

Definition: **liberalism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Political and intellectual belief that advocates the right of the individual to make decisions, usually political or religious, according to the dictates of conscience. Its modern origins lie in the 18th-century Enlightenment. In politics, it opposes arbitrary power and discrimination against minorities. In British history, its greatest influence was exercised in the 19th century. In the USA, liberalism has, since the 1930s, referred to a belief in government action to manage the economy and (from the 1960s on) to improve the position of women and racial minorities. See *also* Liberal Party



Image from: [John Locke's theories about human behavior and... in Encyclopedia of Politics](#)

Summary Article: **Liberalism**

From *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*

Liberalism offers a prescription of how the state is to deal with citizens: Loosely speaking, the state is to address citizens as equal individuals. The rise of liberalism therefore requires the prior or more or less simultaneous development of a strong principle and practice of individualism. There is a considerable literature on the roles of individualism and of individualist Protestantism in the development of capitalism but a far less rich discussion of its role in the development of political liberalism. This is not a little odd, because political liberalism is defined specifically for a society of individuals, and it requires constitutional protections of individual citizens against intrusions

by the state. These three concepts—individualism, constitutionalism, and liberalism—are closely related historically, causally, and conceptually. Before turning to the structure or content of liberalism, there are two major preliminary issues to discuss here: an explanation of why liberalism came to its central place in political theory and practice when and where it did and some account of how it can be protected or enforced.

Individualism

Political liberalism is inherently a philosophy and practice of protecting individuals to live and act as they please, so long as they do not harm others; without individualism, therefore, it has no point. The central figure in the history of a vision of the place of individualism in political theory is Thomas Hobbes, who assumes individualism in his account of social order and the state. One might suppose that his assumption of individualism is normative or libertarian. But for him, in fact, it is much more explicitly a descriptive and causal issue just as Karl Marx's or Max Weber's account of economic motivation is causal. Descriptively, individualism is based on an assumption about human nature. Causally, therefore, it is a necessary part of the explanation of human behavior and, by implication, of political institutions that are designed to deal with individuals. We are self-interested; therefore, to explain our behavior, one must start from the assumption of self-interest.

Historians continue to debate when, where, and why individualism first arose. The most common view is that peasants in England were communally organized and held together by the fetters of the kinship group, and their land was collectively, not individually, owned. Economic progress required what Weber calls “defamilization.” Richard H. Tawney observes that most people in England in the 16th century “have never seen more than a hundred separate individuals in the course of their whole lives, where most

households live by tilling their great-grandfather's fields with their great-grandfather's plough" (quoted in Alan Macfarlane, 1978/1979, pp. 53-54). In its Greek origin, *economy* means household management, and until recent centuries, that would still have been its apt meaning in most of Europe. For the overwhelming majority of people, there was little exchange and virtually no money or commerce; there was at best merely self-sufficiency in a subsistence agrarian society. In a society under these conditions, liberalism is irrelevant.

Major historians of the relevant periods, such as Thomas B. Macaulay, among the greatest of liberals, commonly do not include individualism in their indexes, whereas the idea runs through the work of the great liberal theorist Leonard T. Hobhouse. In reading the historians who frequently delve into political theory, one often wonders where Hobbes has gone. Not surprisingly, Friedrich A. Hayek makes a major issue of individualism and, implicitly, of Hobbesism. For many liberal theorists, the world of Hayek and Hobbes is in principle our world. In fairness, many other scholars address individualism, although somewhat obliquely, through discussions of Puritanism and Calvinism and the role of individualist Protestant religions more generally in the development of capitalism. While these individualist religions are surely causally important, secular aspects of social life in these centuries and even the secularizing tendencies of the individualist religious beliefs provide the final force for remaking English social and economic relations well ahead of continental Europe.

