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Introduction

Liberalism resists easy description. Whether it refers to a political ideology or to a political philosophy, it covers a broad swathe of ideas. The swathe of ideas it covers is so broad, in fact, that efforts to identify its essential and distinctive features almost always come off as hopelessly narrow. For example, in the 1980s it was fashionable for political theorists to propose that liberals, unlike conservatives and radicals, are committed to the idea that the state should be neutral between contested conceptions of the good life.[1] However, this proposal in one fell swoop excludes Mill, Tocqueville, Hobhouse, Green, and many other influential members of the liberal camp. Rather than identifying a single unifying commitment, others have sought, more promisingly, to pick out family resemblance characteristics to zone in on the target.[2] But once again, the exercise looks ill-fated. True, the more characteristics that are picked out, the less restrictive the resulting characterization of liberalism becomes, but, at the same time, the broadened characterization makes it harder to view liberalism as a distinctive tradition of thought, one that differs in deep and informative ways from rival political traditions such as conservatism or republicanism. It might be advisable, then, to speak of multiple liberal political traditions rather than a single political tradition of liberalism. Or perhaps liberalism should be understood as a single political tradition, but one that is not very unified, encompassing a variety of rival strands of thought. What can be said with confidence is that liberalism is a label that attaches both to a history of a fairly diverse set of political movements, and to the ideas and arguments associated with those movements, and to an ongoing research program in contemporary political philosophy.

This volume introduces readers both to this history and to this research program. It certainly does not purport to be comprehensive.

Any volume of this size on a topic as expansive as liberalism must be selective. The historical periods and topics discussed here reflect the predilections and interests of the editor.[3] In selecting topics and contributors, I hope to convey the diversity and vitality of liberalism, but also to bring into view some of its blind spots.

FREEDOM AND PROGRESS

Liberal political movements and the thinkers who have supported those movements have engaged in a wide variety of political causes. As one commentator has put it, "the history of liberalism is a history of opposition to assorted tyrannies."[4] Liberals have fought against religious persecution in favor of toleration, against caste hierarchy and privilege in favor of meritocracy and social mobility, against arbitrary rule in favor of the rule of the law, and against totalitarian regimes in favor of limited government. These and other political causes have aimed to secure the freedom of individuals to lead their lives on their own terms and in free association with others as well as to expand the scope of those entitled to this freedom. Can we say, accordingly, that a strong commitment to individual freedom is at least a minimal unifying commitment of liberal political thought and liberal political philosophy?

Perhaps we can. Liberals do characteristically champion the cause of freedom. And it is certainly true that liberals very much tend to embrace individualism in the sense that they hold that the claims of individual persons, as opposed to social collectivities, are morally primary. But if this commitment to individual freedom is indeed a unifying feature of liberalism, then it is neither straightforward nor very informative. If we are told only that someone is strongly committed to individual freedom, we do not know too much about his politics. This is to be expected. Like other political and moral concepts, freedom is a contested ideal. It can be characterized in manifold ways, and liberal political thinkers have disagreed, often quite sharply, over how it is best understood. To take some important examples: Liberals have debated whether liberty is best construed in terms of rights and negative freedoms, or instead as a positive ideal of autonomy requiring access to a wide range of options. They have disagreed over the relationship, if any, between living in a free state and being a free individual. And while some liberals have held that

freedom is valuable as such, many have insisted that it is only a set of important or basic freedoms that really matter.

Furthermore, even if all liberals are strongly committed to individual freedom on some understanding of that protean value, very few liberal thinkers have thought that liberty is the only political value. Other values, such as equality or democracy or community, have also been associated with liberalism; and different liberal thinkers have disagreed over both the significance of these other values and their relationship to individual freedom. Not surprisingly, these differences continue to be reflected in contemporary philosophical work on liberalism. It is not uncommon, for example, for critics to charge that in venerating individual freedom liberals ignore or give insufficient weight to other concerns. Thus, socialist critics of liberalism hold that liberals too easily sacrifice equality to liberty, and communitarian critics have long objected that the common good is neglected in a liberal society. Liberal writers respond either by asserting the primacy of individual freedom over these rival values or by contending that the values do not really conflict, but are complementary.

