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Knowing What Justice Means and Being Committed to It: Remarks on Allen Buchanan's Analysis of Conservative Factual Beliefs

RAINER FORST

ABSTRACT *Allen Buchanan argues that a particular set of false factual beliefs, especially when part of a comprehensive ideology, can lead persons to develop 'morally conservative' convictions that stand in the way of realising justice even though these persons have a 'firm grasp of correct principles of justice and a robust commitment to their realisation'. In my remarks, I raise some questions concerning the core argument: How 'firm' can a grasp of principles of justice be if a person is blind to the realities of injustice? And how 'sincerely committed' to justice can such an injustice-insensitive person be? Alternatively: How firm is that grasp or commitment if one has a radically pessimistic view about human nature so that one does not believe that (egalitarian) justice can or could ever be realised? Secondly, I ask: If such ideologies or false beliefs are in play in reproducing injustice, do they not also 'mask' existing injustices?*

In his challenging article, Allen Buchanan argues that a particular set of false *factual* beliefs, especially when part of a comprehensive ideology, can lead persons to develop 'morally conservative' convictions that stand in the way of realising justice even though these persons have a 'firm grasp of correct principles of justice and a robust commitment to their realisation'.¹ Buchanan discusses two such sets of false beliefs: those that lead one to overestimate past successes in achieving justice and those that lead one to be sceptical about the possibilities of realising justice. Furthermore, he argues that, if these beliefs are part of ideologies, these are ideologies that form obstacles to realising justice without masking social injustice.

Buchanan's arguments open up extremely fruitful venues for an analysis of the ways in which false factual rather than normative beliefs contribute to the reproduction of injustice. In my short remarks, however, I want to raise some questions concerning the core argument, namely first about the connection between factual and normative beliefs and second about ideology. The first set of questions I want to address is the following: How 'firm' can a grasp of principles of justice be if a person is blind to the realities of injustice in the way Buchanan assumes in his argument? And how 'sincerely committed' (Buchanan, p. 727) to justice can such an injustice-insensitive person be? Alternatively: How firm is that grasp or commitment if one has a radically pessimistic view about human nature so that one does not believe that (egalitarian) justice can or could ever be realised? Secondly, I want to ask: If such ideologies or false beliefs are in play in reproducing injustice, do they not also 'mask' existing injustices?

1. A Firm Grasp and Robust Commitment to Justice

Let me address the question of misguided optimism first. Throughout his article, Buchanan defends a rather strict separation between an understanding of and a commitment to principles of justice, on the one hand, and the awareness and recognition of the social reality one is part of, on the other. The said understanding may even be ‘perfect’ (Buchanan, pp. 725, 727), he argues, and the commitment ‘robust’ or ‘sincere’, while the view of the history of one’s society and the enduring reality of racial or gender injustice may be ‘very faulty’ because ‘they seriously underestimate the negative effects of racism’ (Buchanan, p. 726) in the United States, for example, holding ‘defective beliefs about the extent of racism’ or ‘mistakenly’ thinking ‘that racial injustice is not a serious problem nowadays’ (ibid.). Supported by dominant social discourses, such socially epistemic beings do not recognise any significant ‘irritants’ (Buchanan, p. 728) to their beliefs that racial justice has for the most part been realised, even if in reality this is far from the case.

I do not want to deny that such cases of illusion or delusion exist, nor do I want to take up the (interesting) question of the epistemic responsibilities of such subjects who lack an awareness of reality. What I want to ask is how far someone who is blind to reality to such an extent really has a ‘firm grasp’ or a ‘sincere commitment’ to justice (assuming throughout, as Buchanan does, the validity of ‘correct’ [Buchanan, p. 729] principles of justice that rule out racial or gender discrimination). I find it hard to imagine that the normative beliefs about justice of a person are firm and ‘well-founded’ (Buchanan, p. 728) when he or she shows an extreme inability to identify the presence and pervasiveness of injustice, especially of structural injustice. For what kind of a *practical knowledge* of and commitment to justice is it if one is unable to recognise serious injustice? One need not adopt a particular pragmatist, neo-Wittgensteinian approach to practical knowledge to argue that there has to be *some* connection between recognising what justice demands in principle and recognising what justice demands in practice, for otherwise one would not have been properly socialised into the social space of reasons with respect to the notion of justice.² Being socialised into and being competent in the space of justifications in which justice is a meaningful concept to which one is committed, thus combining theoretical and practical knowledge, implies, I believe, the capacity to understand what kinds of injustice the notion of justice is related to – in fact, to what kinds of injustice it is an answer. So how can one be a competent agent in that social and noumenal realm of practical knowledge about justice while lacking the competence to identify a situation of injustice as exactly that: a situation of injustice? It would mean that you know what justice means and demands in the abstract, but you do not know what it demands in practice. But if that is the case, it seems that you do not really know what justice means and demands.

