
The Skeptic as Inquisitor

KINDLY INQUISITORS

Jonathan Rauch

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According to journalist Jonathan Rauch, malign forces, subsumed under the categories Fundamentalists and Humanitarians, threaten freedom of thought and speech. Rauch hopes to thwart their nefarious plans by exploring the philosophical basis of freedom. Though one must applaud the ambition of this latter-day John Stuart Mill, he does the cause of free speech little good with his confused defense of skepticism.

Rauch fervently opposes what he terms the Fundamentalist Principle. Its adherents include, but are not confined, to religious believers. It states that “[t]hose who know the truth should decide who is right” (p. 6). Against this, Rauch counterposes the Liberal Principle: “Checking of each by each through public criticism is the only legitimate way to decide who is right.” Perhaps this will convict me in Rauch’s eyes of being a “true believer,” but his Fundamentalist Principle strikes me as obviously

correct. If someone must decide who is right, why not those who know the truth? Should it rather be those who don’t know the truth?

But, Rauch will respond, this misses the issue. Just what he contends is that no one has privileged access to truth: we cannot know in advance that a certain person, or group of persons, is right. Here Rauch falls into confusion. If what he means is that one should not accept an unsupported claim by someone that he is the fountainhead of truth, that is one thing; but why need a Fundamentalist do so? Suppose, to take a case that seems particularly to arouse Rauch’s ire, someone supports papal infallibility because he thinks there are good grounds to do so. Why does Rauch assume that any claim of privileged access to truth must be itself taken on faith?

Rauch would probably respond in this way. The empirical rule of science requires that “only the experience of no one in particular” be considered in assessing claims to knowledge. “In other words, in checking—deciding what is worth believing—particular persons are interchangeable” (pp. 52–53, emphasis removed). Thus, claims that individuals have had special religious experiences that give them access to truth can be dismissed, since not everyone can have such experiences. So much for Paul on the road to Damascus.

Rauch has accomplished something altogether remarkable with his “empirical rule.” He has eliminated much of history. How can the statement “George Washington did not believe in entangling alliances,” for example, be checked by the experiences to-day of interchangeable people? The statement appears to make inexpugnable reference to the thought of one very particular person. Should all claims to knowledge of historical statements that mention an individual’s thoughts be thrown out because of Rauch’s “empirical rule”?

Further, Rauch has not shown that all claims to superior access to truth rest on non-interchangeable experiences. What if someone is much better at reasoning things out than others? (Assume this has been confirmed by following the empirical rule). Is it all right to let *him* decide what is right?

The problems with Rauch’s assault on the Fundamentalist Principle have just begun. Why need a supporter of the principle oppose Rauch’s Liberal Principle? That is to say, why can’t someone believe *both* that those who know the truth should decide what is right and

that these ideas should stand exposed to public criticism?

Rauch’s rejoinder can easily be imagined. If someone is guaranteed to know the truth, why listen to criticism of him? What he says goes. Indeed; but this misses an elementary point. You can’t both believe that what someone says is true and that a criticism of what he says is right. But why must the former belief automatically suppress the latter? Perhaps after you hear the counterargument you will stop believing that what the oracle says is true.

Brian Tierney has shown in *The Origins of Papal Infallibility* that infallibility was used by dissident Spiritual Franciscans to criticize the Pope. Since the true Pope was infallible, but so-and-so had fallen into manifest error, *he* could not be the true Pope. Hardly what one would expect from Rauch’s historical caricature of the Middle Ages!

Whatever one thinks of the Fundamentalist Principle, though, Rauch has failed to raise a point relevant to free speech. Unless his benighted fundamentalists in some way act against those who do not

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accept the truth, why is there a problem about free speech at all? Perhaps, if Rauch is right, fundamentalists too readily believe propositions for which evidence is lacking; but unless they interfere with others who do not share their convictions, free speech lies in no danger from them.

No doubt some fundamentalists do wish to block dissent; but belief that you have the truth is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for anti-free speech measures. Not sufficient: suppose a principle one claimed to know is that free speech should not be violated. And not necessary: Rauch, who disclaims special access to the truth, seem quite willing to sweep under the rug ideas such as creationism which he thinks lack merit. Admittedly, he would not impose criminal sanctions on those who favor them: but those who profess ideas he dislikes *can* be “marginalized” and excluded from teaching positions.

But have we not been too severe with Rauch? Isn't criticism of our opinions an excellent idea? Who can reasonably object to the Liberal Principle? Who, indeed? As stated, the principle is vacuous. What constitutes effective criticism? The principle does not tell us, leaving the most strident authoritarian free to accept it. All he need do is specify acceptable criticism as he wishes: e.g., “anything that differs with what Big

Brother has said is *ipso facto* false.” Rauch has endeavored to plug this loophole with his “empirical rule,” with results we have already had occasion to see.

