Defending Floyd's Normative Behaviourism

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Abstract

Jonathan Floyd, a lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Bristol, formulated an original methodology, labelled 'normative behaviourism', for political philosophers to use when attempting to determine how political systems should be organised. Primarily, this essay will attempt to resolve two criticisms faced by normative behaviourism. In defending normative behaviourism, I will demonstrate the benefits of normative behaviourism in comparison to mentalism (normative behaviourism's main theoretical adversary) as a method for determining how we ought to live our lives. A successful defence of normative behaviourism will motivate more students and scholars to consider it as the primary method of approaching political philosophy, moving it out of its infancy and into the dominant methodological tool used in the field of political philosophy.

Introduction

Normative behaviourism (NB) is an original methodological theory developed by Jonathan Floyd in his magnum opus *Is Political Philosophy Impossible? Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative Political Theory* (2017a). NB is first and foremost a critique of mentalism, which has been up until the creation of NB the most common methodological tool used by political philosophers. NB is a methodology applicable to political philosophy, which suggests our political actions and political behaviours should be the basis for generating principles about how politics ought to be organised. The method of mentalism, however, as explained by Floyd in his magnum opus, involves translating political thoughts into political principles and is therefore directly at odds with Floyd's NB.

This essay will primarily set about tackling two separate objections to NB. The first objection is formally raised by Hendrix, where he asserts that mentalism is not impossible but only difficult. Even though the difference between what is difficult and impossible may seem relatively arbitrary, it strikes at the heart of NB and therefore must be thoroughly considered. The second objection, although hypothetical in its nature, is nonetheless worthy of exploration. This hypothetical objection criticises NB for suggesting that Western-centric ideas about social liberal democracy are "more correct" (2017a: 7) than non-Western forms of political organisation. As such, NB is being accused of being somewhat imperialistic.

In discussing both objections, I will defend NB; doing so ought to motivate more students and scholars to consider NB as the primary method of political philosophy, moving normative behaviourism out of its infancy and into the dominant methodology used in political philosophy.

Objection 1: Difficult, but not impossible

Hendrix argues that the mentalist approach to political philosophy is not impossible, but only difficult. Hendrix states "it would be strange to conclude […] that the book has presented evidence sufficient to justify the conclusion that mentally driven political philosophy is impossible rather than simply difficult" (2019: 129). Hendrix seems to desire a less radical framing of NB, where the theory becomes another handy device in the political theorist's toolkit, rather than the sole force for revitalising political philosophy. He is thus suggesting that mentalism and NB can exist conterminously. Nevertheless, one might ask why NB suffers from labelling mentalism as difficult but not impossible. Surely, there is little difference between the two labels and even if there was, it is unclear as to why the judgements of mentalism impact NB. Hendrix's distinction between difficulty and impossibility is significant because NB's logical foundation is built upon mentalism's impossibility. For if mentalism provided a meaningful and convincing answer to the organising question (OQ) of political philosophy ("how should we live?") (2017a: 6), then there would be no need for NB. Mentalism's impossibility is thus a necessary - but not sufficient - condition for NB's existence, and so it is imperative to demonstrate why mentalism is not just difficult but impossible, precisely in order to strengthen this key pillar of NB.

Floyd gives several justifications for his claim that mentalism is impossible (2017a: 124-157), which aim to describe the mentalist methodology as being dissonant. Instead of repeating what has gone before me, my justification for mentalism's impossibility will place Hendrix's critique at its centre by disturbing the key premise of the claim that minimal progress does not equate to impossibility. Hendrix begins his argument by making a link between the case of mentalism and that of philosophy of mind. He suggests that it would be a misnomer to conclude that the potential for progress when philosophising about the nature of the mind is impossible simply in virtue of the minimal agreement witnessed at the present moment. Such logic can also be applied to mentalism. Therefore, it would be rash to abandon the principal method of political philosophy (mentalism) because whilst it has, up to now, produced dissonant normative thoughts, it may produce, what Floyd labels as, "the goods" (2017b: 374) in the future. However, this analogy does not take into account a seismic difference between philosophy of mind and mentalism, which is that philosophy of mind is a new field in

philosophy, whereas mentalism has been the sole method of political philosophy for most of the subject's existence, which has spanned thousands of years. To then suggest that we should carry on using mentalism, even though it has historically failed to produce a meaningful and convincing answer to the OQ, would be a faith-based judgement, rather than a reason-based judgement. If faith becomes the grounding of philosophical judgements, then such judgements cease to be philosophical in nature, and become nothing more than expressions of wishful thinking. So, mentalism's historical failure demonstrates how unreasonable it would be to claim that mentalism could still produce a meaningful and convincing answer to the OQ. Since it would be impossible to reasonably claim that mentalism can provide a meaningful and convincing answer to the OQ, reason follows that mentalism is indeed impossible, not difficult.

