

S.A.L.A.M

The Problems With Liberalism



Author Biography

Mohammed Hijab

Academic Researcher & Media Host

Mohammed Hijab is a debater and public speaker who engages in discussions and polemics on a wide variety of topics including religion, politics and society. He completed a Politics degree and a Masters in History from Queen Mary University. He has taught and instructed courses on humanities and languages in many contexts. He has numerous Ijazahs in some Islamic sciences and has studied in multiple Islamic seminaries including the Shinqeeti Institute which employs a traditional Mauritanian style of teaching the Sacred Sciences.

Liberalism

Liberalism, like many other ideologies, has existed in different political contexts. Many of these contexts have had contradictory self-identified starting points. Today, the term ‘liberal democracy’ is used to refer to most (if not all) political systems that claim to be ‘liberal’. However, it is conceivable to envisage illiberal democracies or undemocratic liberal states. One does not have to go too far back in history to identify such examples of this, as liberalism existed with colonialism since the latter’s inception. Even more shockingly, self-identified ‘liberal’ states – such as France and the United States – had institutionalised programs of slavery in place until close to the beginning of the 19th century. To be clear, this is not an argument against liberalism, but instead an informative historical reading on the conduct of liberalism throughout history. A clear distinction needs to be made between what liberalism is and how politicians (who claim to be liberals) may have contradicted its principles. It is important to note that liberalism is being operationalised, in many ways, like religion. People who consider themselves ‘liberal’ usually believe in concepts such as ‘freedom of speech/expression’ in as much the same way as ancient peoples might have believed in Zeus or Athena, or as later people might have believed in Ram or Buddha. Liberalism will be understood best by the initial thinkers and theorists who have propounded its theories through their rationale. Society is also important to consider but only to the extent that it has decided to accept or reject a certain political philosophy. This chapter will focus on the first principles of liberal political philosophy and assess their corrigibility. It will conclude with some important remarks on the implications of this evaluation on liberalism as a whole.

So who are thinkers from whom we should extract the ideas of liberalism? The answer to this question requires the process of elimination to determine who is not appropriate to represent liberalism. The first principle in this process is that there should be no, or at most limited, controversy surrounding the liberalism of the thinker. Thomas Hobbes, for example, is eliminated from our list since there is considerable scholarly controversy surrounding the extent to which he can be seen as ‘liberal’. The second principle is that the mere popularity of a ‘thinker’ in their society does not indicate their academic worthiness. Conversely, a method of ‘thinker selection’ can be added to the second principle as a principle in its own right. The third principle requires that the thinker fit into one of three categories. The first category includes thinkers who are

regarded as the founders of the ideology. In the case of liberalism, a compelling argument could be made for John Locke or Charles De Montesquieu to be included in this category. The second category includes thinkers who are regarded as renewers or restorers of the ideology. These individuals, who have reconstituted liberalism in a significant manner, include John Stuart Mill, whose refinements to the ideology became categorically important to discussions within liberalism. The third category of thinkers are considered ‘major contributors’. In the example of liberalism, this includes John Rawls, whose elucidations became pertinent to the 20th century discourse on the philosophy.

These three principles will be used in all upcoming chapters to sieve through the many academic works that have been carried out on the ideologies under investigation, thereby getting the cream of the philosophical crop. If one is being critical, though, one could make the case that philosophers are generally regarded as philosophers, thinkers, or theorists only because enough members of a society label them so. In other words, if the general, non-academic masses (or political agents who also represent the non-academic class) did not consider John Locke a philosopher – for whatever social, political or economic reason – then John Locke would not be considered a philosopher, let alone a ‘founding father’ of political liberalism. It is perhaps an irony, therefore, that non-scholars are the ultimate determiners of who is regarded a scholar or specialist in any given academic field. This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, if society is discriminatory, exploited classes may never be seen to be scholarly regardless of their ability and contribution to society. Secondly, a theorist may have a logically unsound but rhetorically appealing theory, which may appeal to the ignorant masses. This latter point was highlighted by Plato in his case against democracy. Thirdly, institutions such as universities or parliaments may decide (for political or economic reasons) to only allow philosophical discourse to be had in the context of specialised ideological parameters. This is unavoidable for the most part. Thus, it is important to preface that what will be discussed in the following chapters pertains to the most popular academic ideas of the certain ideology.

