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Science and Democracy. The non-cognitivist conceptions of Kelsen, Carnap, and Reichenbach

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Overview

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- 2. Kelsen on Science and Democracy**
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- 4. Reichenbach on the democratic character of values**

**1. Prelude:
Don't trust the (European) philosophers!**

Otto Friedrich Bollnow on objectivity and general validity in 1937

- A statement is „generally valid“, if it holds for everyone: „There were X people at Trump’s inauguration.“
- However, g.v. is different from another, stronger, scientific virtue, namely, objectivity
- „therefore space is revealed for the possibility of true and objective knowledge which does not yet has to be generally valid but is restricted to a limited group of people [...] [possibly even] a single person [...] and still is fully objective, i.e., appropriate [sachangemessen].“ (p. 343)
- In other words: the epistemic *Führer* of Bollnow creates „alternative facts“ being not generally valid but still more appropriate

Rickert on values (and the political consequences)

- At least since 1860 or so philosophers no longer trusted in the idea of *eternal values* that involve a univocal and definite answer to each moral or political question (these questions are *context dependent*)
- But there was a backdoor. For Rickert (and other members of the Southwestgerman School) each historical situation involves only a single definite evaluation
- Political questions, therefore, can be answered only by those wise men who are able to carry out these evaluations
- „Political decisions are necessary. Shall we ask the *Volk*?“ „No! Ask Dr. Rickert!“

Kant, Sartre, and post war master thinkers on democracy

- For Kant, the philosopher of enlightenment, democracy was only a „despotism“, because it must lead to a dictatorship of those who are not capable of sifting out the true „transcendental“ story about the world
- Sartre, on the other hand, and other postwar master thinkers in Germany and France, disbelieved in democracy, because it „demobilizes“ the worker class: better go for a revolution and forget about elections (Eribon, p. 126)
- One might generally ask here how strong the believe in democracy among the post war master thinkers in Germany and France actually was? Even strong democrats such as Derrida and Habermas backed up their reasoning on rather dubious notions of the dead subject and society as a communicative process who are not exactly democratic, it seems ...

Don't trust the (European) philosophers!

- ... at least not regarding questions of scientific objectivity and democracy
- It seems that the Continental European philosophical tradition, from Kant until Habermas is full of highly problematic notions being widely at odds with core notions of democracy and science
- But how and where can we find more reasonable accounts of those core notions? What kind of (Non-European) philosophy is trustworthy here?
- My proposal is to trust Logical Empiricism and its derivatives: the legal positivism of Hans Kelsen and the non-cognitivism of Rudolf Carnap and Hans Reichenbach
- Non-European? Not quite – but *became* Non-European ...

2. Kelsen on Science and Democracy

Kelsen 1932: peace and compromise

- Socialism defends a dictatorship of the proletariat
„Diese Flucht aus der Demokratie ist nur ein Beweis dafür, daß die politische Form der Demokratie sich nicht für einen Klassenkampf eignet, der mit dem entscheidenden Sieg der anderen Partei enden soll. Denn die *Demokratie ist die politische Form des Sozialen Friedens*, des Ausgleichs der Gegensätze, der gegenseitigen Verständigung auf einer mittleren Linie [...] so ist der Weg der Demokratie, den eben alle diejenigen nicht wollen, die den Frieden und den Preis des Friedens nicht wollen: das Kompromiß“ (233)

Kelsen 1932: peace and compromise

- Socialism defends a dictatorship of the proletariat
„This escape from democracy is only the proof that the political form of democracy is unsuited for the class struggle that may end with the decisive victory of one party. For, *democracy is the political form of social peace*, of compensation of contrasts, of mutual understanding at a middle line [...] this is the way of democracy that just all those reject who do not want to have peace and the price of peace: the compromise“ (233)

Kelsen 1932: no absolute values

- The right demands a strong leader who knows better what is appropriate than the majority

„Nur wer an die Existenz eines absoluten Wertes glaubt, wer sich selbst oder einen anderen im Besitz dieses Wertes weiß, hat das Recht, die Demokratie zu verurteilen. [...] Wer aber weiß, daß menschlicher Erkenntnis nur relative Werte zugänglich sind, der kann den zu ihrer Verwirklichung notwendigen Zwang nur dadurch rechtfertigen, daß er die Zustimmung wenn nicht schon aller [...], so doch wenigstens der Mehrheit jener hat, für welche die Zwangsordnung Geltung beansprucht. Das ist der Grundsatz der Demokratie.“ (236)

Kelsen 1932: no absolute values

- The right demands a strong leader who knows better what is appropriate than the majority
- „Only those who believe in the existence of an absolute value and who believe themselves or others to possess this value has the right to condemn democracy. [...] But those who believe that human knowledge can approach only relative values can justify the pressure that is necessary for their realization only through approval if not of all [...] then at least of the majority of those for whom the coercive order demands validity. This is the principle of democracy.“ (236)

