**Political Civility in an Uncivil Age**

What can every American—regardless of political persuasion—agree on?

Not the classic inevitable occurrences of life (death, taxes) or the theological (the existence of God) or the inconsequential (chocolate or vanilla), but, in this divisive age, *politically?* Perhaps understanding our deep, though admittedly general agreements can promote civility, even when our specific approaches to these generalizations can be quite different from each other. If we can agree on a body of commonly-held precepts, our discussions about how to achieve goals can be more utilitarian, and less heated.

Of course there are likely outliers who might disagree with *any* list, but I’m thinking of the 90 or 95 per cent of Americans, regardless of their income, regardless of creed, race, or educational attainment, and of course, regardless of political affiliation. They may be Democrat, Republican, Populist, or Libertarian, but I suggest that most people have a shared core of general beliefs that are, at their core, observations about people as what Aristotle termed “political animals.” Imagine a Venn diagram with the aforementioned four ideological circles: what sorts of percepts are in the center?

Starting more generally gives more confidence in agreement. Perhaps this:

1—“People have rights,” and perhaps: 2—“Governments should exert their powers to protect people’s rights.”

Maybe: 3—“Human flourishing is promoted by an abundance of choices,” including, of course, one’s individual choice to restrict one’s choices.

The third maxim implies some economic goods. I think that we certainly can all agree with this statement: 4—“Abject economic deprivation is undesirable.”

Of course, we will disagree about what “abject” implies, or how extensive those rights are (are they only negative, or do they include positive goods as well?), and whether a government’s duty goes *beyond* protecting these rights. And we disagree about how to *empower* choices, and how to *promote* prosperity.

Can we get more specific? I think so.

The last several centuries suggest a number 5—“Markets tend to promote a greater amount of economic goods.”

And, speaking of goods, 6—“Economic goods, particularly if defined narrowly, are not the only goods most people value.”

Here’s one on the principle of subsidiarity that reflects the dispersed knowledge that individuals typically possess: 7—“Most problems should be solved at the lowest possible level, whenever possible.” We can (and will!) argue what’s possible, of course.

Getting even more specific: 8—“It is better to solve problems peacefully, using persuasion rather than coercion, if possible.” One reason #8 is true is because of number 9—“Efforts to impose an undesired conformity of thought or action will often cause resentment.” Perhaps “often” is even too weak? Either way, this well-intentioned meddling may lead to #10—“Imposed equality of any sort will usually limit freedoms, and an abundance of freedoms will generally lead to greater diversity.” We may think the increase in equality is worth the loss of freedom, or we may either cherish all sorts of diversity or worry about the unraveling of society or fret about large disparities in income or wealth that freedom brings, but regardless, it seems to me that history tends to validate each of these generalizations.

I’ll stop here, quite sure I’ve missed many important areas of consensus. But these ten shared—well, what are they? Values, certainly, along with goals, observations, and insights. Whatever we call them, when we next debate our immigration policy, or what to do with escalating levels of student debt, or the insolvency of the Social Security system, we perhaps can look at our opponents, and they at us, and each remind the other that we do, in fact, share foundational precepts, and listen with civility to each individual’s attempts to make our shared world a better place.