

IN DEFENSE OF MORAL LIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT: Though it is much maligned, liberalism remains a vital component of any viable political and social condition. This claim can be defended, though, only once the confusions concerning the meanings of liberalism are resolved. This can be done by considering the primary contemporary challenges to liberalism, of which there are five: populist nationalism, authoritarianism, elitism, traditionalism, and moral absolutism. Each of these, though in differing ways and some more than others, are sources of illiberalism. To appreciate the meaning and import of what is here called moral liberalism, it is valuable to clarify the nature of the challenges to it and the reasons we have to prefer moral liberalism over any of its illiberal alternatives. In the end, moral liberalism may serve as a viable grounding for contemporary societies and states only in so far as it rests, not on commonly held ideas or consensus, but on the recognition of the many interests that members of groups and societies hold in common.

Keywords: liberalism, illiberalism, elitism, traditionalism, authoritarianism, populism, nationalism, freedom, rights, common interests

One of the more important political and social issues facing us, and it is one that is not restricted to any country or small set of countries, concerns the current state and future fate of liberalism.¹ Liberalism in some form has been challenged for a long time. In the 20th century both Marxism and Fascism were understood, correctly for the most part, to be alternatives to liberalism. In our time, as recent developments have indicated, the challenge comes from populism or authoritarianism of one sort or another. Given the importance of liberalism historically and politically, as well as the significance of related political realities such as democracy, individuality, and community, among others, it would be wise for us to try to sort out the relevant concepts. Doing so may enable us to come to a clearer sense of what our options are, and how we may reasonably evaluate them.

¹ An earlier and shorter version of this paper was presented to the Ratiu Dialogues on Democracy, Ratiu Center, Turda, Romania, May 2019. A still earlier version was given at the Central European Pragmatist Forum in Prague, Czech Republic in June 2018.

In the end, our position will be that for many reasons, which we will indicate, liberalism is a powerful and valuable set of moral, social and political commitments to maintain, and that is all the more reason to understand it correctly. The form of liberalism to be endorsed, however, and the reasons for it, are not what may be expected.

As the last comment suggests, the relevant terms and concepts, and perhaps liberalism has been the most susceptible to this, have taken on many different and sometimes inconsistent meanings, and ordinary discourse about social and political events is seriously muddled as a result. This is a situation that benefits no one, other of course than those who would like the public to be confused and therefore more easily manipulated. On the assumption that it is better for all members of the public to have reasonably clear ideas and to be less rather than more susceptible to manipulation, it is to the advantage of the general public as well as intellectuals that we think through the meanings and implications of liberalism and related concepts.

The confusion occurs at the public level in part because we tend to conflate two distinct sets of political concepts and then use the term 'liberal' in both without being sufficiently aware of the distinction. We can refer to the two sets as 'policy' and 'value' concepts. Policy concepts tend to represent a continuum with respect to approaches to political policy from what has traditionally been considered to be the right to the left. In this respect, policy concepts also represent partisan political possibilities. We may plot these possibilities, and the related approaches to policy, using political parlance that is currently common, from far right on one end of the line to far left on the other, even while acknowledging that these terms are themselves rather muddled. This continuum is meant to include conservatism and liberalism in a partisan sense, revanchism, radicalism, and their many permutations. Political parties tend to be distinguished by falling on one or several points along this continuum, often overlapping, which means that policy concepts like these invariably have a partisan edge but hazy boundaries.

The set we have called value concepts, for which we will also use the term ‘moral’ concepts, does not represent a continuum of this kind, nor is it directly related to partisan political options. It is, rather, the options available to us with respect to the values we adopt or employ in relation to our respective polities. Such value options include populism, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, internationalism, liberalism, neoliberalism, and other similarly broad sets of moral possibilities. These values are significant for us not only in that they delineate political styles and forms of engagement with one another, but they also importantly represent what we take to be the ends or purposes of our polities. They are the concepts and precepts we bring to bear when we consider questions like what we want the political aspects of our societies to be like, and what is the proper end of political affairs, which is to say of the state. As in the case of the policy concepts, our thinking concerning values is often complex and conducive to overlap. The lines among our moral options, as with our policy options, are not crisp or cleanly demarcated.

To complicate matters a bit, we should point out that there is also a third set of politically relevant concepts, which we may refer to as structure concepts. Here we find the organizational possibilities available to polities – monarchy, republic, democracy, constitutionalism, dictatorship, and others. As in the other cases, these organizational options overlap in a wide range of ways, depending often on historical traditions of a polity, and on such social traits as class relations, conflicts and/or commonalities of interests among differing social groups, and even religious orientation. As important as this set of structure concepts is for understanding political situations generally, we will pay little attention to it here. Our concern is with the first two sets, with a special emphasis on the value concepts.

To put the point directly, liberalism cuts across the two sets of policy and value concepts and can be applied to the third as well. In itself this may be an indication of nothing more than the richness of the term. In practice, though, the term ‘liberalism’ has different meanings and

connotations in each set of concepts, and we sometimes equivocate between them without realizing that we are doing so, and it is the resulting confusion of this equivocation that we would like to sort out in these remarks.