Kelsen 1937: Freedom of thought and scientific objectivity

„[Es] muss die Idee der *Gleichheit* zu der Idee der Freiheit, diese beschränkend, hinzutreten, damit demokratische Gesellschaftsform zustandekommen kann.“ (239)

„Daher gehört zum Lebensprinzip der Demokratie [...] die geistige Freiheit, die Freiheit der Meinungsäußerung, die Glaubens und Gewissensfreiheit, das Prinzip der Toleranz und insbesondere: die *Freiheit der Wissenschaft* in Verbindung mit dem Glauben an die Möglichkeit der *Objektivität*.“ (241)

„Die Krisis der Wissenschaft fällt zusammen mit der Krisis der Demokratie.“ (243)

Kelsen 1937: Freedom of thought and scientific objectivity

„The idea of *equality* must accompany the idea of freedom, restricting the latter, in order to allow for the occurrence of the democratic form of society.“ (239)

„Therefore, the following belongs to the vital principle of democracy [...]: freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of believe and conscience, the principle of tolerance and, in particular, the *freedom of science* in connection with the believe in the possibility of *objectivity*.“ (241)

„The crisis of science coincides with the crisis of democracy.“ (243)

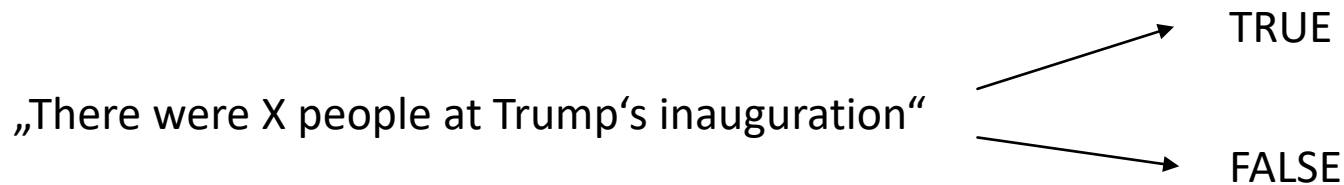
A paradox?

- We assume that, for Kelsen, objectivity and general validity are synonymous (no backdoor for private truths, in the sense of Bollnow)
- An objectively true proposition („X people are at Trump’s inauguration.“) is true for everyone.
- But how can we combine this *intolerant* character of objectivity with freedom of thought, democratic equality and tolerance?
- (Remember also that Kelsen not only defends scientific objectivity to be a democratic virtue but also *relativity* of values.)

3. Carnap on theoretical questions and practical decisions

Facts and Values

- Cognitive: is everything that can be cognitively carried out to be either true or false



- Non-cognitive: is everything where this is not possible, because we only assert things on a purely emotional basis

„You may not kill“ → { x | x holds "You may not kill"}

Carnap 1934: *Theoretical Questions and Practical Decisions*

„If I want to be clear about whether or not I should eat the apple that is lying before me, then that is a matter of resolution, of practical, not theoretical decision. [...] Should I eat this apple? [...] Neither my own thought nor all the theories of science are capable of answering that apparent question [...] Theoretically, from every day or scientific knowledge, all that can be said is: ‚if you eat the apple, your hunger will disappear (or: you will poison yourself; or: you will be sent to jail; or ...“). These theoretical assertions regarding the expectable results can of course be very important for me; however, the resolution cannot be taken away from me by them. It is a matter of practical resolution whether I want to satisfy myself or remain hungry; whether I want to be poisoned or stay healthful; the concepts ‘true’ and ‘false’ cannot be used here.” (258, transl. Carnap companion 299)

Another example: climate change

- Shall we try to keep the CO₂ emissions as little as possible or reduce them to a value x , respectively?
- Theoretical questions: Does global warming take place? What are the consequences of global warming? Is global warming connected with CO₂ emission?
- Practical question: Do we want to avoid global warming? Do we want to reduce CO₂ emission, in order to achieve that goal?

Political decisions are *always* non-cognitive ...

- ... simply because *every* practical decision is non-cognitive.
- Therefore, political decisions may not be transferred *to experts*.
- The so-called „dictatorship of experts“ (cf. the extreme athlete Felix Baumgartner) is not a plausible scientific replacement for democracy but a very crude (and classical) form of right wing totalitarianism (cf. Kelsen, Rickert)
- Experts may inform us about causal consequences of an action but whether we *want* these consequences is a practical question an expert never can answer for us

... and political decisions are *sometimes* irrational

- We *can* benefit very strongly from science, if we are willing to let our actions guide by objective knowledge about spatio-temporal facts and their causal relationships
- If, for example, I believe that global warming is a very bad thing *and* also know that the only way to avoid global warming is to decrease CO₂ emissions then it would be just *irrational* to opt against a CO₂ decreasing policy
- If I unequivocally reject genocide *and* know that Hitler is planning to destroy the Jewish population in Europe *then* it would be just irrational to vote for Hitler

