

Moral Issues with the Campaign of Bernie Sanders (20170315)

By Alonzo Fyfe

In 2020, we will be searching for a new President. Some people view Bernie Sanders in the 2016 campaign as an ideal candidate and will be looking for somebody like him in the next election. However, they are overlooking some significant moral failings. In the next election, people should be looking for a candidate that would be superior to Sanders in three significant ways.

- (1) Shows more respect for empirical data and the findings of science.
- (2) Refrains from using tribal "us" versus "them" scapegoating and, better yet, condemns the practice as something bad in itself.
- (3) Shows an interest in the effects of policies on the global poor – at least showing some reluctance to make them worse off so as to provide benefits to people who already have substantially more wealth and income.

These are areas where Sanders fell short.

The reader can take these criticisms in one of two ways.

In this article, I wish to examine the Sanders campaign, identify these errors and show how to recognize them, and explain the reasons we have to seek a better candidate.

One can take these as reasons to reject Sanders and his ideology – and to look elsewhere for political leadership that does not contain these flaws. Or, one can take these as suggestions for reform – as a list of ways in which Sanders' political movement can reform and improve itself. In this latter option, while there are those who worship Sanders as something like a divine prophet, he is human, and capable of error. This suggests three possible locations in which one can find error.

I would argue that this distinction really does not matter. There is a puzzle that asks one to imagine a ship, in which workers replace various parts as they age, until every piece of the ship is replaced. The puzzle asks the question, "Is this the same ship?" The answer I am offering here is, "It does not matter. If one needs a plank that needs replacing, then one should replace it. What matters is having a quality ship to sail. What that ship is called should not be an overriding concern.

Below, I identify three planks that need to be replaced.

A Disregard for Facts

Quality candidates get their views on scientific matters from scientists, not from their political ideology. Yet, Bernie Sanders' attitude towards scientific facts showed a disturbing disposition to embrace science where it fit comfortably with his ideology, and reject science that did not come to the "correct" conclusions. He showed what are statistically liberal anti-scientific attitudes regarding fracking, nuclear power, genetically modified foods, and alternative medicines.

One way to determine if a candidate's views on a matter of science is based more on political ideology than on scientific understanding is if the candidate holds an all-or-nothing view on such a matter.

In the 2016 Democratic Primary campaign, Sanders offered as a point of pride that he was against fracking in all instances.¹ This suggests that there is no set of evidence that he is willing to listen to in support of the conclusion that fracking can be done efficiently anywhere – including places that are far removed from human habitation and under geological conditions where we can know beyond a reasonable doubt that the risks are minimal. Nor does it allow for the study of new technologies that might improve safe usefulness the techniques.

We can imagine somebody claiming that, because there are instances in which x-ray radiation is harmful, that the use of x-rays must always be prohibited. Yet, this would have denied us of a great many benefits – particularly in medicine but also with respect to such things as inspecting pipelines and buildings – where x-rays are used to advantage.

We can imagine somebody claiming that because the injection of substances into the body is generally harmful, that all instances of injecting substances into the body shall be prohibited. Yet, this would deny us the benefits of vaccines and intra-venous medical treatments.

The only time when a political candidate should give us an all-or-nothing answer to a question is when the activity is *malum in se* or “bad in itself” – such as slavery, torture, or the abuse of a child. These are examples of activities which, even if they prove beneficial to certain interests, ought not to be done. Fracking is not *malum in se*. It is something that there is reason to allow where it is safe, and to research in order to improve its safety.

In saying that some things are “bad in themselves”, I am not saying that they are intrinsically bad – since there is no such thing. In this context, “bad in themselves” mean that they are things towards which we have many and strong reasons to promote a strong aversion – to cause people to dislike doing for their own sake even if they think they could do some good by it. We have reasons to build a community that share a common dislike and disapproval of certain types of acts such as the abuse of children, violence against the innocent including physical assault and rape, exploitation, breaking promises, and a failure to repay debts. Even here, it may be necessary to do such an act if the consequences are important enough – but they should always be reluctantly done, even then.

This is in contrast to things that are bad in virtue of their consequences or effects. For something that is bad in virtue of their effects, if we remove the bad effects (which it is at least hypothetically possible to do) we can remove the reason not to perform the action.

On the issue of nuclear power, Sanders said that he would not support building more nuclear power plants “when we do not know how to get rid of the toxic waste from the ones that already exist”.²

There is a possible way to get rid of the toxic waste. It is through the development of a travelling wave reactor. A travelling wave reactor would consume the spent fuel from current conventional reactors.

