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The Disenchantment Of Secular Discourse



Synopsis

Prominent observers complain that public discourse in America is shallow and unedifying. This debased condition is often attributed to, among other things, the resurgence of religion in public life. Steven Smith argues that this diagnosis has the matter backwards: it is not primarily religion but rather the strictures of secular rationalism that have drained our modern discourse of force and authenticity. Thus, Rawlsian "public reason" filters appeals to religion or other "comprehensive doctrines" out of public deliberation. But these restrictions have the effect of excluding our deepest normative commitments, virtually assuring that the discourse will be shallow. Furthermore, because we cannot defend our normative positions without resorting to convictions that secular discourse deems inadmissible, we are frequently forced to smuggle in those convictions under the guise of benign notions such as freedom or equality. Smith suggests that this sort of smuggling is pervasive in modern secular discourse. He shows this by considering a series of controversial, contemporary issues, including the Supreme Court's assisted-suicide decisions, the "harm principle," separation of church and state, and freedom of conscience. He concludes by suggesting that it is possible and desirable to free public discourse of the constraints associated with secularism and "public reason."

Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; First Edition edition (June 1, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674050878

ISBN-13: 978-0674050877

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,086,442 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #21 in [Books > Law > Health & Medical Law > Right to Die](#) #21 in [Books > Law > Estate Planning > Living Wills](#) #239 in [Books > Reference > Etiquette > Conversation](#)

Customer Reviews

Smith diagnoses the place where public discourse finds itself today, locked in an iron cage of secularist assumptions, hypocritically smuggling in non-secular first principles, and zealously policing the borders to prevent anything with the whiff of religion from entering into public

discussion. According to Smith the result has been a break-down of the ability to engage in public discussions because of the loss of confidence in reason. Smith's first chapter - "The Way We Talk Now" - surveys the current landscape. It seems that the consistent opinion of philosopher and public intellectuals is that modern secular discourse is particularly shallow and ineffective in its modern iteration. The ineffectiveness of modern discourse stems in part from a lack of confidence by many people that reason can actually work, i.e., do the things it is supposed to do, such as lead people to the truth. Significantly, this view is held by secularist intellectuals, who ought to be the people with the biggest incentive to see discourse as effective and rational. The result is that many public discussions are not discussions. They are just people rehearsing their statements of their own commitments to something or other. As Smith says: "There is indeed a good deal of contention, Dworkin might respond - a good deal of sound and fury, or noisy clash of opinion. Even so, there is precious little real argument, strictly speaking - little genuine debate. Because if you look closely at what people say, they do not really engage their opponents, or even reveal the real bases for their own positions; they merely dress up their pre-established conclusions in verbiage. People may look like they are engaged in debate. They may even think they are engaging in debate."

Excellent analysis and critique; solution rather bland, as the author himself admits. But the critique is so effective that I still must award the book 5 stars. (And I enjoyed his gentle humor and easygoing writing style.) The real strength of this critique, in my mind, is that Smith bothered to search out what leading secularists in the liberal tradition (and here I speak of the kind of liberal that All Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, generally are) actually said at the highest levels of academic discourse and jurisprudence. As a law professor, his mining of court opinions on euthanasia was particularly valuable. That leg-work demonstrated his thesis that even the most ardent secularists smuggle metaphysical and/or theological assumptions into the iron cage of secular discourse (a concept similar to Charles Taylor's immanent frame). Smith also spent time critiquing renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum's viciously circular "he says" justification for human rights. And he offered a valuable critique of scientism, drawing from Joseph Vining (The Song Sparrow and the Child: Claims of Science and Humanity), namely that while evolution may provide an explanation for morality, it doesn't seem to be one that scientists themselves personally believe with consistency. Scientists do not act as if we all live in a closed system of material causes. This brief summary demonstrates, I think, that Smith was not critiquing no-name lightweights or picking odd, extraneous issues. I have written a much longer review article about this book that I hope to publish elsewhere, but I want to share one conclusion

for the community (and for both of the readers of my blog).

Thank you for writing such an interesting and timely book. I have been thinking about the limits on public discourse since the mid-1970's when I could see the range of topics which could be discussed in language reflecting deep human experience became more and more limited. I am a relatively old guy (69) who was born and raised in a world where people lived through and survived the Great Depression and World War II. There was a more shared common experience and language which tapped into most people's deeply shared world views. Those deeply shared views had a greater emphasis on belief and the idea that we were all in this together. Hardly anyone made it through the Great Depression and WWII without losing something or someone important to them and who also were helped out in one way or another by their family, neighbors and community. Those ideas and experiences were reflected in our common language and were an important part of public policy discussions. I think that common experience and language was captured perfectly when John F. Kennedy gave his inaugural address in 1961. The language/rhetoric he used and embodied caught the imagination of many people, including myself. It was a peak of common language and aspirations which has not been approached since then, though it was somewhat captured by the Presidential campaign of Barack Obama. I have been involved in public life since the early 1960's. I have successful experience in government, business, and community leadership. But very interestingly, and I think unnoticed by many, except the author, is that the language and discourse necessary to be successful in all of those areas has changed significantly over the last 50 years.

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