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The Philosophy of Political Conflict: The Example of Punishment

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Title: The Philosophy of Political Conflict: The Example of Punishment

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Abstract. This article posits a basic philosophical substrate of inevitable political conflict as opposed to more common psychological ones.

Throughout history, many observers have attributed a small group of psychological substrates as causal factors for inevitable political conflict. (1) Humans possess basic aggressive instincts that need to be satisfied. Conflict is inevitable. (2) Humans have infinite needs--physical, psychological, spiritual--but there seem to be only finite resources to satisfy these needs. Conflict is inevitable. (3) Humans experience and later--under stress--regress to a basic developmental stage wherein the other is bad and the self is good. The self versus other and good versus bad congruencies beget inevitable conflict. (4) Humans seem to possess too many similarities (or differences) that ensure competing concerns and inevitable conflict. (5) Humans seem to possess a need to be better (or worse) than others or to be better (or worse) than their true selves. As they pursue the satisfaction of these needs, conflict is inevitable. (6) There is some evil (or good) in everyone. Conflict is inevitable.

A basic philosophical substrate of political conflict relates to an essence of philosophy itself. As Arthur Danto (among many others) has pointed out, a philosophical problem is one wherein an appearance has been taken for reality. Can dreams and waking experience be differentiated based on the experiences themselves? Based on experience only can two identical behaviors be differentiated as to their morality based on the behaviors themselves? Can two identical universes be differentiated as to which is deterministic and which is arbitrary? Which has a God and which does not? Can a computer and a human be differentiated as to their intelligence based on their identical outputs? Can two identical objects be differentiated as to which is a work of art and which is not?

These are not the sort of issues that can be approached through variants of the scientific method, for they are not necessarily subject to confirmation or disconfirmation through experience. Ultimately, they are items of faith. And philosophical faith so often founded on illogic as much as logic, irrationality as much as rationality, emotion as much as reason, and the unconscious as much as the conscious can be a primal causal factor in inevitable political conflict.

As but one concrete example, political leaders cannot differentiate (through experience) two identical worlds as to that in which punishment decreases a target's noxious behavior and to that in which punishment has no effect, increases the noxious behavior, or has arbitrary and unpredictable effects. So the conflict that goes on within the Israeli Cabinet about collectively punishing Palestinians after a terrorist event allegedly perpetrated by some Palestinians or the conflict within the United States Congress about consistently punishing North Korea after the latter's international transgressions is conflict that is deliberated based on experience--but cannot validly be. And the conflict is inevitable. (See Danto, A. (1997.) *Connections to the world: The basic concepts of philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 6-13; Koller, M. (1995.) *Authoritarianism, perception, and person perception: What do authoritarians infer from another's attempt to rebut a rumor?* *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, <17, 199-212; Mihanovic, M., Jukic, V., & Milas, M. (1994.) *Rumors in psychological warfare*. *Socijalna Psihijatrija*, 22, 75-82.) (Keywords: Aggression, Conflict, Political Conflict.)