Liberalism can be divided into three categories: fiscal, societal, and political. Although fiscal (or economic) liberalism is relevant and important to this chapter, we will not delve into extensive detail on economics. Liberalism’s basic tenets are best summarised in the famous Second Treatise of Government by John Locke: “All mankind being equal and independent, no one ought to harm one another in his life, health, liberty or possessions”. A similar wording is used in the US Declaration of Human Rights: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

In this chapter, I will focus on the works of three philosophers: a 'founding father', a renewer, and a 'major contributor'. John Locke is regarded as a founding father of modern day liberalism as he laid the epistemological foundations for all thinkers that would come after him. Locke could be said to have had the most impact on the ideological political establishment of nations such as Britain, France, and the USA. Understanding the first principles and epistemological precepts laid down by Locke is an essential part of understanding his wider philosophy. John Stuart Mill is considered a renewer of liberal thought since he renewed the discussion on liberalism both academically and on a societal level. Many of the slogans and expressions associated with liberalism are also found in the works of Mill. He is regarded as 'progressive' because of his views on universal suffrage (female participation in politics), which would foreshadow both the first and second waves of feminism. Finally, John Rawls is undoubtedly a major contributor to liberalism as he uses thought experiments when arguing for the ideology. Rawls was the most widely mentioned contributor to liberal scholarship in academic circles in the 20th century.

John Locke

Locke's moral philosophy has been criticised for its apparent incoherence. Jerome B. Schneewind summarises this criticism: "Locke's failures are sometimes as significant as his successes. His views on morality are a case in point". A reading of Locke's most famous work on epistemology, the *Essay*, presents a clear view of Locke as an empiricist who prioritises experience acquired through sense-data as the primary (if not the only) way of obtaining knowledge. In addition, Locke has been described as believing in 'theologically based legislative ethics'. What differentiates Locke from 20th century logical positivists is his non-dismissal of the 'ideas of the mind' as being either real or true in some cases. Locke says, "Whenever the mind refers one of its ideas to something extraneous to it, the idea becomes a candidate for being true or false, because in such a reference the mind tacitly assumes that the idea fits the external thing." However, where Locke says that we can have ideas in our mind that can be 'candidates for truth', he stops short at saying that they can be true in and of themselves. This, of course, would have been consistent if Locke had stopped there and did not continue by saying, "[He is] bold to think, that Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematicks: since the precise real Essence of the things moral Words stand for, may be perfectly known; and so the Congruity, or Incongruity of the Things themselves, be certainly discovered, in which consists perfect knowledge."

An obvious problem in this is that mathematics - itself a metaphysical language - cannot be said to exist in the real world in any real empirical sense. Thus, Locke's apparent empiricism seems to be at odds with his attempt to be rationalistic (in a Cartesian sense) and assume the existence of a morality that can be 'demonstrated'. Locke uses theology, and excessive reference to God, to help him find a way out of his epistemological conundrum. This can be noted in his saying, for example, that "with sense-perception showing the way, reason can lead us to knowledge of a lawmaker or of some superior power to which we are necessarily subject." For Locke, the morals that we see as 'self-evident' are a result of God endowing human beings with the ability to recognise this reality. This, of course, is contradictory to his empiricist insistence in other parts of the Essay, as God in more than one obvious way contradicts the empiricist premise. Another layer of contradiction in Locke's moral and epistemological reasoning relates to Locke's hedonistic morality. Locke says that "nothing but Pleasure or Pain, or that which occasions or procures Pleasure and Pain to us" is important in realising morality. The simple question remains: how can we ascertain that God's morality leads us to hedonism? Does the fact that human beings are capable of pain and pleasure evidence God's endowing us with the ability to recognise this as a 'self-evident' moral? If so, how can we prove such a thing empirically using sense perception? These questions have led to criticism on the part of philosophers who have not been able to square Locke's philosophical circle. The main question would be on how this impacts liberalism generally. If Locke's first principles are clearly contradictory - as we have been able to demonstrate - can we comfortably assume that his entire system of government is based on incoherent moral reasoning? Furthermore, since Locke's first principles are very much premised on the existence of an interacting God, what substitute first principles would liberal atheists (especially considering Locke's liberal society would not accept atheism) put in place in order to salvage liberalism as a coherent philosophy from the bottom up?

