Moral Approximates

"I urge you to beware the temptation of pride–the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil." – Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" Speech

During the Cold War, folks like Ronald Reagan accused their domestic opponents of believing in the "moral equivalence" of the United States and the Soviet Union. Having lived through the era, I am confident that believers in moral equivalence existed. Knowing the relevant history, I agree that this was an absurd belief. However bad the United States was, the Soviet Union was vastly worse.

If you want to nitpick, admittedly, we never find literal moral equivalents in real world. Why? Because in a continuous world, one side in any conflict is bound to be at least a *little* worse. Still, careful examination of real-world conflict does occasionally uncover not moral equivalents, but moral *approximates*. Though the two sides' moral status is not precisely equal, they are morally more-or-less the same.

It's easiest to identify examples that are far away in time and place. During the Wars of Religion, who was worse – the Catholics or the Protestants? During World War I, who was worse – the Germans or the Russians? During the War of the Roses, who was worse – the Yorks or the Lancasters? You could plead ignorance. Yet even if you studied the history for a year, you would plausibly conclude that the two sides were moral approximates – both sinned so egregiously that it really is hard to know who was worse.

For recent and ongoing conflicts, assertions of moral approximation naturally inspire far more pushback. If we were rational, however, the opposite would be true. The very fact that people have strong emotions about recent and ongoing conflicts is a strong reason to discount their judgment. Furthermore, when a conflict is recent or ongoing, we usually lack a great deal of not-yet-released relevant information. No one is likely to scare up shocking new revelations about the Lancasters, but in fifty years we'll have a *much* better understanding of what the Trump administration actually did.

Those limitations in mind, here are the top three moral approximations I am willing to defend.

1. Communism and Nazism are moral approximates. Why? Both movements were fanatical attempts to build dystopian societies – and both self-righteously murdered tens of millions of innocent people. Contrary to much propaganda, Communists did not have noticeably

better motives. Both groups imagined that a totalitarian society would be a big improvement over the status quo – and recklessly embraced the necessity of mass murder to get there.

2. *Socialism and fascism are moral approximates.* Why? Socialism is a toned-down version of Communism; fascism is a toned-down version of Nazism. As toned-down versions, they aim for much less, and murder far fewer people in the process. Yet the vision of both movements – society as a big family with a common purpose – remains dystopian. And while their methods are far less brutal than Communism or Nazism, socialism and fascism both casually advocate pervasive coercion for flimsy reasons.

(My main doubt here is that while I've repeatedly publicly debated socialists, I would not so engage a fascist. Doesn't that show that I think fascism is markedly worse? Not exactly. The main reason I don't debate fascists is that avowed fascism is now so low-status that its *adherents* are low-quality and scary. In a world where fascists were as mainstream as socialists, I would debate them).

3. *The Democratic and Republican parties are moral approximates.* Why? Both are dogmatic, emotional, and demagogic. Neither party internalizes the maxim that with great power comes great responsibility – or dwells on the possibility that they might be mistreating people who don't agree with them. Both parties say they want various radical changes, many of which seem very bad. The policies Democrats and Republicans actually impose when they have power are similarly mediocre, though that doesn't stop them from rhetorically making mountains out of molehills. On immigration, for example, the Democratic-Republican debate basically comes down to whether the border should be 98% closed or 99% closed. Though I prefer 98% to 99%, it's approximately the same.

I am well-aware that both Democrats and Republicans will protest angrily being lumped together; in their eyes, the differences between their parties are "huge." My question for them: In 200 years, how big will these "huge differences" look to historians?   Yes, during the Wars of Religion, Catholics and Protestants mutually called each other servants of the Antichrist. Today, however, we can plainly see that both sides were unhinged.

Similarly, if you carefully studied the politics of, say, France in 1970, would you really conclude that the arguments that enraged contemporary French partisans were, in fact, a big deal?

Back in 2016, many Democrats told me that Trump's election exposed the sheer evil of the Republican Party. In a way, this understates. I say that the mere fact that a man like Trump did well in the primaries shows that the Republican Party is rotten. However, I'd say the same about Bernie Sanders' success in 2016. The mere fact that a man like Sanders did well in the primaries shows that the Democratic Party is rotten, too.

You could respond, "Suppose Democrats and Republicans really are moral approximates. Shouldn't an economist, of all people, still be eager to discover the *slightly* lesser evil?" My answer: If I were America's kingmaker, then yes. But when I'm just one voice among tens of millions, no. While I'm always happy to share my views with curious Democrats or Republicans, I'm too much of a puritan to ever join either party.

P.S. Lest anyone misinterpret me, I think the Democratic and Republican parties are *markedly* better than socialism and fascism, which are in turn *markedly* better than Communism and Nazism. Mathematically: D≈R>>S≈F>>C≈N.