A traveling-wave reactor (TWR) is a type of nuclear fission reactor that can convert fertile material into usable fuel through nuclear transmutation, in tandem with the burnup of fissile material. TWRs differ from other kinds of fast-neutron and breeder

¹ Yamiche Alcindor, “Bernie Sanders Proposes Fracking Ban and Attacks Hillary Clinton on the Environment”, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/11/bernie-sanders-proposes-fracking-ban-and-attacks-hillary-clinton-on-the-environment/>, *New York Times*, August 11, 2016, accessed 02/20/2017.

² Charles Strozier and Kelly Berkell, “The Curious Politics of Global Warming and Nuclear Power,” *Huffington Post*, November 30, 2015, accessed 02/19/2017.

*reactors in their ability to use fuel efficiently without uranium enrichment or reprocessing, instead directly using depleted uranium, natural uranium, thorium, spent fuel removed from light water reactors, or some combination of these materials.*³

This, then, represents another characteristic that one would find in a candidate that embraces science. Such a candidate would express an issue such as nuclear power, not in terms of absolute prohibitions or permissions, but in terms of, “here are the problems we need to solve.” Perhaps such a problem will never be solved, but understanding these problems is the first step in identifying where one should be putting research dollars in the hopes that, someday, they can be solved.

TerraPower is working with the Chinese government for permission to build a prototype travelling wave reactor.⁴

Bernie Sanders supported labelling genetically modified food.⁵ In this, he ignored the claims of a clear majority of scientists that genetically modified foods are safe.

One can make the claim that people have a right to know what they are eating. However, there is only so much room on a food label, and there is a need to determine which information is useful and which is not. For example, we could include information about the astrological sign of the CEO of the company that packaged the food and defend that on the grounds of the peoples' right to know.

There is only so much room on a label, and so much information to put there. When the government insists on certain pieces of information, it communicates to the people that this information is important – and that they should be basing their information on what to eat based on this data. In the case of GMOs, this assumption of relevance is simply false.

A politician who respects scientific fact over political prejudice would make scientific fact the primary concern for what goes on a label, and not turn food labels into marketing platforms for every nonsense idea that comes out.

Sanders has also shown deeper respect to political ideology over scientific fact with respect to alternative medicine. As Time Magazine reported:

*From linking sexual abstinence to cancer to blaming disease on the "ails of society," Sanders has sometimes professed opinions on health as alternative as his political ideas. He penned essays in his twenties arguing that sexual repression causes cancer in women, and suggested through his late forties that the disease has psychosomatic causes.*⁶

³ Wikipedia, “Travelling Wave Reactor”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traveling_wave_reactor, accessed 02/19/2019.

⁴ Nuclear Engineering International, “China to support US travelling wave reactor,” <http://www.neimagazine.com/news/newschina-to-support-us-travelling-wave-reactor-4680016>, September 25, 2015, accessed 02/20/2017.

⁵ “Sanders Statement on GMO Labeling Legislation”, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-statement-on-gmo-labeling-legislation>, March 16, 2016, accessed 02/20/2017.

⁶ Sam Frizell, “Bernie Sanders’ Long History with Alternative Medicine,” *Time*, <http://time.com/4249034/bernie-sanders-alternative-medicine-cancer/> March 6, 2016, accessed 02/19/2017.

Sanders' views have changed over time. However, according to the same article, he was continuing to advocate that government tax dollars be spent on alternative medicines rather than focusing the use of limited government funds for helping veterans on treatments that actually work.

Sanders also sponsored a bill in the Senate in 2013 that would have increased access for veterans to alternative medicine by increasing funding for alternative medicine research and allow veterans' health care to cover alternative forms of healthcare.

It is important to recognize that these deviations from a scientific understanding of the world are not random. These represent areas where liberals tend to be anti-science, suggesting that Sanders' own attitudes are founded on political ideology. He is judging the merits of the science according to whether it generates conclusions that traditional liberals like.

If he does not understand or respect the science concerning these issues, then it is quite reasonable to expect that he does not understand or respect science on the issues that he gets right. On the matter of climate change, for example, we can suspect that Sanders does not end up on the correct side of this issue because he understands and respects the scientific findings, but because, in this case, scientific truth accidentally lines up with his liberal prejudices.

An ideal candidate would let scientific understanding determine his views on policy issues, and reject the practice of letting political ideology dictate his acceptance or rejection of scientific conclusions.