Liberalism is widely recognized as a magnificent social invention, perhaps the greatest political invention of modern history, not least because it effectively created political modernity. Its development required one of the greatest changes in social structure ever experienced. Elements of it or local instances of its elements precede modern times, but the real transformation begins in a big way only in the 17th-century era of the spectacular efflorescence of—especially—Anglo-Saxon political theory. Hobbes is arguably the most important figure in this movement in part because he is the most insistent on the individualist focus. He is much less concerned with property than with social order. Indeed, he treats property and its protection as required for social order as well as for prosperity. One could rightly say that order must precede finer issues of wealth and prosperity, so that liberalism depends on order. And one should note that Hobbes wrote against the background of brutal wars that likely informed his vision. Later writers, such as John Locke and the grand economists in the line of Adam Smith, could focus on economic growth and "the wealth of nations." Hobbes's case shows that the two strains of liberalism—individualism and constitutional protections—can be separated in theory, and the English case shows that they can be at least piecemeal separated in the institutions that make them work in practice.

Why did liberalism come so late in history? Its appeal seems almost obvious. But social structures virtually blocked it through most of history. Pervasive, brutal poverty got in the way of concern for liberty, so much so that much of the vocabulary of liberalism is a late invention. Rather than a concern with liberty, which must have been hollow, with its implication of a right to starve a few centuries ago, rural families must sooner have focused on collective family welfare and fears of famine and sickness. The development of the transformative concern with individualism came first in England, and therefore, the idea of liberalism seems English, although it is soon followed by a somewhat different French conception.

Anarchists such as William Godwin might hold the optimistic view that individualism could drive a liberal society through the loosely coordinated individual efforts of large numbers of people without an overbearing government. But autocracy is a more likely form of government—the form that has

controlled most lives historically. While continental monarchies, especially in France and Spain, increasingly passed into greater despotism, the English became more liberal over many centuries. There were retrograde moves, such as the proclamation of the doctrine of the divine right of kings and the introduction of the Star Chamber. The final reign of autocracy in England was the monarchy of the Stuart, Charles I, who, oddly, signed the strikingly liberal “Petition of Rights” but then went on to ignore its agreed constraints on his actions.

Constitutionalism

The 1787 U.S. Constitution, one of the greatest liberal documents, written in light of English experience, ironically, did not include explicit statements of many of the protections that liberals and what would now be called constitutionalists wanted. Many of these, including freedoms of the press and of religious conscience, were added to the constitution in its first 10 amendments, the “Bill of Rights.” It may seem peculiar to create government in order, at least in part, to protect individuals against government when that government is implicitly enabled to act against individuals as readily as to act for them. There is no theoretical guarantee that a supposedly liberal state will or must rein itself in. Constitutionalism is therefore at best a pragmatic move that might work or that might fail. In the vocabulary of *The Federalist Papers*, a constitution is only a parchment barrier that is implicitly no barrier at all. In the history of this and many constitutions, such barriers have often been overridden, even trampled by powerful office holders. When constitutions succeed in regulating conduct, they do so for social psychological reasons and through James Madison's device of countering ambition with ambition.

The rise of constitutionalism has been a long-drawn-out process. The set of liberties to be protected has grown, and support for protection of many of these is virtually universal in liberal states today. Historical struggles over protection of freedoms of the press and speech more generally are typical of several other protections of civil liberties and civil rights. Historically, the most important issue for initial constitutionalism is the protection of freedom of religious conscience and practice. This is the issue that tore societies apart and that still plays a fundamental role in the development of liberalism. Diverse Christian sects were the chief problem in the United States in 1787. Islam, especially militant Islam, is regarded as a problem in much of Europe and North America today. Hobbes noted the near impossibility of assessing or controlling variant religious beliefs in an era in which, for example, England and Holland were increasingly diverse in their religious commitments. Still, he allowed enforcement of religious practices as supposedly necessary for maintaining order. The wreckage caused by religious conflicts in England in his time arguably licenses his illiberal views on this issue.

The Harm Principle

The harm principle says that I may do anything I please so long as I do not harm others. This principle, which has been stated over many centuries by many people in varied ways, has been elevated with its seductive and almost self-defining label by John Stuart Mill, who has perhaps, therefore, come to own the idea despite its common currency. One could say that this principle is the central commitment of liberalism: Do not interfere in the deliberate actions of others whose actions do no harm to us. Mill calls it a very simple principle, but the remarkably extensive commentary on it suggests, rightly, that it has subtle nuances and complex potential meanings. Mill argues against many state regulations, some of them offensively intrusive and some ostensibly beneficial. For example, to go back to the early foundation of liberalism, the state should not impose religious beliefs, qualifications, or practices on its citizens.

