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# Political Functionalism

## An alternative to liberal and conservative

*by Stever Robbins*

**Note: This is a work in progress. Expect it to change and evolve over time. Later versions may even contradict earlier versions, as this document may reflect later learning, input from others, etc.**

I was on a radio show this morning, after which I ended up talking with the host of the next show, a super-arch-conservative. There was a big discussion about the evil of labels, after which he suggested he'd like to know if I'm "liberal" or "conservative." I elected to opt out of the label game and gave a label of my own devising: I'm a political functionalist. Little did I realize that I really meant something by that!

Political Functionalism is an approach to political issues. It's an alternative to the labels "Liberal" and "Conservative." A functionalist can be a Democrat, a Republican, or a Green Party member. **Functionalists bond not by sharing opinions about what policies they want implemented, rather they share a commitment to a common process for evaluating and setting policy.** Functionalists seek to understand the function a policy is designed to fill and then explore and design the policy to insure the policy will, indeed, fulfill that function.

## Underlying beliefs of Political Functionalism

(Much of this mindset corresponds to what would be called a "learning organization")

- we align around process, not around positions. High-quality decision-making and policy-setting is most important. When positions disagree, we return to the process to find alignment
- it's important to keep a clear distinction between the means and the ends of a policy, and maintain that distinction throughout the life of an initiative, otherwise learning can't occur
- successful policies and systems reflect that we live in a complex, interconnected world
- avoiding self-deception and confronting the truth, even when we don't want to hear it, allows us the greatest chance to take steps to shape our future
- it's OK to make mistakes, and thoughtful learning from mistakes should be integrated into future decisions
- science, systems theory, statistics, and the use of empirical evidence from other times and places are critical to making intelligent policy and shaping our future (and we won't ignore them when we don't like the results)

- there's more than science. Sometimes policy will be set for emotional, ethical, or moral reasons, even in the face of contradictory science/evidence.
- we take honest responsibility for our decisions and the criteria and process used to make them
- collective action problems are among the trickiest and most important issues to be faced in making policy and deciding our own behavior
- rights are not possible without responsibilities, and we acknowledge that there are times we must be asked to take on responsibilities in order to guarantee our rights

## **We align on process, not position**

Political functionalists may disagree on positions. One may favor gun control, while another opposes it. What we agree on, however, is that we will consider the functional, systemic, scientific, moral, and ethical ramifications of our policy decisions. So when we disagree, we can return to a discussion of facts, feelings, science, morality, and long-term systemic consequences to find agreement.

Sometimes, we'll disagree just because we value things differently. Imagine a report showing that eliminating income taxes results in lowered quality of life. Two PFs read the report, and also recognize they emotionally hate paying income tax and really would feel much freer if they didn't have to write that check. One PF may vote to eliminate taxes. The other may vote to keep taxes.

Both PFs will frame the decision as "lower quality of life vs. emotional distaste for income taxes." One will say emotional distaste for taxes is more important than quality of life. The other will say quality of life is more important than emotionally distasteful taxes.

Notice that's very different issue from the two PFs disagreeing on the validity of the report. If the validity of the report is at question, PFs will seek to obtain better data before making a decision (or will recognize explicitly that the decision is being made in the absence of data). They will recognize that disagreement about data validity is very different from disagreement about values.

## **We keep distinguishing means from ends**

Most political and social goals these days are "means" goals, and we've largely forgotten the "ends" they were designed to reach. For example, taxes might be raised to fund a social program to reduce crime. When the program has no effect, the tax hike and program remain (or at least the tax hike remains), and becomes disconnected from the original end goal of reducing crime.

- we believe this confusion of means and ends happens in fiscal, defense, social, civic, and economic policy

- we seek to recover the original desired end results by asking of all policies and proposals “Why do we wish to do this? What good do we believe it will bring? What *function* does this policy/proposal hope to fill in society?”
- when a policy is no longer fulfilling its original end goals, we explicitly use the learning to inform future policy
- we freely terminate failed policies and redeploy the resources to new experiments or new end goals

## **Our policies reflect a complex, interconnected world**

We seek to understand the larger system in which our goals reside and design/choose/support policies that take that larger system into account. The policies are chosen endorsing several key systems principles:

- every policy and program will have unintended consequences
- the more policies can be designed to fulfill multiple needs, possibly in vastly diverse spheres, the better those policies are
- policies that preserve the integrity and long-term viability of the system (long-term defined as seven generations or more) are preferred over policies that produce local maximums at the expense of long-term overall health
- when we choose a local maximum in the belief that we’ll someday orient to a long-term maximum (“sure, we use oil now, but we have 300 years’ supply left”), we make provisions *now* to begin developing the long-term solution rather than assuming the fundamental solution will magically happen
- more and more, the system we must consider is the global system. We are especially wary of policies that appear to be good for one group to the detriment of the world health. (For example, permanently destroying rain forests for one-time mining gains.)