Bigotry

Much of the suffering that humans have endured – that humans have inflicted on each other – over the centuries has involved the use of derogatory overgeneralizations. They have involved adopting an “us” versus “them” mindset where “us” are virtuous and noble and only suffer due to the injustice of others, and “them” are villains worthy of contempt whose main goal in life is to benefit themselves at the expense of “us”.

Here is an illustration from history. On May 21, 1856, before the Civil War, a gang of pro-slavery guerrillas attacked Lawrence Kansas. They killed nobody in the town, but they destroyed some buildings and terrorized the anti-slavery citizens of the town. In retaliation, an abolitionist named John Brown (the same John Brown who tried to capture the federal armory at Harper's Ferry one year later) rounded up and murdered five pro-slavery Kansans. His victims were not a part of the original raid and had committed no crime. He killed them, not because of anything they had done, but because of what some other pro-slavery citizens in Kansas had done. For no crime of their own, Brown and his followers decided that they deserved to die. Brown and his followers kidnapped them from their farms and hacked them to pieces with swords.

Hitler's Holocaust, and the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II are additional examples of “us” versus “them” thinking leading to injustice. The Thirty-Years War that depopulated whole parts of Europe, the Crusades, and many of the terrorist attacks of recent years – including the 9/11 attacks – were carried out by people who thought that all of “them” were the enemy and, thus, deserved to die. President Trump's anti-immigration and anti-Muslim policies are modern examples of this type of prejudice and this type of injustice.

Bernie Sanders' main campaign message was also an example of “us” versus “them” demagoguery.

Where Trump targeted immigrants and Muslims. Sanders targeted millionaires and billionaires. In the same way that Trump started his campaign in claiming that he intended to champion regular Americans in a battle against Mexican “rapists and murderers”, Sanders began his campaign by announcing that the enemy was “billionaires”.

*Today, we stand here and say loudly and clearly that; "Enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACs and their lobbyists."*⁷

The general form of this message says, "There is a group of people – 'Them' or 'The Other' – who are malevolent and powerful – who are responsible for all of your ills. You would have had the life you deserve, a good life, if not for the evils inflicted on you by 'Them'. 'Them' are the enemy. Elect me, and I will deal with 'Them'. I will go after 'Them' as one would attack an enemy. And when I win – when I am victorious – you can enjoy the quality of life you deserve without interference from 'Them'."

Like all forms of bigotry, Sanders' message fails to distinguish among the different kinds of people that make up the group "billionaires". It fails to recognize that there are people in this group such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett who are not only doing good things with their money, they are doing far more good with far less money than the federal government could hope to perform. Putting their business skills to work, these billionaires look for ways to do the most good with each dollar.

Currently, Sanders is criticizing President Trump's cabinet on the grounds that those who he has nominated are wealthy.

*"I guess they have a few poor millionaires on it, but, mostly, it is billionaires," Sanders told CBS' "Face the Nation." "And this is coming from a candidate for president, Mr. Trump, who told us he was going to take on the establishment. Well, maybe I am not seeing something here, but you don't appoint the head of ExxonMobil to be secretary of state. That is not quite taking on the establishment."*⁸

There are many things about Donald Trump's cabinet that one can criticize. However, to criticize them merely because of the size of their bank account represents a type of *argumentum ad hominem*. He is rejecting these people because of a property of the person and saying that we can dismiss their views on the relevant issues based on these personal facts alone.

This is comparable to criticizing a cabinet made up mostly of women or Hispanics on the grounds that they are women or Hispanics, without regard to the specific qualities and views of those individuals.

Let us consider, for example, a cabinet in which Bill Gates was named the Secretary of Health and Human Services, or one that puts his wife Melinda Gates in as the Secretary of Education. Both of these people have developed significant knowledge and contacts in the medical and education fields as a result of their charitable activities. They have set up an institution dedicated to doing as much good for people as possible with the limited resources at their disposal. This gives us at least some preliminary reasons to believe they could fill these positions quite well.

Similarly, we can entertain the possibility of having Elon Musk serving as the Secretary of Energy.

These moves would significantly increase the net worth of even the Trump cabinet. Yet, the fact that they are wealthy itself bears no relation to the question of whether they can do these jobs effectively. Their wealth may have given them an opportunity to become involved in and understand these policy areas, but it is still their understanding that determines their qualifications, not their wealth.

⁷ Bernie Sanders campaign announcement, <https://berniesanders.com/bernies-announcement/>, May 26, 2015, accessed 02/20/2017.