Now Buchanan might have a situation in mind in which one is a competent speaker who knows how to use the concept of justice practically but still misinterprets social reality drastically, looking at the situation of a disadvantaged group without seeing the disadvantage. So the person knows what words such as ‘disadvantage’, ‘discrimination’, ‘domination’, or ‘exploitation’ mean in practice generally, but not what they mean given *this* practice which the person misunderstands. If that is the case, I would rephrase my argument. One’s knowledge of what justice demands in practice must be seriously flawed if one is unable to recognise an unjust practice – clearly visible to the nondeluded, as Buchanan presupposes – as unjust. That lack of practical competence extends, I think,

to the core knowledge and commitment about justice – such that the knowledge must be judged to be *not* firm or perfect but instead quite superficial, and such that the commitment is *not* robust or sincere but weak. One cannot properly *know* what a practical concept means or what it means to be committed to it when one is unable to recognise its practical meaning and the situations to which it applies.

In other words, in my view we do not understand the social *demands* of justice if we do not understand the demands that those who suffer injustice make on us – that is, if we do not have the ability and willingness to recognise a social situation of injustice, especially if it is a structural feature of our society and also a source of constant conflict within it. Thus I am not convinced that we can assume that in a society like the United States today (the one to which Buchanan refers), people can fully or perfectly grasp what justice demands and still hold the unshakable belief that this is a just society. My hunch is that such factual blindness to injustice implies a conceptual and normative blindness with regard to justice. One does not understand what principles of justice mean if one is incapable of relating them to situations of injustice here and now. One does not grasp their full *justification*.

To sum up, I believe that the factual erroneousness of justice judgements is related to a lack of normative and conceptual competence, and thus I question the strong disconnect between factual and normative beliefs suggested by Buchanan. I would even go a step further and say that someone who thinks he or she knows what justice demands and is committed to it but seriously misapplies that knowledge in the face of blatant injustice is not just deluded with respect to factual beliefs but also with respect to her normative beliefs, so that her beliefs about justice themselves become ideological, justifying the unjustifiable as just. Such persons may regard themselves as true egalitarians, but in reality they are not. They hold false normative views about what equality means. So the ideology does not reside only or mainly in the mistaken factual beliefs, as Buchanan assumes, but already in the normative core, leading to serious misjudgements. An example would be that such persons believe that to ‘have’ certain rights already realises justice, while completely ignoring the social and political situations in which one is unable to exercise the rights one formally ‘has’. If such blindness is produced by your view of justice, it is not only superficial, but also ideological. I will return to this point.

As for the second case of delusion that Buchanan discusses – namely, that of underestimating the prospects for achieving justice – I want to raise similar questions about it. However, the factual beliefs that lead to pessimism concerning the realisation of justice are of a different kind from the first case. Here, it is not mistaken beliefs about the lack of injustice that matter; rather, it is beliefs closer to the conceptual core of justice, and, as I would say, very much connected to it. For example, Buchanan lists ‘simplistic views of human nature’ (p. 729) among them, i.e. beliefs about the ‘inherently selfish’ (ibid.) nature of humans that characterise ‘reactionary discourse’ (p. 730), implying that ‘poverty is inevitable’ or that ‘attempts to reduce major social and economic inequalities inevitably fail or backfire’ (ibid.).

As above, I am not convinced that someone who holds such views has a firm grasp of the correct principles of justice if, for example, we presuppose a view of such principles such as Buchanan defends in his other work, one that goes far beyond libertarian views.³ Those who believe with Hayek that the aim of realising social justice leads down the ‘road to serfdom’ do not, I think, hold an egalitarian view of justice but just think that egalitarian justice is hard to realise given human nature; rather, they think that for human beings,

libertarian principles of justice *are* the right and valid principles. Views about human nature are part and parcel of a conception of justice; hence I would not count such views as wrong-headed *factual* beliefs which prevent libertarians from thinking that a more egalitarian form of justice is preferable but unfortunately unrealisable. A conception of justice is always one for humans, and even though one may think that in given circumstances justice is hard to realise, one cannot have such a conception of justice and simultaneously think that human nature categorically prevents its realisation. If one held such a view of human nature, one would not 'firmly' grasp a more egalitarian notion of justice or be committed to it. One would think it meaningless.

Again, I think the ideology at work here is broader than Buchanan thinks. It is not just due to some factual beliefs, since views about human nature are much more than that: they are part of a philosophical world view. But what is more, the ideological delusion at play here is also one that affects the very conceptual and practical knowledge of and commitment to justice. It leads to a 'one-sided' (Buchanan, p. 729) and negative, say, Hobbesian view of human nature and to the view that humans lack the capacities and willingness to realise anything more than minimal libertarian justice, so that the resulting conception of justice is reductive and not 'well-founded' at all. The mistake is in the very normative foundations of the view, which are ideological in that they justify the unjust as just. Which leads me to my final point.