Strong defenders of the principle mean it to imply that, if you clearly know that what you are doing is harmful mainly to yourself alone, neither the state nor I should interfere; we should let you harm yourself. When this view is stated in the abstract, it offends many people because it seems to be cruel. But in actual fact, Mill is descriptively right: We commonly act on the strong form of the principle. For example, we do not prevent you from killing yourself through harmful or risky actions such as smoking, skydiving, and experimenting with powerful drugs. It is your life even if you wish to destroy it or to risk doing so. We might even be barred from interfering in your choice to commit suicide. Here, one of the difficult nuances pops up. We might suppose that your suicidal urge is somehow a mistake or a brief and aberrant psychological urge and that you would be grateful tomorrow for our interference today. If we confidently hold these views, what should we do?

Rule of Law

It is hard to read the early history of England without stumbling into surprising, brutal issues of unequal treatment under the law and of high-handed actions by the powerful that are not grounded in law. What today would be legal matters were formerly matters to be resolved by politics, power, and even murder. If the monarch or a baron wanted you out of the way, you had little recourse other than flight. Women, slaves, and serfs were often treated with brutality. In early medieval times, different status groups were subject to different laws and, especially, different punishments for the same offense. The rule of law includes a crude principle of fairness according to which all are subject to the same law and under which there can be no separate statuses for citizens.

In its first article, the 1789 version of the French revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen stipulates, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights; social distinctions may be based only upon general usefulness." This vision may be taken as the ultimate guiding principle of the rule of law. The main target of such a principle is arbitrary government, and the main resolution of this principle is to guarantee that everyone will be treated in accordance with the law. To make this work, there must be general social order and institutions to control officers of the government.

Commitment to the rule of law is of a piece with concern to limit government, which is the main point of constitutionalism. Liberalism and constitutionalism are interdependent defining features of political modernity. If a constitution does not limit government, it is a failed constitution. In this respect, yet again, constitutionalism, liberalism, and individualism are joined together. Already at the height of concern with the rule of law and limited government, however, Jeremy Bentham concludes that government is a close corporation with a vested interest that is potentially hostile to the collective welfare of its society, a view echoed later by John C. Calhoun. Their view is that democracy in England and America is increasingly turning corporatist. As is often more generally true, Bentham is prescient on this development, which must have distressed him deeply because it must undermine his belief in democracy as essentially utilitarian. This conclusion casts a pall over modern democratic society. If democracy is not utilitarian, there is little hope for a generally good form of government. Bentham's great utilitarian book, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, virtually trumpets the association of democracy with utilitarianism. The book is unusual in the identification of its personal moral theory with its political theory: These do not live in separate worlds, as they otherwise typically do in most of normative theory. Their separation is deplored by David Hume and Jeremy Bentham.

Religion

Protection of religious freedom is the fundamental concern that has driven political theory since well

before Hobbes. In the United States, the principal obstacle to government enforcement of particular beliefs has been the radical fractioning of beliefs, which nicely sets up a resolution of conflicts over religion in the United States, where the sheer numbers of sects fuels widespread opposition to selecting any sect as the national religion. The only workable compromise in 1787 was to rule out any official recognition of religion and especially to rule against establishing a state church. The problem of religion, which led to heated debates during the constitutional era in the United States, was virtually settled by this provision of the constitution. Indeed, the first Supreme Court case on religion, *Reynolds v. United States* (1878), came before the Court 90 years after the adoption of the constitution. This decision ruled against the Mormon practice of polygamy on pragmatic rather than on religious grounds. The judgment in *Reynolds* is that under religious freedom, one may believe whatever one may, but one cannot act in any way one chooses. It might seem to be hard to formulate an objection to polygamy from the harm principle, but many people do object that the practice of polygamy harms the status of women generally.

Multiculturalism and Group Rights

Over the past few decades, a multiculturalist movement has grown. This is both a matter of claims of particular groups and claims of academic theorists who take themselves to be defending the cultural rights of various minority cultural groups. Liberalism has no resources for dealing with groups, especially large groups well beyond the scale of the family, except to treat them as individuals aggregated into groups. But the features of the aggregations or of the groups play no role in standard liberal treatment of them. Indeed, standard liberal theory often conflicts with claims by the advocates or actual members of the groups themselves. Such theory has invariably been framed for individuals, and on the evidence of the weak, supposedly liberal arguments of academic defenders of the liberal nature of such groups, the liberal theory cannot easily be recast for groups. The greatest conflict commonly arises from certain groups' extremely illiberal treatment of their own children and of women in the groups.

