

References

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My Most Regretted Statements

Jon Elster⁷

[Editor's note: Upon receiving the invitation to contribute to the present symposium, Jon Elster responded by noting that in his published work he had illustrated defective belief formation by sharing some of his own regrets about his own past statements. He kindly authorized us to reproduce the following passages, as part of the symposium.⁸]

Because it is often easy to detect the operation of motivated belief formation in others, we tend to disbelieve the conclusions reached in this way, without pausing to see whether the evidence might in fact justify them. Until around 1990 I believed, with most of my friends, that on a scale of evil from 0 to 10 (the worst), Communism scored around 7 or 8. Since the recent revelations I believe that 10 is the appropriate number. The reason for my misperception of the evidence was not an idealistic belief that Communism was a worthy ideal that had been betrayed by actual Communists. In that case, I would simply have been victim of wishful thinking or self-deception. Rather, I was misled by the hysterical character of those who claimed all along that Communism scored 10. My ignorance of their claims was not entirely irrational. On average, it makes sense to discount the claims of the manifestly hysterical. Yet even hysterics can be right, albeit for the wrong reasons. Because I sensed and still believe that many of these fierce anti-Communists would

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8. The sources for the three passages are Elster 2015, 125 n.11; Elster 2015, 475; and Elster 2000, ix.

have said the same regardless of the evidence, I could not believe that what they said did in fact correspond to the evidence. I made the mistake of thinking of them as a clock that is always one hour late rather than as a broken clock that shows the right time twice a day. Later, I made the same mistake about members of the ecology movement.

Scholars sometimes go wrong because of the strong tendency of all human beings to find meaning and order in the world, causing them to search for agency, objective teleology, and analogy. ... [I]t seems appropriate, in a chapter where I criticize other scholars, to recount some of my own failings. On three occasions in the 1970s, I fell victim to the lure of analogy, and perhaps also of teleology. In a book in Norwegian from 1971, I drew a parallel between the impossibility of predicting technical change and Gödel's incompleteness theorem. When a logician colleague at my university raised his eyebrows, I realized the foolishness of the analogy. In a book in French from 1975, I approvingly cited Jacques Lacan's analogy between Marx's concept of surplus-value (*Mebrwert*) and Freud's concept of surplus-pleasure (*Mehr von Lust*). I did not need help to quickly realize how stupid that comparison was. In a book from 1979, I claimed that the system of periodic elections without the possibility of recalling representatives "can be interpreted [as] the electorate's method of binding itself and of protecting itself against its own impulsiveness." Needless to say, no electorate ever did anything of the kind. In that case, the flaw in my reasoning may have been due either to a misplaced analogy between individual and collective self-binding or to objective teleology. In getting rid of my confusion, I was assisted by a history professor who told me bluntly, "In politics, people never try to bind themselves, only to bind others." An irony is that I proposed this "interpretation" in a book, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, which among other things was a crusade against functionalist explanations.

Chapter II [of *Ulysses Unbound*] reflects a change in my view about *constitutions* as precommitment devices. I have been much influenced by a critical comment on *Ulysses and the Sirens* by my friend and mentor, the late Norwegian historian Jens Arup Seip: "In politics, people never try to bind themselves, only to bind others." Although that statement is too stark, I now think it is closer to the truth than the view that that self-binding is the essence of constitution-making. Ulysses bound *himself* to the mast, but he also put wax in the ears of the rowers.

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My Methodological Flip-Flop on Individual Liberty

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I have always been a small-government thinker. At the most general level, that position is captured in Aaron Director's maxim that the laissez-faire system starts from the assumption that government intervention is an evil until it is proved to be a good. As a general rule of thumb, this proposition is hard to beat. But as a guide to individual decisions, it does not tell you when or why that presumption should be overcome. One obvious area involves the commission of torts by one person against another. At least in the simple cases of trespass—the direct application of force by one person to the body or property of another—the presumption against legal intervention seems to be overcome. But it is important to understand just how far this kind of exception runs. It is easy to invent indirect-harm cases, as every legal system from Roman law to the present has done, in which a defendant is held responsible for setting hidden traps or supplying poison to someone else who in ignorance ingests it. It takes only a little more imagination for

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