The picture becomes even more complicated when we assess one of Locke's key arguments: his discussion on natural law and equality. This discussion can be found in the chapter on 'The state of Nature' in his Second Treatise. The point of being born 'equal' (another oft-quoted line in the U.S. Declaration of Independence) is central to Locke's liberal philosophy. In his confutation of Robert Filmer's position (which advocated the rights of divine kings), Locke makes scriptural arguments to make the case against slavery and for equality. Locke sees that human beings are naturally in "a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of Nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man."

Locke's discussion of 'freedom' seems more descriptive than suggestive inasmuch as he seems to indicate this is how things 'are' rather than how they 'ought to be'. From a purely philosophical perspective, one may ask how Locke came to this conclusion and where determinism fits in with his theory. This is, as he seems to indicate, that the human being is ultimately independent with no determined or otherwise compelling forces acting upon him. How can we prove this? Does Locke even attempt to provide a mechanism whereby any of this can be ascertained? The painful answer to these pressing questions is, once again, quite obvious. Locke defines equality as

"A state ... wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another, without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty."

It would seem that the latter part of this quotation evidently contradicts the first. These Lockean ramblings do not just indicate inconsistencies in his initial thought process, but his heavy reliance on the Bible to make a social case. It is with these shaky foundations that we are introduced to the Lockean concepts of social contract, as well as protection of life and property. Considering such foundations, it would therefore seem fair that a scrupulous critic of the Biblical arguments made by Locke (such as a naturalist, positivist, or atheist) could reformulate, reassess, or otherwise reject the Lockean evidence as unsatisfactory, regrettable, or even disappointing. Despite this harsh epistemological reality, Lockean ideas have become so deeply entrenched in the social fabric of Western societies that it is difficult to envisage a revision of such ideas any time soon. This is because, although Locke premised his ideas on theological (and even scriptural) precepts. Locke's system of government does not need either of these things in order to function. Moreover, some governments that stress the importance of liberty seem to be much more socially successful than other types of despotic governments, which do the opposite. What can we gain from this observation? Historical experimentation has shown us that governments that emphasise checks and balances and a separation of powers (as the theory would be later developed by Montesquieu) are successful in promoting human freedoms and civil cohesion. Here, we must be careful to distinguish between a useful idea and a truth, as one does not necessarily entail the other.

But why is liberalism so attractive to contemporary peoples, especially in a postmodern Western context? Perhaps part of the answer lies in Locke's hedonistic principle mentioned above. To put

this in Freudian terms, human beings have a psychoanalytic tendency to seek pleasure. On this point, although we may never prove that being hedonistic is logical or rational, we have some (psychoanalytic evidence) to suggest that it is 'natural' to some extent. Perhaps if Locke knew about this he may have been able to rehash his epistemology to allow for a better starting point. At any rate, it was Jeremy Bentham who expanded on the hedonistic principle. Bentham created utilitarianism, 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. In his works, Bentham would use similar language to Locke inasmuch as he would describe pain and pleasure as two 'lords'. Many issues arose as a result of the logical implications of this principle, including whether or not a 'gang rape' scenario would be acceptable since, after all, it would allow for the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people. It is here where John Stuart Mill, who had ample exposure to both Bentham and utilitarianism, would be instrumental. The famous 'harm principle' was popularised by Mill in his famous book *On Liberty*. This principle states that one could do whatever they wanted (freedom emphasised) so long as no harm is inflicted on anyone else.

The respective philosophies of both Locke and Mill were both a product of the (very different) historical time periods both men lived in. In the former's case, the political situation in England was highly volatile with the events of the English Civil War (1649-1660) and (more specifically to Locke) the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Bill of Rights (1689) would incorporate many of Locke's ideas on government. This would seal Locke's fate as one of the most influential human beings of all time. Religion (or theology) was key to the philosophies of both Locke and Mill, but had been particularly relevant to the former. But where both men were nonconformists, non-Trinitarian (in the case of Mill), and even non-Christian, religiosity in the Victorian period began to decline. This was due to religion's seeming contradiction with new scientific discourse and the emergence of substitute philosophies, which people would use to find meaning in their lives. Mill is incredibly important to present day discussions on liberalism, as his views on freedom of speech, expression, and the press are normatively accepted by most institutions of the Western World. It would not be an exaggeration to even state that the views solidified by Mill are a template for most mainstream political discourse. If anyone were to deviate from such a template, this would signal an ideological aberration unacceptable to most members of the Western post-Enlightenment masses.