Having illuminated a logical foundation of NB and how this foundation builds a pressing case for the impossibility of mentalism, there is still one nagging thought about mentalism that plagues this pillar of NB. At face value, mentalism can and has reached a very similar conclusion when answering the OQ as NB. The conclusion being that they both posit a form of egalitarian liberal democracy (ELD) - a form of political organisation that emphasises the need for consensus and tolerance and that many scholars assume already exists in some form, including liberal and or social democracy (Mann, 1970: 424; Parekh, 1992; Tilton, 1974: 570). So why is it that NB's conclusion of ELD is a meaningful and convincing answer to the OQ, while mentalism, which seems to arrive at very similar conclusions, is labelled as impossible? This tension demonstrates that either 1) NB merely repackages old ideas, or more crucially 2) mentalism has already reached the same conclusion about what constitutes a "more correct" (2017a, 7) answer to the OQ as NB. If the second proposition is true, then mentalism cannot logically be classed as impossible without classing NB as impossible. The similarities in the ends produced by mentalism and NB turns NB into a self-defeating prophecy. The question that should be asked is not 'what is the point of political philosophy?' but rather, 'what's the point of normative behaviourism?'.

The burden of proof is now on me, a defender of NB, to show that there exists a clear and distinct factor that separates the ELD posited by NB and that which is reached by mentalism. To do this, it must be first understood that the criticism is grounded in the assumption that the raison d'être of NB rests in the end - being ELD - that it produces. Even though NB is primarily a method, the principles present within ELDs – which are likely to produce greater consensus through action by limiting the level of crime and insurrection than other tried and tested organising principles (Floyd, 2016) – is what drives NB's conclusions about the level of meaning and conviction in the answers to the OQ. As such, the main end

produced by NB does partly constitute the labelling of mentalism as impossible, which in turn provides a necessary condition for the existence of NB.

However, whilst the teleology of NB must be recognised, it is merely the tip of the iceberg when distinguishing between it and mentalism. The foundation of NB's claim that mentalism is impossible lies not just with the ELD, but within the methodological differences, which ELD is a symptom of. The key difference between mentalism and NB in their positing of ELD; NB sets empirically verifiable conditions – the level of insurrection and crime – and so it is rooted in the real, where real is defined by what is feasible (Miller, 2016: 219). These empirically verifiable conditions are valuable when practicing political philosophy because they allow us to "gauge the ultimate worth of answers to political philosophy's organising question by monitoring the responses human beings give to them in political practice" (2017a: 275). Mentalist theories, such as Rawls' Original Position and Locke's Social Contract Theory often focus too much on the hypothetical and are too abstract to be meaningful (Fishkin, 1975; Buckle & Castiglione, 1991). So, while they may reach the same point, there is a disparity in the level of meaning – brought about through empirical verification – that is transferred by the somewhat seemingly identical answers. The level of meaning is the key point of difference, which makes mentalist formulations of ELD clear and distinct sets of ideas from that which NB formulates. The burden of proof has thus been lifted.

Objection 2: The Western Project

The end produced by NB is a 'sleight of hand' way of pushing the Western liberal project because the standards it sets for judging whether a political system should be indicted or adopted is rooted in the Western-centric values of greater economic equality, greater liberties and more political rights – as presented by the triad of egalitarianism, liberalism and democracy. Any other form of political organisation which does not conform to these basic principles is then no longer classed as legitimate forms of society under the standards of NB. By looking deeper into the connection between ELD and the standards NB sets for answers to the OQ, this criticism captures an unexplored narrative of NB – namely, that it is 'by the West, for the West.' Whilst this is a hypothetical argument, it is nonetheless damaging and must therefore be tended to because if this objection is true, then NB cannot be exported without being labelled as somewhat imperialistic.

The task set by this criticism is to show that there can be a union between contemporary manifestations of ELDs and other forms of political organisation. By demonstrating theoretical similarities between ELD and Confucianism, a form of Chinese

political organisation that emphasises the need to respect tradition and the need for strong government (Yan, 2018), I will show that whilst the formulation of NB originated in the West, ideas of tolerance and consensus that drive NB are not fixed to Western political philosophy.