Finally, liberal political thinkers disagree over which institutions best advance the values that they share. Almost all liberals embrace constitutional government. They contend that governments, including democratic governments, can become tyrannical and that limits on government are necessary to secure the freedom of individual people. In addition, almost all liberals affirm the institutions that make possible free speech and free inquiry, at least concerning subjects that are, in Locke's words, of "maximal concernment" to the individual. Beyond these commitments there is little agreement on institutions, however. Within the tradition, or traditions, of liberalism, we get different answers to these questions, for example: Does democratic government, and the associated idea of majority rule, safeguard or threaten individual liberty? Is the capitalist market an essential component of a free society, or does it allow the rich to dominate the poor, thereby undermining their freedom? And is a freedom-promoting political order one that centralizes power so that local tyrannies can be disrupted or one that decentralizes power so that the bureaucratic state does not absorb into itself all space for experimentation and free association?

Different answers to these questions will seem more or less plausible in different times and places. The liberal commitment to

individual freedom cannot on its own provide much guidance in answering them. Of much greater importance are the threats to individual freedom that the liberal perceives and responds to; and since these threats come from different quarters, it is no real wonder that liberal thinkers have supported different institutional arrangements to combat them.

The liberal commitment to individual freedom, however, is related to another commitment that many have taken to be central to liberalism, one that does help to distinguish it from some other political traditions of thought, particularly earlier traditions of political thought. This is the commitment to human progress. While there are anticipations of liberal ideas in ancient and medieval political thought, liberalism is widely, and correctly, viewed as a modern development. It is the offspring of the Enlightenment, and it bears the marks of its birth. Enlightenment thinkers very much believed in human progress, and it is characteristic of liberal Enlightenment thinkers to believe that freedom and progress go together.

How exactly might freedom of the individual and the progress of the species go together in the mind of the liberal? Various answers to this question can be given. In a perceptive essay on the nature of liberalism, Jeremy Waldron provides a particularly insightful one. "The Enlightenment," Waldron observes, "was characterized by a burgeoning confidence in the human ability to make sense of the world, to grasp its regularities and fundamental principles, to predict its future, and to manipulate its powers for the benefit of mankind."[5] This optimism, in turn, had a political dimension.

> Society should be a transparent order, in the sense that its workings and principles should be well known and available for public apprehension and scrutiny. People should know and understand the reasons for the basic distribution of wealth, power, authority, and freedom. Society should not be shrouded in mystery, and its workings should not have to depend on mythology, mystification, or a "noble lie."

In short, if human beings can grasp the rational order in the world as the Enlightenment promised, then this order can be explained to them. The limits on their freedom need be neither arbitrary nor inexplicable. Once this thought is granted and gains currency, then each individual, as a rational agent, is in a position to demand that the restrictions on his freedom be justified to him.

In retrospect, the Enlightenment confidence in human reason can look quaint. It was often excessive. But it took different forms, and some expressions of this confidence were more plausible than others. A major divide within liberalism is reflected in the differences between the Scottish and French wings of the Enlightenment. The French, and to a lesser extent the Germans, tended to be rationalistic, stressing the power of the human mind to design a rational political and social order, whereas the Scots tended to emphasize the limits of human reason and the need to learn from experience.[6] Still, the Scots, like the French, remained optimistic about the prospect that human beings would use new scientific advances, including advances in economic and political science, to improve their political and social lives. Hayek, the steadfast critic of constructivist rationalism and twentieth-century heir to the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, was himself a firm believer in progress, albeit a cautious one. As he saw matters, human beings have used advances in knowledge to improve their societies, and they can be expected to continue to do so in the future. However, to make progress they must use the knowledge they can acquire "not to shape the results as the craftsman shapes his handiwork, but rather to cultivate a growth by providing the appropriate environment, in the manner in which a gardener does for his plants."[7]

Not infrequently, critics of liberalism on both the left and the right seize on this commitment to progress and the universalism that goes with it. Liberals, the critics charge, misrepresent the particular as universal. They present their ideals as rationally mandatory, ideals to which all of humankind must aspire.[8] In reality, however, liberalism is merely the "official ideology of the western world."[9] In pressing this objection, the critics are heirs to an important and powerful anti- or Counter-Enlightenment current (or currents) of thought.[10] The anti-universalist criticism concerns the status of liberal values and ideals. In thinking about it, it is fair to ask, could not one accept wholesale the Counter-Enlightenment critique of liberal universalism and yet remain steadfastly committed to liberal politics? Many examples suggest an affirmative answer, of which Richard Rorty's "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" is perhaps the best known. But possibility and plausibility are not the same. On inspection, it may turn out that liberal politics must presuppose some commitment to universalism – some commitment to truth in politics – in order to

make good sense of the demand that the distribution of power and freedom in a society should not be shrouded in mythology, mystification, or lies.[11]

The relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment commitment to progress is, of course, more complex than these brief remarks suggest. Like Tocqueville, some liberals are not particularly sanguine about the future. Others, as indicated, are skeptical of universal claims. The view ventured here concerns general tendencies of thought within liberalism. The suggestion is that these tendencies are significant enough to make it plausible to associate liberalism with them. More often than not, critics of human progress and of the possibility of universal values are critics of liberalism.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Philosophers typically characterize liberalism in terms of certain ideals and values, such as freedom or equal concern or toleration, but liberalism does not refer only to these ideas. It has a history in practice, one that is enacted by liberal political movements and by liberal political societies. This volume does not attempt to trace this history. As mentioned, it is very selective, focusing on only a few historical developments.

The relationship between liberalism as a theory of politics and liberalism as it has been enacted in practice is complex and contested. There is very often a gap between liberal ideals and liberal practice. And this raises the interesting issue of whether liberalism should be identified with its ideals or with its practice. To take an example, it is sometimes said of liberalism in America that, with respect to race, it has repeatedly failed to live up to its own ideals. In tension with this claim, it is also often said that American liberalism itself is defective, that it contains internal contradictions, and that these contradictions are exposed by its treatment of race. Or to take another example, consider the status of women in liberal societies. Feminist critics sometimes reject liberalism because, as they see it, liberal societies have failed to bring about equality between the sexes. Others claim that this failure is merely a failure of these societies, not any failure of liberalism as such.

No resolution of this issue can be defended here. However, two observations are in order. First, as a general matter, it is a mistake to

reject liberalism because of defects or failures associated with one of its contingent manifestations. The defects and failures of a particular liberal society often tell us more about that society than about liberalism. Second, if it is a characteristic, even if not an essential, feature of liberal societies that they generate certain maladies, then it becomes more plausible to view this feature as a defect of liberalism. If every attempt, or almost every attempt, to put some ideal into practice results in disaster, then the defensive response that this merely reveals a failure of the societies, but no failure in the ideal, will ring hollow.

To illustrate this second observation, it is helpful to consider briefly the relationship between liberalism, on the one hand, and private property and commercial society, on the other. (This relationship is surveyed by Jeremy Jennings in his contribution to this volume.) As indicated earlier, liberal thinkers have had very different views about the desirability of modern capitalism. The divide between classical liberalism and the modern liberalism that emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth century pivots on this very issue. The classical liberals viewed the economic liberties associated with private property and contract as essential components of what Adam Smith termed "the natural system of liberty," whereas the modern liberals viewed capitalism, particularly laissez-faire capitalism, with great suspicion, seeing it as a threat to, not an institutional realization of, individual freedom. Still, modern liberals, while distrustful of capitalism, were not inclined to reject it outright. They did not recommend that we abandon the market and replace it with centralized economic planning, for example.

The modern liberals, like the classical liberals, accepted the legitimacy of private property, including private property in productive assets, and they were not, in general, hostile to commerce. Moreover, and more to the point at hand, liberal societies have always been commercial societies. And commerce and the institutions that facilitate it, such as private property, free trade, and the free movement of people, often have been thought to generate social pathologies. Commercial societies, we have been told, produce "possessive individualists" who erode valuable community and who lack a concern for the public good. These societies also generate high levels of material inequality. These are familiar complaints. Our present concern

is not to evaluate their truth, but to consider their implications for an assessment of liberalism. If the complaints were true, would this show a defect in liberalism or merely a defect in liberal practice? To think about this question, consider a character we might call the *pure liberal*. The pure liberal holds that liberalism is not committed to any social and political practices at all. Any institutional structure may fail to serve liberal values, and the structures that the liberal should support depend solely on how well they serve liberal values in this or that circumstance. The pure liberal may come to reject all of the institutions typically associated with liberal practice. If constitutional government, democracy, or markets generate social pathologies, then these institutions may need to be reformed. Thus, the pure liberal could come to reject liberal institutions because of his or her commitment to liberal values. (To be sure, the pure liberal may believe that the values that liberal institutions serve are more important than the social pathologies they generate. If so, then he or she will have to acknowledge that liberal institutions come at a price; and, to that extent at least, the critics of liberalism are right.) We can think of John Stuart Mill as a paradigm pure liberal. He took an experimentalist approach to institutional design, assessing institutions in terms of their propensity to advance the interests of "man understood as a progressive being." Markets and private property in time may need to be replaced with some form of socialism. Democratic government may need to be supplemented in various ways so that the "instructed classes" have sufficient influence on public affairs. And colonialism and imperialism may have their place in advancing the cause of human progress and freedom.

