeats opportunity: if we are able to specify social outcomes with a high degree of accuracy in advance, then the people in question cannot enjoy much opportunity.

Why accept this principle? What is it that connects predictability and opportunity? The obvious answer is that we think we know enough about people to be confident that if they did enjoy opportunities, they wouldn’t exercise them in a way that leads to bad social outcomes. The fact that we know that Smith will end up poor in all likelihood suggests that he is powerless to avoid it, since if he were capable of influencing the outcome, then he would. This amounts to another, deeper principle:

Predictability is evidence of incapacity: the fact that we can predict poor social outcomes is evidence that those who experience them lack a capacity for avoiding them.

Another way of putting the matter is that a fixed proportion of poor

outcomes might be bad, but it wouldn't be bad for reasons of diminished opportunity, since it might be the case that there are going to be winners and losers in anything resembling a free society, and as long as everyone has a fair shot at being a winner, things aren't so bad. (No doubt more would need to be said about what "losing" amounts to for us to feel reassured.) What is terrible about predictability is that the losers aren't just random, but never had a chance. Because predictability is evidence of incapacity, we know that those with poor outcomes never had a chance to succeed, and a fortiori they lacked anything like an equal or reasonable opportunity for success.

The problem is that it isn't true that predictability, in itself, is evidence of incapacity, that outcomes are beyond our control. I don't want to deny in the end that certain forms of incapacity do play a role in social outcomes, but how much is far from settled, and by opening with the assumption that predictability implies incapacity, we go wrong from the start. The fundamental confusion is between the epistemic question of what we can say about the future and the metaphysical question of what people are able to do at a given time in given circumstances. There are various fancy examples to illustrate this in the free-will literature, but for our purposes we can stick to some everyday examples:

Rope line: at the airport, we predict with great confidence that people will walk along a particular circuitous path— the one laid out by the velvet ropes. Nevertheless, the passengers are free to step over the ropes any time they like. It's just that hardly anyone does.

Predictability here doesn't imply incapacity, it's just that the passengers all have reason to exercise their freedom in a certain way.

Victim-blaming is (often) question-begging:

[I]t sounds mean to claim that people generally have a capacity to influence social outcomes when thinking about the poor, a bit like victim-blaming. But such a denial would involve insisting that something like the following claims are generally true (readers are invited to imagine these in the mouths of their own children facing unfavorable social circumstances, such as a lousy school system):

- *“I can’t help it that I skipped class.”*
- *“It wasn’t possible to do my homework.”*
- *“I had no control over whether I had children.”*
- *“There was no way I could have worked this past year.”*

It is important to acknowledge that for some people, these statements will be true. Mothers have children due to rape, classes go unattended because of gunfire or violence in the school, recessions destroy employment opportunities even for those who are highly qualified and persevering and willing to accept low wages. The point isn’t that all poor social outcomes are blameworthy, but that most (not all) people can exercise an enormous amount of influence over whether they lead a decent life in the developed world, even when ignorance or other internal impediments bar the way.

Governing Least is so packed with insight that I could easily have made this post three times longer. Read it and see for yourself!