Many see the blending of Confucianism and ELD as idealistic, including scholars such Fox (1997) who sees inherent conceptual conflicts that render ELD and Confucianism incompatible. On the surface, there appears to be some conceptual overlap between ELD and Confucianism, but this overlap does not exist beyond the similar terms used. For example, Confucianism, which is grounded in a desire to build a harmonious society (Kissinger, 2011), propagates ideals of justice and community in order to establish consensus between individuals. Similarly, liberalism seeks to establish social harmony and consensus through justice. However, Confucius (Kung Fu-Zi) believed that consensus was achieved through recovery of old values, which would embed a social code of conduct (Wei-Ming, 1996; Rarick, 2007). However, many liberal thinkers are much more sceptical of tradition. In fact, liberal thinkers such as Tocqueville favour the approach of upsetting the "dominion of tradition" (Mitchell, 2019: 34-35) because tradition puts unjustified constraints on the individual. What this tension reveals are competing views of justice; one of justice through tradition, and the other of justice through individual freedom and reform. So, whilst the same word is being employed, it connotes vastly different meanings. What justice means in Confucian thought would seem alien in the language employed by liberals. It seems that any kind of conceptual overlap between LD and Confucianism would be artificial and forced at most.

This last point then begs the question about how one could attempt to reconcile Confucianism and liberalism in an organic, non-artificial way. The key to answering this question is to break down the assumption made by the likes of Fox that the two theories are homogenous. This assumption means that little attention is paid to the tensions that lie within Liberalism and Confucianism, even though these tensions provide room for both schools to manoeuvre to a point where conjunctions between them are created. The elasticity of both schools means that they are not necessarily bound to their foundational texts. There is room to deviate from each schools' vade mecum, or room to deviate because there is precisely no vade mecum. For example, some tensions within the Confucian school of thought arise from privation of core texts (Kaczynska-Nay & Charvet, 2008: 331-342). Kaczynska-Nay & Charvet suggest that due to a lack of breadth of human rights in classic Confucian texts, there is greater potential to shape Confucian views on human nature. According to Chan (1999), even though the likes of Tu-Wei Ming suggest that human rights are merely one of the various tools available to the Confucian leader when fulfilling their duty to bring about social harmony, critical Confucian scholars such as Mencius see humans as naturally moral. Confucius even

suggests that to be benevolent is "to love all men" (Chan, 1999: 232-233). This tension, brought about by a privation of materials, unearths a conceptual starting point for overlap to occur between Confucianism and liberalism, where the notion of tolerance becomes an interlocutor. So, realisation of the elasticity within both schools leads us to reject arguments that themselves reject meaningful conceptual overlap between the two schools as they lack a wholesome and interrogative engagement of the malleable, not fixed, meanings of concepts within both schools.

The concept of NB has not been mentioned for a while, so it might not be clear as to what this conclusion about the malleability of concepts within both liberalism and Confucianism means for NB, and the objection that NB is an excuse to export Western-centric values. The potential meeting point of liberalism and Confucianism at the tolerance juncture shows that neither school of thought is completely distinct from the other. Because the concepts and, more crucially, the meaning of the concepts in both traditions are malleable, we cannot suggest that the core ideas of NBs answer to the OQ – ELD - are grounded in purely Western-centric values. This is the case as it would assume that conceptual meanings in liberalism and Confucianism are rigid and static, rather than elastic and dynamic, when this is putatively false. NB can thus transcend its original context without being labelled as imperialistic because despite originating in the West, the basic principles of NB that ground ELD do not belong to a particular region of the world. Thus, the hypothetical objection that NB is Eurocentric has been successfully navigated.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will briefly review what has been shown in this article. Firstly, Hendrix's claim that mentalism is difficult, rather than impossible, was rebuked in a successful attempt to defend the logical foundations of NB, which rest on the impossibility of mentalism. Secondly, the notion that NB is imperialistic and Western-centric was rebuked by highlighting the elasticity within both liberalism and Confucian thought, which opens up a possible overlap on the idea of 'tolerance.' One must realise however, that the second section has only shown a potential conceptual conjuncture between NB and one other non-Western school of thought over one concept. Future development of NB must work on addressing further potential areas of unison between ELD and non-Western cultures to strengthen ELDs ability to transcend the context and become truly global. This would strengthen the judgement that even though the end of ELD, which NB propagates, may be Western in origin, the ideas it is grounded in transcend context.

In defending and directing NB, I have illuminated its logical foundations (mentalism's impossibility), and as such, I have strengthened the case for employing NB when contributing to the field of political philosophy. NBs realistic tendencies and scepticism of mentalism, when viewed holistically, work in tandem to unsettle the historically commonplace assumption about how to 'do' political philosophy whilst also providing a stable vision of how political philosophy ought to be done. What has been demonstrated in responding to the three criticisms will hopefully attract more students and academics to use NB as the sole method of political philosophy in the future.

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