Three sides to every story?: Kling's model is a major addition to the political science toolkit

Ian Cameron April 2 2013 _____

Professor Arnold Kling gave the world a rather mixed gift through his blog in December: his three-axes model for understanding the progressive, libertarian, and conservative ideologies. The implications of the model and the discussions that it makes possible are huge, and it could very reasonably become part of the standard curriculum for political science and similar fields.

Kling, a wearer of many hats but most recently an adjunct scholar of the libertarian Cato Institute, refined the three ideologies to one idea: that those subscribing to each ideology view politics along separate axes. The progressive axis is from oppressed to oppressors; that is, they view events as a dynamic of oppression. The conservative axis goes from civilization to barbarism, and the libertarian axis is between free choice and coercion.

There are many ways to extract value from this model. Possibly the most important implication it offers is that there is no correct ideology, but rather all ideologies vary between being correct and incorrect depending on the situation. This is a lesson sorely missing from standard political science education, which tends to orbit whichever ideology the professor subscribes to without addressing ideology head-on. Not all negative situations are the result of oppression, nor are they always the result of a slide to barbarism, or the result of coercion clamping down freedom.

Each of these three ideologies can be seen under the model as being independent and not related; the axes do not intersect, as they are incompatible concepts. Kling notes that part of the value of understanding the three-axes model is in being able to anticipate how these ideologies work and what they demand. If progressives propose a solution to a problem, they should be aware of what the deficiencies of their solution will appear to be from conservative and libertarian perspectives, and they should address those deficiencies for their critics.

Not only that, but hostility to other ideologies is implicitly discouraged, because under the model, different axes are similar to different languages. There are obviously not superior or inferior languages, and given that there are many popular incompatible languages, it makes more sense to translate between them than to condemn some in favor of others.

When someone subscribes to one of these ideologies, they will often exaggerate to better fit issues to their own axis. Conservatives, for example, will find that the threats to civilization are severe in many situations because this is their axis of comfort, and they don't necessarily consider whether coercion or oppression are more appropriate to worry about.

Kling is clearly a libertarian, but that should not be used to disqualify his model, for it is very useful, regardless of its origin. The model is certainly not stacked in a pro-libertarian way, and many situations fit one axis best.

But to see the value of the model, consider choosing a recent political event that generated partisan arguments and trying to extract the three axes from it. What is the possible narrative of oppression, barbarism, or coercion? Why are progressives not understanding conservatives and libertarians distancing themselves from both?

Understanding how these ideologies typically work is the first step for those who seek to step outside of them. Being free of ideology is a noble aspiration that many claim to have, but if they have not challenged their own logic against something like the three-axes model, such claims have no strength; how can you say you are free of ideology if you lack a basic understanding of what ideology is?

Obviously, every part of this article owes a major debt to Professor Kling, and he expounds upon the model in far more depth across many well-reasoned posts on his blog. The brilliance of the model merited an introduction and primer of sorts, and I hope that in that respect I have not failed it.

No doubt, the three-axes model will outlive Kling because the framework is adaptable to any new ideologies that may arise