Among the demands that such groups make is to limit their children's education, often so severely as to cripple any chances those children might have to survive outside the groups. In some cultures, girls are not educated at all, and boys are educated primarily in religious texts, such as the Talmud or the Koran. Another common demand is to have public agencies and schools speak in the native languages of the groups. Apart from Spanish, perhaps no other language is common enough across the United States for dual language policies to work at reasonable cost.

A liberal perspective on subgroups with which people are free to identify within a society is not strategically analogous to standard individualist political and economic liberalism. Such a "group liberalism" violates the strategic logic of liberalism. A policy to maintain a cultural group's autonomy and distinctive norms is not likely to motivate the most politically important groups in liberal societies. In particular, if a state attempts to maintain a cultural subgroup's autonomy, the state takes the risk of creating a politically influential class. Nor are resolutions of group problems likely to be self-enforcing, for example, in the ways in which the old liberalisms, once in place, are self-enforcing or a workable constitution is self-enforcing.

The greatest threat to the survival of an immigrant cultural subgroup's ways and norms is the next generation of the group itself. Their interests are often not served by the group's static values and norms. In this, group liberalism has failed. To preserve the group's character, the state would most likely have to intervene to coerce that generation into line. This coercion need not be so draconian as that of

the Saudi Arabian morality enforcement squads (the *mutawa*), but it would be dispiriting for many people in the group. It would violate most aspects of liberalism, including the harm principle, and very likely, if the culture discriminates by gender, it would violate the rule of law that requires equal treatment under law. In many of the cases argued in the recent explosion of multicultural arguments, it seems also likely to violate individualism and religious freedom.

At its worst, the violation of religious freedom is astonishing. For example, in the view of many Islamic clerics, apostasy from Islam is a capital offense. Therefore, Salman Rushdie was threatened with murder under a fatwa. It is a remarkable and distressing feature of claims for protecting culture or so-called group rights that they commonly do not address the reality of those claims and, in particular, their violation of the fundamental principles of liberalism. One can reject liberalism in defense of these claims, but it is perverse and wrong to suppose that these claims are or can be reformulated in liberal terms. They cannot be. There might be good moral defenses of various subcultural group practices, but liberalism cannot be distorted enough to provide a defense that merits the hallowed label *liberal*.

Incidentally, “group rights” is at least half an oxymoron. The individualism of rights collapses under the weight of a group. Moreover, groups of any numerical significance are sure to be very indistinct and poorly definable. Does Rushdie continue to be a member of the community of Muslims when he ceases to believe or when Islamic leaders target him for murder?

Liberalism in Moral Theories

With its individualist focus, liberalism seems consonant with the two leading moral theories of our time: utilitarianism and Kantianism. Kantianism might require a lot of groundwork to fit it to what is rightly framed as a consequentialist theory. Immanuel Kant famously asserted that justification of actions from their consequences is immoral, but he was not consistent in this odd view that would virtually rule out any serious understanding or justification of political institutions, whose usual purpose is to effect good consequences.

Writers from Bentham to Hobhouse have argued for a strong connection between liberal and utilitarian principles. Indeed, Bentham essentially derives liberalism from utilitarianism. The harm principle is readily seen as utilitarian, as are the rule of law and freedom of religious conscience, which are conceived of as individualist principles. Insofar as Kantian theories focus on the individual, they too must honor these principles.

Individualism and liberalism have often been associated with utilitarianism, perhaps merely because Mill and others took up all of these. But Mill would likely insist that they are logically coupled. Insofar as Kantian theory is individualist, it too tends to fit with liberalism through its implications for individual autonomy, which, with liberty, is an individual concern. Other moral theories generally do not seem to generalize straightforwardly to a political theory.

See Also:

Constitutionalism, Hobbes, Thomas, Individualism, Neoliberalism, Political Philosophy, Utilitarianism

Further Readings

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