In terms of epistemology, Mill picks up where Locke left off. He seems to recognise the incoherence of a theological philosophy and thus expands on - what would seem to be - the secular ways in which Locke advanced his theory. More particularly, Mill emphasised the hedonism that Locke initially promoted to Jeremy Bentham, a close friend of his father. In Mill's book *On Utilitarianism*, Mill says that human goals should be based on "pleasure, and freedom from pain,

are the only things desirable as ends.” For Mill, the purpose of life is to be ‘happy’ as can be noted in his saying “utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end.” Some early critics of Mill noted that the principle of utility might not allow us to differentiate between animalistic desires and higher intellectual pursuits. However, this criticism is ill-founded, as Mill famously declares that it “is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” One may even argue that, even if this were the case, it would not contradict the initial premises of Mill’s theory.

It is clear that Mill’s principle of utility (to a great extent) implies a relativism in morality, as what may be ‘good’ for one person (in making them happy) may not be so for another. Thus, an ultimate truth is completely lost in translation. Locke’s theological starting point gave liberalism what Mill’s purely utilitarian starting point could not: boldness and certainty. For Mill, ‘The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.’ Mill expands on Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’ reasoning by outlining that to act ‘morally’ one must act in accordance to what would allow that to happen. What proof did Mill have for utilitarianism? Philosophers such as Geoffrey Sayre-McCord completely damn Mill as inconsistent or totally fallacious in his reasoning. In trying to ‘prove’ utilitarianism from the first principles, Mill says:

“The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; and similarly with the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it. [This paragraph up to here is given in Mill’s exact words.] If happiness, the end that the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself, were not acknowledged in theory and in practice to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was an end.”

What Mill is saying is that we see people self-interested with what makes them happy. What makes them happy must therefore be a good thing. This ego-centric view of human beings does nothing to anchor the first principle of utility in any way. Mill’s logical jump from something being ‘desired’

to it being 'good' is philosophically unsubstantiated. It also assumes that human beings are not altruistic by nature, but selfish - an unproven presupposition. With this, we are once again stuck. How do we prove that what we like is what is good? How do we prove that human beings are born 'equal' or 'free' if we have now taken away Locke's theological reasoning?

These questions have plagued not only Locke and Mill but also every liberal philosopher who has sought to find some epistemological base for liberalism. In the preface of his work *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls comments on the failure of these first principles:

“One reason for this is that it has been espoused by a long line of brilliant writers who have built up a body of thought truly impressive in its scope and refinement. We sometimes forget that the great utilitarians, Hume and Adam Smith, Bentham and Mill, were social theorists and economists of the first rank; and the moral doctrine they worked out was framed to meet the needs of their wider interests and to fit into a comprehensive scheme. Those who criticized them often did so on a much narrower front. They pointed out the obscurities of the principle of utility and noted the apparent incongruities between many of its implications and our moral sentiments. But they failed, I believe, to construct a workable and systematic moral conception to oppose it. The outcome is that we often seem forced to choose between utilitarianism and intuitionism. Most likely we finally settle upon a variant of the utility principle circumscribed and restricted in certain ad hoc ways by intuitionistic constraints. Such a view is not irrational; and there is no assurance that we can do better. But this is no reason not to try.”

Mill's failure to ground his first principle in anything substantive caused Rawls to aim to “to present a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.”

What is of particular significance here is that Rawls cites the 'failures' of basing a political philosophy on either utilitarian or intuitionism. In narrating his own moral philosophy, Rawls - one can say quite ironically - reiterates a kind of hedonism that had been spoken of by his predecessors. In reference to his 'theory of the good', Rawls packages this hedonism in a 'Kantian' logic:

“It is a familiar one going back to Aristotle, and something like it is accepted by philosophers so different in other respects as Kant and Sidgwick. It is not in dispute between the contract doctrine and utilitarianism. The main idea is that a person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out this plan. To put it briefly, the good is the satisfaction of rational desire. We are to suppose, then, that each individual has a rational plan of life drawn up subject to the conditions that confront him. This plan is designed to permit the harmonious satisfaction of his interests. It schedules activities so that various desires can be fulfilled without interference. It is arrived at by rejecting other plans that are either less likely to succeed or do not provide for such an inclusive attainment of aims. Given the alternatives available, a rational plan is one which cannot be improved upon; there is no other plan which, taking everything into account, would be preferable.”