Carnap 1937: Illogical Reasoning: possible (and quite common)

„The requirements made by logic are based on the simple fact that unless they are satisfied, thought and knowledge cannot perform their function as instruments for arriving at successful decisions in practical matters. Now since our actual thinking frequently violates the requirements of logic, it follows that illogical thought is an important factor in determining human behavior. [...] Logic must often play the role of the critic, especially in our own days. Its task is to serve as a spiritual hygiene, cautioning men against the disease of intellectual confusion. It has the ungrateful duty, whenever it finds symptoms of this disease, to pronounce the unwelcome diagnosis. [...] The logician himself has no remedy to offer, and must turn to psychologists and social scientists for aid [...]“
(117-8)

4. Reichenbach on the democratic character of values

Democracy *is* non-cognitive

- Only if we accept (with Kelsen and Carnap) the non-cognitive character of practical decisions and values, we are in a position to accept democracy
- This is the main reason why (European and many other) philosophers tend to reject democracy ...
- ... simply because they think of themselves as being the experts for values and practical decisions
- Again: DON'T TRUST THE PHILOSOPHER

Dr. Evil (Alfred Jules Ayer) in 1935: discussions on values are waste

- If practical decisions are non-cognitive: does not this lead to a complete anarchy of opinion?
- Doesn't non-cognitivism inevitably lead to a very crude and potentially catastrophic form of egoism and subjectivism?
- „Believe what you want! I also believe what I want!“
- Ayer: „In short, we find that *argument* is possible on moral questions only if some system of values is presupposed.“

Reichenbach 1951: the exact opposite is the case!

- Discussions about values are waste only if we assume cognitivism (because then we may not discuss but ask an expert)
- If we assume non-cognitivism, by contrast, we almost inevitably have to accept what Reichenbach calls the „democratic principle“ (of non-cognitivism):

„Everybody is entitled to set up his own moral imperatives and to demand that everyone follow these imperatives“. (295)

The non-peaceful alternative (Freyer): Social Darwinism

- More precisely, we have *two options*, if we accept non-cognitivism
- Non-cognitivism implies that we have to expect that other people sometimes might have different preferences with respect to values and practical decisions
- How shall we respond in such cases?
- *First option* (Hans Freyer, 1930): try to defend your own preferences violently – the fittest may survive

Second Option (Carnap, Reichenbach): keep your values adaptive!

„Volitional differences cannot be settled by the appeal to a system of ethics constructed by some learned man; they can be overcome only through the clash of opinions, through the friction between the individual and his environment, through controversy and the compulsion of the situation. Moral valuations are formed in the pursuit of activities; we act, we reflect about what we have done, we talk to others about it, and act again, this time in what we regard as a better way.“ (296)

Adaptivity does not mean weakness though

„The give and take of social coöperation offers much deeper satisfaction than does obstinate refusal to abandon one's goals. Thus the person educated in an empiricist approach to ethics is better prepared than the absolutist to become an adjusted member of society.

This is not meant to imply that the empiricist is a man of easy compromise. Much as he is willing to learn from the group, he is also prepared to steer the group in the direction of his own volitions. He knows that social progress is often due to the persicence of individuals who were stronger than the group; and he will try, and try again, to modify the group as much as he can. The interplay of group and individual has effects both ont he individual and the group.“ (300)

Democracy is the non-violential
option, against the background
of non-cognitivism
(the alternative is a social-darwinist
variety of totalitarianism)

Reichenbach 1951:

DO NOT TRUST THE PHILOSOPHER

„Whenever there comes a philosopher who tells you that he has found the ultimate truth, do not trust him. If he tells you that he knows the ultimate good, or has a proof that the good must become reality, do not trust him, either. The man merely repeats the errors which his predecessors have committed for two thousand years. It is time to put an end to this brand of philosophy. Ask the philosopher to be as modest as the scientist; then he may become as successful as the man of science. But do not ask him what you should do. Open your ears to your own will, and try to unite your will with that of others. There is no more purpose or meaning in the world than you put into it.“ (302)

Conclusions

- Political decisions are normative and volitional: no way to carry them out objectively
- Therefore, political decisions can be *fair*, only if they are based on a compromise that is acceptable to the majority (democracy is non-cognitive)
- Nevertheless, we may use theoretical knowledge as a guide for our decisions: lack of scientific background leads to illogical decisions
- Therefore, scientific objectivity (and logic) is an indispensable basis for political (and democratic) decision making
- The non-cognitive character of practical decisions enforces us to choose between a social darwinist conception and democracy
- If we choose the latter, then it becomes natural to keep ones values as adaptive as possible, try to listen to others, find a compromise
- This may all sound a bit trivial ... but it actually is not!