## **We tell the truth, even when we don’t like it**

We recognize the truth even when we don’t like it. It’s a natural, well-established defense mechanism to lie to ourselves about what’s happening when we encounter situations that contradict our beliefs. In a world where one red button can destroy the planet, we must develop the ability to face the truth, even if it goes against what we want to believe.

The Bush Administration recently asked (the EPA?) to strike references to increases in global warming from certain reports and policies. If global warming is an important issue for (the EPA?), we tell the truth about that, even if we choose not to deal.

## **It's OK to make mistakes and learn from them**

We recognize that policies won't always achieve their end goals. Decisions aren't always right. People are human and can behave inconsistently. While we certainly wish everything worked perfectly, we recognize that we'll make lots of mistakes. Rather than condemning mistakes, we will explicitly learn from them so we can do better next time.

If bussing doesn't work to raise the education levels of minority students, we'll won't roll out a dozen new bussing programs to keep from having to admit the program didn't work. We'll stop the program and try something else.

## **Science, statistics, and empirical evidence matter**

We consider scientific results, statistics, and hard data valuable input to policy-making, even when the data contradicts our a priori desired beliefs or policies. Many controversial policy discussions vastly de-emphasize data and instead play on pure emotion. Abortion, free trade, gays in the military, gun control, supply-side economics are all based in beliefs that can be studied. For example, "if you enforce gun control, it will have no effect on crime" can be tested. Studies can be done on communities and societies with different gun control policies to discover the effects of gun ownership policies.

Political functionalists do our best to inform our decisions with data, statistics, and observation. Of course, we also recognize that it's a well-established result of psychology that simply knowing we're blinded by our beliefs doesn't make us any better at overcoming that blindness.

## **Science is fallible and not the final word**

Decisions have ethical, factual, and moral components that are as important as the numbers. We don't blindly say "Science says X, so we will pursue X." We may adopt policy for emotional reasons, not scientific reasons. In these cases, however, we are explicit about the tradeoff and stand by our choices. Political fundamentalists recognize when they're choosing to follow their beliefs rather than science.

An example of political functionalism: a study was undertaken by the Federal Government that found one out of three successful youth suicides was due to gay and lesbian teens taking their lives over sexuality-related troubles. Louis Sullivan, Secretary of Health and Human Services under the Reagan administration, was practicing functionalism when he explicitly decided to ignore this report and wrote his Oct 13, 1989 memo to William Dannemeyer:

"As we discussed, that report was commissioned and written during the previous Administration. Moreover, I want to reemphasize that the views expressed in the paper entitled "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide" do not in any way represent my personal beliefs or the policy of this Department.

Indeed, I am strongly committed to advancing traditional family values. Federal policies must be crafted with great care so as to strengthen rather than undermine the institution of the family. In my opinion, the views expressed in the paper run contrary to that aim.”

## **We take honest responsibility for our decisions**

When we choose to give statistical or scientific evidence less weight than emotional, moral, or religious reasoning, we’re honest and up-front about it. We don’t disguise moral, ethical, or emotional reasoning as science. For example, mid-80s “trickle-down” economic policy was framed as “supply-side economics,” despite having no foundation in or support from any branch of economics<sup>1</sup>. If we make policy based on emotion, we present our policy as an emotion-driven policy and don’t invent pseudoscience to justify it.

Especially when it comes to the natural world, sometimes actions have consequences that we don’t like. For example, there’s consensus in the scientific community that our actions can result in global warming. Rather than try to argue that SUVs somehow have no effect on the environment, we consciously own our decision to drive an SUV while recognizing that it is contributing to global warming.

