

## THE LIBERAL TRADITION

People disagree about what is good in life. The disagreement often cuts deep—the devout Mormon and the secular atheist can differ about the most fundamental matters about personal ethics, the afterlife, the meaning of existence, and the social arrangements that lead to human flourishing. What should the state do in light of such disagreement? One natural answer is that the state should determine which of the many available perspectives is correct, and then try to design legal, educational, and political institutions so they are in line with that correct perspective. On the liberal view, however, this is misguided. Instead, the state ought to be *neutral* with respect to the various conceptions of the good life that people might have. The liberal state does not *take sides* in such debates—rather, it aims to maintain institutions that allow a diverse range of individuals and communities to peacefully live under the same roof, so to speak.

There are two broad strands of argument in defense of liberalism. On the deontological picture, the state simply lacks the *authority* to impose a particular view of the good life on individuals. Forcing people to live a certain way is not in line with respecting their autonomy and their equal moral standing as persons. So, even supposing that a particular view of the good life is uniquely correct, the state may not coercively impose that ideal on people who disagree. For, doing so amounts to treating people in an objectionable way, by not affording them the *respect*, in the Kantian sense, that they are owed as persons able to think for themselves and make their own choices.

On the more utilitarian way of seeing things, liberalism can be defended by noting that giving states the power to impose particular ideas of the good life is more likely to do harm than good. After all, the state is not a perfectly benevolent, omniscient entity—rather, it is composed

of ordinary people who are themselves fallible, corruptible, and prone to bias. Giving the state the power to determine and impose the uniquely correct way of living, then, will make matters ripe for abuse.

Further utilitarian rationales can be given for why the state should seek to be non-*paternalistic*—i.e. avoid coercing individuals for their own good. John Stuart Mill notably put forth several arguments to this effect. First, there are no one-size-fits-all rules for what choices and lifestyles are optimal for everyone. Whereas Alice might be prone to alcohol addiction, and thus might be wise to avoid all alcohol, an occasional drink or two in social situations might enhance Bob’s quality of life. A blanket ban on alcohol, then, is likely to be counterproductive from the standpoint of many people’s well-being. Second, Mill thought that each individual is the expert on what makes their life go best. Of course, we all can make prudential mistakes, but in general, and in the long run, it’s best if we are allowed freedom to make our own decisions. In addition, if individuals are allowed to conduct their own “experiments in living,” the resulting lessons and perspectives are likely to be a boon to society at large.

Liberals of various stripes have, on anti-paternalistic grounds, advocated for the legalization of a range of behaviors that might be plausibly construed of as self-regarding and thus not within the proper purview of state prohibition. Though particular examples are bound to be controversial, some include: marijuana decriminalization, the legalization of sex-work, and the abolition of prescription requirements for drugs.

From the liberal standpoint, it is not just the state which can interfere with our autonomy. Social pressures, customs, and sanctions can be just as—if not often *more*—inhibiting. The old Chinese practice of foot-binding, for example, was not primarily enforced by state actors. Neither is the convention of female genital mutilation prevalent in parts of Africa. Our social

milieu can have a very powerful impact on the choices we are able to make. Indeed, part of the function of a liberal state is plausibly to prevent society from interfering with individuals' liberty. Provisions against discrimination based on religion or sexual orientation, for example, are enacted with this goal in view.

The fact that social contexts exert tremendous force on individuals' choices can raise a dilemma for the liberal state, however. From the liberal standpoint, individuals ought to be free to live as they please, so long as they are not interfering with the rights of others, regardless of their social characteristics such as gender or caste or religious affiliation. However, this stance threatens to impose a particular ideal of the good life on communities who by and large endorse social norms and practices that are sensitive to social characteristics. Thus, a religious community might believe that in order to flourish, men and women must have different rules applicable to them. There might be separate dress codes, norms of deference, locations for praying, etc. based on gender. Furthermore, there might be high social costs imposed for leaving the religious community. How ought a liberal state accommodate such practices? If it seeks to ban or discourage such religious practices, it threatens to coercively impose a particular ideal of the good on its citizens. On the other hand, if it doesn't interfere, then some individuals within its jurisdiction seem to have their autonomy limited in ways at odds with the liberal ethos. Political theorist Chandran Kukathas has argued that one potential way out of this dilemma is to conceive of the liberal society as an archipelago. The idea is that the liberal state is obliged to allow illiberal communities to flourish within its borders. If individuals want to join, or remain in, such societies, they must have the liberty to do so. However, the state must ensure that there is a robust freedom to exit—once someone has decided that that life is not for them, they must be free to leave.

In addition to the anti-paternalistic ideal, liberal philosophers have also emphasized the freedom to speak our minds. To the extent a state imposes content-based restrictions on what views can be expressed, it departs from the liberal ideal. In modern liberal democracies, states typically do not impose punitive sanctions for expressing ideas. However, individuals can face great social and professional costs for expressing ideas that conflict with those of their milieu—to the extent this happens, society can depart from the liberal ideal even if the formal state apparatus does not. Liberal philosophers thus have stressed the importance of maintaining a cultural *ethos* of free expression, where we try to minimize the social or professional sanctions we impose on individuals for merely expressing opinions. Of course, some speech acts can go beyond merely stating an opinion—for example inciting violence by riling up a mob—and can be sanctioned for that reason. But Mill in particular emphasizes the need for society to tolerate, without qualification, a wide range of opinions, even those which the majority (or the influential minority) may deem offensive or harmful.

Mill defended an absolute and unqualified right of free expression for the following reason. Either the claim that is suppressed is true, in which case the censor is doing society a disservice by not allowing it to apprehend certain truths. Or the claim suppressed is false; but even then, the censorship is counterproductive in the long run—for, Mill thought, having some people defend false opinions helps the rest of us better understand the reasons why our beliefs are true. For us to be genuinely justified in believing any claim, there needs to be the robust possibility for people to challenge that claim. Mill thought that even if Newtonian physics, which in his time was well established, could not be challenged, then people could not be rationally confident in believing it. Indeed, as it turns out, Einstein later showed that Newtonian physics is only true in approximation in certain contexts.

Typically, suppression of opinions via social and professional sanctions occurs when a dominant ideology, or comprehensive system of looking at the social world, is potentially threatened by some ideas. While it might be tempting to think this type of suppression is beneficial if the ideology is true, Mill thought that any such comprehensive system can only contain, at best, part of the truth. If the ideology successfully isolates itself from criticism, the culture is then bound to have blind-spots, which might worsen over time. Thus, Mill thinks we should be very suspicious of attempts to suppress ideas for the supposed reason that they can only be harmful. Furthermore, the claim that certain ideas can only be harmful is itself an opinion we can only be justified in believing if it can be robustly challenged.

An ethos of free speech, Mill thinks, is best for society in the long run because only with it can we hope to reliably track the truth. Some liberal philosophers like Seana Shiffrin have also defended the ideal of free speech as a necessary precondition of our being able to develop as rational beings. Only if we are free to speak our minds can we fulfill our fundamental needs as individual thinkers.

Liberalism is a particular response to the question of what to do when faced with a diverse array of perspectives—both about what the world is like, and what we ought to do within it. The liberal seeks to be maximally tolerant of individuals' choices so long as they do not interfere with the liberty of others. The other face of liberalism is a commitment to tolerating expressions of opinion even if the majority, or the powers that be, deem those opinions to be false, misguided, or even harmful. There remains disagreement, however, as to how we should interpret particular liberal ideals and what they might commit us to in terms of particular policies.

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See also: Groupthink; Liberalism and Toleration; Moral Pluralism

## **FURTHER READINGS**

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