2. Ideology

Buchanan presents a very important argument about an aspect of ideology that, according to him, tends to be overlooked in standard views, especially critical theories in the neo- or post-Marxist tradition. Such ideologies, Buchanan points out, help support unjust social orders 'without masking their injustices' (p. 734), as they do not deform normative but 'only' factual beliefs. But apart from my above argument questioning that sharp distinction between the normative and the factual, it seems to me that the factual ideologies in the way Buchanan conceives of them also 'mask' social injustices, even if in a 'merely' factual way.

Take the example of exaggerated optimism that justice has already been achieved. If justification narratives and dominant discourses in your society lead you to believe that racial justice has been realised when in reality it has not been, as Buchanan assumes, and if the ideological noumenal power complex (as I call it)⁴ is as thick as he suggests, leading to an epistemic situation in which one sees no signs of injustice or not the slightest irritations that its social structures may not be just, then I would say that such ideologies *mask* existing injustices, making them invisible or dressing them up as just arrangements. Thus I disagree with Buchanan's interpretation of the nonmasking ideological nature of such beliefs, even if we regard them as primarily or merely factual.

With regard to the second case, that of exaggerated pessimism, I also have some qualms about whether this is an example of false beliefs which do not mask injustice (see Buchanan, p. 732). Buchanan's assumption is that persons with such beliefs do not think that justice can be realised but still have a proper view of what justice demands. But if their mistaken beliefs about the impossibility of justice convince them that present injustices are unavoidable, is this not also a case of masking? I think it is, because what is avoidable is redefined as unavoidable, and in that sense *masked* as unavoidable. Thus a category of injustices opens up which humans cannot do anything about, and thus they will not care about them and may someday no longer call them injustices.

Still, if my above argument from Section 1 about such cases is correct, the problem is even more severe. For, as I have argued, the reactionary views of human nature that characterise these persons actually lead them to libertarian conceptions of justice, which are limited and truncated conceptions on Buchanan's account. But that also implies that they have no eye for certain injustices in a capitalist economy. They simply declare the unjust as just, based on merit or desert or chance or whatever, the survival of the fittest maybe. That means that they also mask injustice by declaring it as just.

In any case, both forms of ideology, that of exaggerated optimism and that of exaggerated pessimism (in either interpretation of the latter), are forms of masking injustices, it seems to me.

A final word on ideology. There is a long debate about the term and whether it ought to be used in a neutral or in a pejorative sense.⁵ Buchanan uses a neutral one but focuses on a negative version, when he says that ideologies 'can function as *doxastic immune systems*' (p. 731) which include 'false or unjustified beliefs' (ibid.) that support certain comprehensive sets of beliefs shielding them from critique. There are thus two notions of ideology at work here, one that refers to a comprehensive world view generally and one that refers to false justifications immunising such world views. One can, of course, work with these two notions, but it might be preferable to call the first simply a comprehensive world view and the second, the set of false and unjustified beliefs that stabilise delusions and justify unjustifiable social orders, ideologies. And as I argued above, all of the latter mask, in one way or another, structures of injustice by making them appear just and justifiable. Buchanan adds an important layer of analysis to how such ideologies work. But he does not go beyond the conventional critical theories that unmask such forms of thought, I think – for neither can he show that there is a 'pure' set of merely factual false beliefs apart from normative ones nor that such ideologies (or parts of them) do not mask injustice.

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NOTES

- 1 Allen Buchanan, 'When knowing what is just and being committed to achieving it is not enough', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38,5 (2021): 725–735, here 732f. All further references to this article are in parentheses in the text.
- 2 For such a notion of entering the space of justifications, see my 'Critique of justifying reason: Explaining practical normativity' in Rainer Forst (ed.) *Normativity and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 21–36. For a different, powerful account, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Lecture IV.
- 3 See especially Allen Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); I discuss Buchanan's views in Rainer Forst, 'The grounds of institutional moral theory: On the political philosophy of Allen Buchanan', in *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* (forthcoming). Online at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-05301001>.
- 4 On noumenal power and ideology, see Rainer Forst, 'Noumenal power', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23,2 (2015): 111–127 (also in Forst 2017 op. cit., Chapter 2) and my response to critics in 'Noumenal power revisited: Reply to critics', *Journal of Political Power* 11,3 (2018): 294–321 (reprinted in: Mark Haugaard & Matthias Kettner (eds), *Theorising Noumenal Power: Rainer Forst and his Critics* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 129–156).
- 5 For a neutral conception, see Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); for critical notions, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Michael Rosen, *Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).