⁸ Emily Schultheis, "Bernie Sanders blasts Donald Trump's "Cabinet of Billionaires", <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/bernie-sanders-blasts-donald-trumps-cabinet-of-billionaires/>, CBS News, December 11, 2016, accessed 02/20/2016.

A case can be made that the best thing we could do for the well-being of planet would be to concentrate even more wealth in the hands of Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Elon Musk, and billionaires like them. Specifically, if we compare what the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation can accomplish with \$100 billion to what a room full of Senators would do with that money. Taking this money away from Bill and Melinda Gates in the form of taxes and giving it to politicians would not produce an overall net benefit.

Certainly, many very wealthy people are lacking in virtue – to put it mildly.

There are those, like the Walton family, who, rather than help the poor, wish instead to build corporate feudal empires, where they live substantially above the law managing their corporate-feudal estates. For them, the rest of us have value only as far as we are good and obedient serfs working in their corporate fiefdoms. Those who cannot work in these corporate-feudal estates and otherwise be useful servants are discarded – including the sick and those denied a proper education.

There are those – such as the owners and directors of Exxon-Mobile – who seek to pursue profits through activities that kill and maim others and threaten to destroy whole cities and whole countries – all without the consent and without providing a bit of compensation to their victims.

There are millionaires and billionaires worthy of our contempt. However, they are not worthy of our contempt BECAUSE they are millionaires and billionaires, but because of other actions that they have performed.

The ultimate objection is not directed towards Sanders' specific bigotry against the very wealthy. The real problem with Sanders' campaign rhetoric is its implicit endorsement of "us" versus "them" attitudes generally. Above, I distinguished between actions that are "bad in themselves" from those that are "bad in virtue of their consequences". Scapegoating and bigotry are bad in themselves. They represent something – like torture and slavery – that a person should be reluctant to do even if they think some good could come of it.

Disregard for the Global Poor

Sanders is popularly held to be a champion of "the poor" and against the "very wealthy".

However, a look at the facts of his campaign show that Sanders was a champion of a group of people whose household income placed them, globally, in the economic range of the top 75% to 90%, against not only "the top 10%," but also against the bottom 75% globally.

This shows up in his views on trade and the economy.

Sanders spoke constantly against the "exporting of jobs" and condemned companies who gave jobs to people in other countries.

"[T]wo of the countries in the TPP are Vietnam and Malaysia. In Vietnam, the minimum wage is equivalent to 56 cents an hour, independent labor unions are banned and people are thrown in jail for expressing their political beliefs or trying to improve labor conditions. In Malaysia, migrant workers who manufacture electronics products are working as modern-day slave laborers who have had their passports and wages confiscated and are unable to return to their own countries. American workers

*should not have to 'compete' against people forced to work under these conditions. This is not 'free trade'; it is a race to the bottom."*⁹

In writing about this topic, I want to distinguish between two issues.

The first of these issues is the effect of trade. Sanders is mistaken in believing that trade is harmful to Americans overall. Certainly, "exporting jobs" has harmed some specific American workers – and questions can be raised as to what we can do to help those adversely affected.

However, trade generally has been good for Americans. For those who have jobs, trade has allowed them to purchase certain goods at a much lower cost. This has left more money in their pockets that they can then use to purchase other goods, which creates additional jobs.

This raises the possibility of a discussion that allows for the benefits of trade, but that draws the money from some of those benefits into programs to help those made worse off, to spread those benefits more generally across the population.

My purpose for raising this topic is not to discuss the merits of global trade on Americans. I do not want people to think that I accept the claim that America has suffered as a result. However, I wish to focus on the moral issues that would be relevant even if it were the case that Americans did suffer some from these trade arrangements – moral issues that Sanders and many of his followers have ignored.

In addressing these moral concerns, I can assume that the (false) premise that Americans are somewhat worse off because of these trade agreements is true.

I want to focus on the effects on the global poor.

Politifact, referencing a report from the World Bank,¹⁰ reports:

*[According to the World Bank](#), 1.9 billion people (or 37.1 percent of the global population) lived on less than \$1.90 a day in 1990, compared to a projected 702 million (9.6 percent) in 2015. That's a 74.1 percent decline in 25 years.*¹¹

The moral question that I want to ask is: Does Sanders care about this? Does it matter to him?

Sanders never discusses the topic of the global poor. He knows that they exist, but it is hard to find an example in which he showed actual concern for his welfare – concern in the form of thinking that some sacrifice to provide them with a benefit may be warranted.