Indeed, Rawls’s famous thought experiment, the ‘veil of ignorance’, is based on these premises. Rawls’s use of the term ‘rational desire’ reveals his desperation to ground the first principles of his theory in something more morally real. In actuality, he seems to be falling into the same issues he is avoiding. In the footnotes of the chapter where he elucidates on the veil of ignorance, Rawls makes the following point:

“The veil of ignorance is so natural a condition that something like it must have occurred to many. The formulation in the text is implicit, I believe, in Kant’s doctrine of the categorical imperative, both in the way this procedural criterion is defined and the use Kant makes of it. Thus when Kant tells us to test our maxim by considering what would be the case were it a universal law of nature, he must suppose that we do not know our place within this imagined system of nature. See, for example, his discussion of the topic of practical judgment in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Academy Edition, vol. 5, pp. 68–72.”

A major issue is that Rawls and Kant have completely different epistemological starting points. Leaving aside Kant’s ‘Transcendental Idealism’ (a concept many philosophers struggle with), Kant

says that “If intuition has to conform to the constitution of the objects, then I do not see how we can know anything of them a priori; but if the object (as an object of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent this possibility to myself.” You may have spotted the incongruence of Kant’s seeming acceptance of ‘intuition’ and Rawls’s wholehearted dismissal of it in the beginning of this section. Rawls’s ‘Reflective Equilibrium’ is a moral constructivist model which aims to “find a description of the initial situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted.” As John Arras points out, this model may not even be said to be an attempt to reaching moral objective truth. In this way, where one may be impressed with Rawls’s re-rendering of the first principles laid down by his predecessors, it cannot be said that he did so to any greater epistemological benefit. What is clear, though, is that Rawls, albeit hesitatingly, saw a need in reconstituting the first principles which is indicative of his dissatisfaction with them as true principles in the first instance.

This chapter has attempted to show the corrigibility of the first principles of liberalism as proposed by three main thinkers of the tradition. Though this chapter has not attempted to provide an exhaustive list of liberal theorists, and thus cannot be said to represent all ‘liberal thought’, it has covered much of the major starting principles as accepted by the vast majority of major contributors. Liberalism spread rapidly after being an accepted part of the government and elitist discourse in European colonial lands. It appealed to people even more after defining moments such as the Glorious Revolution, the US and French Revolutions and, more recently, the two World Wars. Liberalism provided a basis for tolerance between countries and the peoples within them. From this perspective, liberalism has proven to be particularly useful (especially to Europeans and their extensions) as it has allowed them to co-exist and, more recently, even unite against common enemies. Liberalism has also allowed people to (in a Freudian sense) express their Id and curtail their superego. Many things in society have been allowed that would not otherwise have been so due to liberalism. In addition to its religion-like spread throughout the world, liberalism is also believed by many to be true as if its precepts are divinely instated. Freedom of speech, expression, and the press are ‘good’ things. Someone deprived of them is seen as dealt with unjustly, unfairly, or inappropriately.

If we are asking a strictly philosophical question - putting aside the social implications of doing so - we may ask the following question: What philosophical justification do we have to believe in any of these precepts if the epistemological foundations of liberalism have not been definitively established? Why feel the need, as Rawls did, to reconsider the faulty first principles of liberalism rather than just reject them? Considering this point, what is the main epistemic difference

between the Ancient Westerner who believed in Athena to better his society (while not having a foundational justification for doing so) and the modern one who believes in liberalism (without having justification from first principles) to better his society? Bear in mind that arguing that liberalism is better than all of the other alternatives, or that it prevents conflict or bloodshed, or that it allows personal expression or anything else, are all arguments of convenience for the usefulness of liberalism. These are fine arguments to that effect. However, what should be established is that the corrigibility of the first principle of liberalism cannot allow us to make definitive or real moral judgements based on the liberal framework. Liberalism should be seen as an ideology of philosophical convenience that, if not adhered to, causes social problems, rather than as a measure of any kind of true morality.

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