It is common, currently and even traditionally, to defend liberalism as the reasonable, ‘center’, alternative to the unreasonable excesses of the left and right.² This is not the position that I wish to defend in these remarks, and I cannot state this emphatically enough. One of the reasons it is unacceptable is that it is the chief illustration of the confusions created by putting the term ‘liberal’ to work in one set of concepts with meanings derived from another. When it is said that liberalism represents a political center, the term is being applied to the continuum on which are plotted the policy concepts, with the right on one side and the left on the other. The problem with using the term ‘liberal’ in this way is that it tends to be applied with the meanings it has in the set of value concepts, which is to say that we mean it as a moral concept but apply it as a policy concept.

The confusions arise immediately. For one thing, the meanings of ‘liberal’ as a value or moral concept can be applied to right and left as well as to anything in the center, which would presumably be some sort of amalgamation of traits of the political left and right. For example, among the meanings we would ascribe to ‘liberal’ as a moral or value concept is flexibility and expansiveness of outlook, but there is nothing inherent in either ‘right’ or ‘left’ policy concepts that preclude their being flexible and expansive. There can be adjustable and outer-oriented conservatism and socialism, for example, so to contrast liberalism with them simply confuses rather than illuminates. Similarly, it is equally possible for there to be an inflexible and ‘inner-looking’ center, just as there can be right and left positions that can be rigid and xenophobic, and we will look at examples a few pages on. Liberalism as a set of values ought not to be offered as a contrast within the context of policy concepts.

² A recent book that argues for the virtues of liberalism as centrism is Gopnick 2019.

This is not to say that liberalism as a value cannot be applied as a modifier of policy concepts, for surely it can be. There can certainly be a liberal right, center, or left, just as there can be an illiberal right, center, or left. The point is not that liberalism is meaningless; on the contrary, our position is that it is powerfully meaningful. Its power, however, is obscured when it is used inappropriately and in ways that are conducive to confusion. The point of the illustration is that we ought not to be talking about liberalism as an alternative, and therefore not as a preferable alternative, to right and left policy concepts. The import of liberalism lies elsewhere.

II

We may begin by looking more closely at the meaning of the term 'liberalism' as a set of values, because that is where its importance lies. In this respect, liberalism is a set of values that developed, largely in Europe and the Americas, from roughly the 17th century to the present. These values are enshrined in many central documents through these centuries, from the US Constitution to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the EU's Human Rights Charter. The values that constitute this sense of liberalism turn centrally on the idea of rights, human rights specifically, as well as on freedom. One can readily acknowledge that both terms – rights and freedom – are themselves complex and have a range of meanings available to them, but descriptively it is the case that liberalism in this moral sense is closely related to them, in one or several of the meanings that they have. It also values, as among the rights and freedoms to be respected, speech and expression, the press, human moral equality, religious liberty, justice, human development, and the profound significance of individual and community prosperity. As a matter of structure concepts, it is generally assumed that liberalism in this sense goes hand in glove with democracy. Historically that has been the case, though I would like to leave open, tentatively at least, the question whether liberalism of this sort requires democracy of some kind.

In our day, liberalism in the sense of a set of values as described above, is being challenged by one or another form of illiberalism. The term 'illiberalism' has come into use recently through the Hungarian ruling party's (Fidesz) reference to its position as 'illiberal democracy'. This is a fascinating phrase because, for one reason, it challenges the association of democracy with liberalism that has been an article of faith for those committed to liberalism as a policy or structure concept. We should take seriously, again at least tentatively, the possibility of a democracy that is illiberal, as Viktor Orban has proposed, and what that might mean. It is worth pointing out, too, that just to complicate things there is also in use the term 'undemocratic liberalism'. This is another locution we should take seriously, because, I would like to argue, much of the partisan, policy liberalism of recent decades, for which we may use the term neoliberalism, has in critical ways been far too undemocratic – remember the concern within the EU about a 'democratic deficit' – which has in turn caused to a considerable extent the reaction against political liberalism through which we are currently living. We will, in the end, want to describe neoliberalism as a form of 'undemocratic liberalism'. If the terms 'illiberal democracy' and 'undemocratic liberalism' are meaningful and point to some prevailing realities, then there is reason to believe that the presumed necessary relation between democracy and liberalism has been severed, in some respects anyway, and that this has been accomplished by both the illiberal democrats of the Orban variety and the leadership of the dominant western democracies. Neither set of political figures should think themselves superior to the others because we are all, or surely most of us, on the hook for our contemporary political malaise.

If all of this is sensible, then several important conceptual challenges present themselves to us. One is to examine whether democracy is a political condition that we ought to continue to endorse, and if so, in what forms and why. Another is whether liberalism, particularly in its policy and moral forms, continues to deserve our support, and why. A third critical question is what

the proper relation among the two, which is to say the relation between democracy and liberalism, might plausibly be. Those three questions are enough for more than a few volumes of thinking and writing, so I would like to focus on one of those questions, and make a case for a specific meaning of liberalism as a value or set of values, and to clarify the reasons it warrants our continued support.