And a less academic point also tells against Rauch's Liberal Principle. What important group has ever disallowed criticism? Medieval Islamic theologians? The Soviet Communist Party? Both were marked by furious debates. These groups, and many others, have of course crushed some kinds of dissent; but that is a far cry from the absence of criticism that Rauch fears. Rauch might say that debate among theologians, e.g., does not meet the terms of his Liberal Principle. What he wants is criticism open to everyone, unbound by limits fixed in advance. But Rauch utterly fails to show that unlimited criticism is needed to advance truth. Why not, for all he has shown to the contrary, just enough criticism to prevent stagnation? And who is to say that an elite will necessarily fall short of this goal?

The term “fundamentalist” usually is applied to religious believers, but Rauch includes considerably more in its embrace. He has discovered a new variety of fundamentalists, those who believe that theoretical arguments conclusively show the desirability of the free market. “Another man . . . told me [Rauch] that *serious* economists knew that the minimum wage

throws poor people out of work and cuts off the bottom rung of the ladder. I mentioned that quite a lot of people, including a lot of supposedly serious economists, had concluded that the minimum wage helps people, on balance. . . . He replied that if a study shows that red is really black, it is not a credible study, or it has overlooked something” (p. 91).

I have quoted this passage at some length, as it makes clear Rauch’s own intellectual dogmatism. As everyone but Rauch knows, there is a simple but strong argument that minimum wage laws cause unemployment. If you accept the argument, and believe it renders questionable empirical studies that claim to contradict it, then, in Rauch’s view, you stand condemned as a fundamentalist.

But why is one guilty of intellectual sin if one is more reluctant than Rauch to abandon a strong theory? Rauch himself seems quite willing to dismiss accounts of “paranormal” phenomena that contravene *his* theory of how the world works (pp. 54–55). Evidently, to qualify as a believer in liberal science, you must adopt

Rauch’s opinions, giving them (no doubt within limits he would be happy to specify) just the empirical weight that he does.

It is not enough for Rauch to give us a philosophical justification for freedom. He also offers an unusual version of the history of philosophy. He holds, following Karl Popper, that the ideal state that Plato depicted in the *Republic* is totalitarian. (Never a hint, of course, that this interpretation is controversial.)

“What makes the whole massive totalitarian machine possible is the view of knowledge which undergirds it. Plato believed what so many of us instinctively believe: that the way to produce knowledge is to sit down in a quiet spot and think clearly. . . . Liberalism holds that knowledge comes only from a public process of critical exchange, in which the wise and unwise alike participate” (p. 33).

The unwary reader will conclude from this that Plato did not think criticism essential to philosophical knowledge. The very reverse is the case: the process of dialectical reasoning lies at the essence of Plato’s philosophy. Has

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Rauch ever reflected on what Plato meant by calling knowledge “justified true belief?” But since he incredibly equates Plato’s Forms with the external world, perhaps it is better that he not reflect on Plato any more at all (p. 36).

Rauch rightly protests against university speech codes, which proscribe views and expressions liable to hurt the feelings of women or assorted minority groups. Yet even his argument against those he terms Humanitarians lacks cogency. He maintains that since the purpose of a university is the advancement of knowledge, those hurt by so-called hate speech must put up with their injured feelings. This is the price of intellectual advance.

Far be it from me to defend political correctness, but why must the advancement of knowledge be accorded unconditional primacy? (I here grant for the sake of argument that complete free speech does best advance knowledge.)

What if the defender of PC willingly gives up a slight possibility of new knowledge in return for avoiding a great deal of hurt feelings? What has Rauch to say against this, other than that his “faith” in liberal science directs him to choose otherwise? The best contribution Rauch could make to freedom of thought and speech is to abandon at once further work on the subject. ❖

Come One, Come All?

ALIEN NATION: COMMON SENSE
ABOUT AMERICA'S IMMIGRATION
DISASTER

Peter Brimelow

Random House, 1995, xix + 327 pp.

The customary approach to immigration by libertarians has been a simple one. No restrictions on freedom of entry into a country (or exit from it) can be justified; as Robert Bartley’s Constitutional Amendment has it, “There shall be no borders” (p. 140). Peter Brimelow challenges this view in *Alien Nation* and in doing so raises fundamental issues of political theory.

Brimelow begins by building a *prima facie* case that current immigration to the United States does indeed pose a problem. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments, according to supporters such as Senator Edward Kennedy, intended to bring about no drastic change in the American population. Quite the contrary, the new legislation sought to remedy the alleged inequities of the 1920s national origins system. Supporters of the reform, including President Lyndon Johnson, castigated those who