In an interview with Vox, Sanders said,

⁹ Sander, "So-called 'free trade' policies hurt US workers every time we pass them ", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/29/so-called-free-trade-policies-hurt-us-workers-every-time-we-pass-them>, April 29, 2015, accessed 02/19/2017.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Ending World Poverty and Sharing Prosperity*, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/109701443800596288/PRN03Oct2015TwinGoals.pdf>, accessed 02/18/2017.

¹¹ Politifact, "Did we really reduce extreme poverty by half in 30 years?", <http://www.politifact.com/global-news/statements/2016/mar/23/gayle-smith/did-we-really-reduce-extreme-poverty-half-30-years/>, accesses 02/18/2017.

I think from a moral responsibility we've got to work with the rest of the industrialized world to address the problems of international poverty, but you don't do that by making people in this country even poorer.¹²

Think about this.

Imagine what Sanders himself would say if a representative of the top 1% had said:

I think from a moral responsibility we've got to work with the rest of the billionaires to address the issues of basic medical care and education, but you don't do that by making the wealthiest people in this country even poorer.

Putting these arguments side by side reveals the fact that Sanders is guilty of a near perfect hypocrisy. There is no consistent moral argument to be had that says that the top 10% can be made poorer to provide benefits to a group of people in the 75% to 90% range in terms of global wealth, but that denies aid from those in the top 25% to those in the bottom 75%.

Again, I wish to set aside the (false) claims that trade is making Americans poorer and concentrate on the fact that it has lifted more than a billion people around the world up from a level of squalor where they were literally starving and incapable of affording even the most basic medical care to the point where they can afford food, basic medical care, and some education. Sanders does not devote even a single sentence to the idea of sacrifice for their welfare. It is as if the people in the bottom 75% in terms of wealth and income, globally, only have significance insofar as they can make his constituents in the 75% to 90% range, globally, better off.

It is as if Sanders believes that it is better that 1000 of the global poor die of starvation and disease than that an American worker suffer a slight decrease in wages.

Sanders has literally claimed that a fundamental principle of morality prohibits us from helping these people if it means that his primary constituents – those who can afford to send him campaign contributions and elect him into office with their votes – are made worse off. Yet, he condemns politicians who adopt the very same position with respect to the top 10% in terms of wealth that he adopts with respect to a group in the 75% to 90% range.

We should expect any future political candidate, when they address the question of exporting jobs to those who currently are starving to death and dying of easily treatable disease, to tell us what they plan to do for those people while they are denying those people a way to pay for food and basic medical care.

Conclusion

There were elements in Sanders' campaign that deserve condemnation – where we would hope that a future candidate could do better.

I must admit that in writing this paper I looked at the moral issues themselves. I did not address the issue of campaign strategy or how to win elections. At times, winning an election goes contrary to morality such that a candidate cannot always do the right thing – be the best sort of person – and still have any chance of getting elected.

The degree to which this is true depends on the voters.

¹² Vox, "Bernie Sanders: The Vox Conversation," <http://www.vox.com/2015/7/28/9014491/bernie-sanders-vox-conversation>, Accessed 02/18/2017.

Voters who pay attention to and promote these issues create candidates that pay attention to and promote these issues. Voters who ignore these issues or, worse, promote their denial, create candidates who ignore these issues or, worse, promote their denial.

These are not minor issues.

When politicians base their policies on ideological fictions rather than empirical facts, people suffer. Sometimes, some of them die. Sometimes, a lot of them die. If a policy is bad because of its effects and not bad in itself, the politically correct answer should not be an outright ban. It should be, "We have issues. Let's see what we can do to solve them."

We have reason to put an end to the practice of dividing "us" against "them" – promoting hatreds and hostility between various tribes and seeking power for by claiming, "I will lead 'us' against 'them'." This can be classified as something that is *malum in se* (bad in itself) – like slavery or torture – something that no politician should get away with defending.

Politicians should be required to give an answer to the question of what effects their policies will have on the global poor that is better than, "I do not know, and I do not care, as long as those who will vote for me and can afford to contribute to my campaign are better off."

Politicians, being human, will not have perfect virtue. At the time of voting, we will always be forced to give up some of our moral principles and vote for a candidate that has human flaws and frailties. However, we can at least nudge politicians in the right direction. Blinding ourselves to their imperfections in the name of hero worship is yet another common human quality that we have many and strong reasons to discourage.