## **We understand and address collective action issues**

- We are aware of and understand collective action problems (the “Tragedy of the Commons” and the “Prisoners Dilemma”) that markets fail to handle and do what we can to contribute to helping others understand the nature of those problems.
- We aren’t proposing to engage in meaningless hardship in the name of a cause unless that hardship will make a real difference in the message or the underlying issue. Basically, this means we won’t give up our microwave to help control pollution unless we believe it will inspire enough other people will do it so that our sacrifice results in a real solution.
- Due to the nature of collective action problems, we recognize that collective action problems are solved only through setting/changing cultural norms or external intervention (e.g. government intervention or self-regulation).

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1. “Peddling Prosperity: Economic Sense and Nonsense in an Age of Diminished Expectations,” Paul Krugman, 1995

### ***Collective action problems: a discussion of the prisoner's dilemma<sup>1</sup>***

Tanya and Cinque have been arrested for robbing the Hibernia Savings Bank and placed in separate isolation cells. Both care much more about their personal freedom than about the welfare of their accomplice. A clever prosecutor makes the following offer to each. "You may choose to confess or remain silent. If you confess and your accomplice remains silent I will drop all charges against you and use your testimony to ensure that your accomplice does serious time. Likewise, if your accomplice confesses while you remain silent, they will go free while you do the time. If you both confess I get two convictions, but I'll see to it that you both get early parole. If you both remain silent, I'll have to settle for token sentences on firearms possession charges. If you wish to confess, you must leave a note with the jailer before my return tomorrow morning."

The "dilemma" faced by the prisoners here is that, whatever the other does, each is better off confessing than remaining silent. But the outcome obtained when both confess is worse for each than the outcome they would have obtained had both remained silent. A common view is that the puzzle illustrates a conflict between individual and group rationality. A group whose members pursue rational self-interest may all end up worse off than a group whose members act contrary to rational self-interest. More generally, if the payoffs are not assumed to represent self-interest, a group whose members rationally pursue any goals may all meet less success than if they had not rationally pursued their goals individually.

### ***Tragedy of the Commons and Free Riders***

"The Tragedy of the Commons" is a similar collective action problem. . A town has a common area for cows to graze, with enough grass for 100 cows. Every farmer makes the same calculation: "If I bring two cows to the commons, it will barely make a dent in the commons and it will double my income for the year." The farmers bring 200 cows, the commons is overgrazed in an instant, and everyone loses.

### ***Problems of a "collective action" nature***

**Pollution.** Each individual polluter gets great benefit from polluting and does a tiny amount of total damage. When 250 million people do that same calculation, the resulting pollution is dangerous to all.

**Advertising.** Every company wants their message to be heard. The advantage to running one more ad, or one louder ad, or one more SPAM campaign is great, and it doesn't increase the overall noise level very much. When everyone uses that logic, however, consumers get overloaded and start ignoring more ads, leading to even higher levels of intrusion.

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1. Kuhn, Steven, "Prisoner's Dilemma", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2003 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2003/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>.



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**Taxes and common expenditures.** Everyone wants to pay fewer taxes, or only pay for those public services they use. Yet some expenditures like police forces, defense, highways, sewage infrastructure, medical plans, etc. automatically benefit everyone or they are so expensive that they require communal funding. If everyone opts for lower taxes, then services vital to a community's well-being get cut, to everyone's detriment. In the last forty years, Conservatives have considered common expenditures on social and environmental programs to be wasted money, while liberals have considered common expenditures on defense and business subsidies to be wasted money. (Oddly, neither group's politicians considers money spent on their own salaries and pet projects to be wasted money.)

## **We consider responsibilities as well as rights**

People (at least in America) have grown very fond of their rights in the early part of the 21st century. But the word "responsibility" rarely crops up, unless in the context, "it is their responsibility to [do something for me/protect my rights]." Functionalists recognize that responsibilities are as much a part of the nature of community as rights. Often, rights carry attendant responsibilities. For example, the right to free speech carries the responsibility not to yell "Fire" in a crowded theater to cause a panic.

## **OUR BASIC BELIEFS**

- All people are created uniquely, and all should be given equal opportunity to realize their dreams.
- We should approach the task of setting policy this way: Imagine that before your birth, you could set the rules for everything—how money gets distributed, how food gets distributed, how economies work, how families work, etc. The only thing you can't determine is your birth. You may be born any race, any gender, any sexual orientation, any religion, etc. So design well.

We seek to create a world where *that* is the attitude of our leaders.