In contrast to the pure liberal, most liberals have believed that certain institutions, such as the market or constitutional democracy, are not merely instruments for advancing liberal values, but integral components of the liberal ideal. For them, the study of liberal practice – the study of how the institutions and practices associated with liberal politics actually function – is crucial to an assessment of liberalism. If markets do indeed generate too much material inequality, then this is a strike against liberalism. If commercial societies characteristically erode community and encourage destructive self-seeking in social life, then this too is a strike against the view. Retreating from liberal institutions to liberal ideals is not an option for those who define liberalism, in part, in terms of its institutions.

It remains open to liberals of this unpure kind to contend that the social maladies associated with liberal institutions result from nonideal circumstances. The problem, they can argue, is not with the institutions as such, but rather with the conditions under which the institutions operate. However, this maneuver comes at a steep price, especially if the imagined ideal conditions are far removed from actual conditions. The liberal now may have to concede that liberal institutions do not work well in the world as we know it.

These reflections on the relationship between theory and practice in liberalism underscore the significance of liberalism's history to its contemporary claim to acceptance as a normative theory of politics. A study of its practice, as revealed in various historical moments, may also help us to distinguish between institutions and practices that are not integral to liberalism, but were appropriate for a given time and place, and those institutions that have a stronger claim to be part and parcel of the liberal ideal.

FOUNDATIONS

I have been emphasizing the diversity of liberal political thought and practice. Debates in contemporary political philosophy over the best understanding or best conception of liberalism reflect this diversity. Rival liberal theories build on different normative foundations. The difference in foundations, in turn, is reflected in different understandings of the nature of liberalism. The claim that the essence of liberalism is the commitment to state neutrality with respect to conceptions of the good life, while not plausible as a general characterization of liberalism, is much more plausible as a characterization of some important strands of liberalism, for example.

At the cost of some distortion in the service of theoretical tidiness, one can distinguish three broad approaches to providing normative foundations for liberal politics. These are, respectively, natural rights, social contract, and consequentialist approaches. In the early modern period in which liberalism first emerged, the appeal to natural rights was the dominant approach. Natural rights were taken to provide the rational grounding for a political order that secured individual liberties against absolutist rule. Thinkers like Grotius and Locke employed the state of nature construct to articulate the pre-political

rights and duties of individuals. These rights and duties, in turn, were understood to place strong limits on the authority of political rulers.

To contemporary ears, the notion of natural rights can sound rather suspect. "[T]he truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns."[12] For Grotius and Locke, the natural law, from which natural rights and duties could be derived, had a lawmaker. Take that lawmaker away, the thought goes, and there is no natural law. The foundation of natural rights collapses in a disenchanted world.

Despite its currency, this quick refutation of natural rights liberalism is hardly persuasive. Philosophers who defend a natural rights approach to politics do not need theological premises. An appeal to natural law can be construed as an appeal to the objectivity of morality. Anyone who is not committed to some version of relativism or subjectivism about morals can pursue the natural rights approach to justifying liberalism. And indeed Locke himself, as scholars have pointed out, often appealed to secular considerations in justifying the natural law. His defense of natural law and natural rights, while incomplete, was overdetermined.[13]

The most influential contemporary statement of natural rights liberalism is Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. This book opens with a ringing sentence. "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)." As critics noted, Nozick did not provide a moral basis for the rights he assumed. He sought to make progress at the superstructural level, while leaving work on the foundations for another time. But Nozick's practice in this regard is pretty unexceptional. Much work in deontological ethics proceeds in exactly the same manner, first proposing general principles about rights and entitlements and then proceeding to work out their implications. Commentators on natural rights theories often forget that argumentative support for rights claims can take different forms. It does not have to proceed in foundationalist mode, drawing inferences from normative bedrock. The natural rights approach to defending liberalism needs both the superstructural argumentation of the sort that Nozick provided and the deeper work that connects rights to their underlying moral basis. Since both of these enterprises are respectable enterprises in contemporary philosophy, natural rights liberalism remains a viable and important approach to defending liberalism.