The question is, then, whether moral liberalism should prevail over the illiberal alternatives. First, we need to be reminded that this is not a question of whether in general to endorse the left, right, or center, because illiberalism can prevail in all of them, as I will try to show. Second, we need to be clear about what sort of challenges to the values of moral liberalism are posed by illiberalism, and it is this question that will occupy much of the rest of the essay. As we will see, illiberalism takes several forms, and it is not difficult to offer illustrations of all of them. The illustrations provided are current as of late 2019, when this is being written. How each individual case will develop, indeed how the current forms of illiberalism will turn out, remain to be seen.

I would identify five general sets of contemporary illiberal challenges: 1) xenophobic, i.e. populist nationalism, 2) authoritarianism, 3) elitism, 4) traditionalism, and 5) moral absolutism. When we begin to consider these five sets of challenges, we can see why it is not helpful to think in terms of left, right, and center. Nationalism, especially of the xenophobic, populist variety, frequently comes to us from the right – think of Orban, Trump, Marine Le Pen, the AfD, Salvini and the Northern League, Kukiz 15, Zivi Zid, Vox, Modi and the BJP, and other examples in Austria, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and elsewhere – but a potentially destructive nationalism can come from the left as well. Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party's hostility to the EU comes from a left-leaning nationalism, in the sense that absent a proper socialist international, Corbyn will retreat to the English case alone, and the same tendency is appearing now elsewhere in Europe, for example in the German Social Democrats' 'Aufstehen' movement, created in early

2019, and to some extent in Mélenchon and his interest in the 'Gilets Jaunes' in France. While these are certainly not all the same, and the right-wing variety tend to be more xenophobic than the others, a debilitating nationalism can come from anywhere.

The same is true of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism certainly has right wing credentials, as the history of fascism and militarism around the world makes clear. Contemporary authoritarianism can also be right wing in some sense – the Turkey of Recep Erdogan comes to mind, as does Bolsonaro in Brazil and the Duterte government in the Philippines. The PRC, however, to the extent that it still has anything more than nominal socialism remaining, comes to us from the left, as do several other single-party states, and Russian authoritarianism is even harder to categorize.

Elitism is also ubiquitous, though it has the distinction of being the form of illiberalism that is most at home in the political center. It is what has for some time now gone by the name of neoliberalism, and was for some time referred to as, or at least related to, the 'Washington Consensus'. It is the collective leadership of the liberal democracies, what is sometimes called the 'Party of Davos', and it is the set of people that has been most stunned by the illiberalism of our times. Whoever those people are, and one could argue about who they are to whom the term refers, they were quite sure, since the end of the cold war, that the future belonged to them. Now they are not so sure, though they most certainly have not given up.

Traditionalism is a bit harder to characterize, though it is an interesting phenomenon. It is possible to reject liberal values without being nationalistic, xenophobic, or especially authoritarian, and an illiberal traditionalism meets this description. For example, there is currently a Catholic movement in France, referred to as 'La Manif' that to some extent could be characterized this way. Its roots are in traditional Catholic values rather than more modernist liberal commitments, and I have in mind such values as family, church, traditional marriage, and community. Such religiously grounded traditionalism is intri-

going because it could also describe many Americans whose value systems are in traditional, in some cases pre-modern, forms of Christianity. Many such people are among those who voted for and continue to support Trump, though he himself does not fit the description of a religious traditionalist. One of the public figures who is associated with La Manif, by the way, is Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, the granddaughter of Jean-Marie and niece of Marine Le Pen. The American Vice-President Mike Pence might meet this description, though his Protestant traditionalism is of a more virulently authoritarian stripe. We may also point out that in the US especially, there is a school of traditional Catholic political philosophy, drawing in part from the communitarianism of Alasdair MacIntyre, that is critical of liberalism on similar traditionalist grounds. Patrick Deneen is among the most prominent of this group for his *Why Liberalism Failed*, and there are others at several universities across the country (Deneen 2019).

The final category of illiberalism, what I have called ‘moral absolutism’, comes to us largely from the left, at least in the US and as I understand it to some extent in the UK as well, and it is most evident in universities and in the press. There are many people who are quite sure that they are in possession of the truth, especially with respect to anything having to do with race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc., and they are determined to ensure that no falsehood have a chance to be uttered or even heard. These are the people who disrupt speakers with whom they disagree, or who make demands of certain kinds with respect to university curricula, or who determine which words, expressions, and grammatical forms we may be permitted to use, or who demand that they not be exposed to any ideas that offend them. In their certainty and moral absolutism, they are akin to the 17th century self-righteousness that is often associated with the Puritans (though this may be unfair to the Puritans), and in fact to a certain sort of Christian missionary who was determined to save souls and allow no evil to interfere. Just as that form of intolerance and missionary zeal represents the world against which

moral liberalism developed, its current manifestation in secular guise is one of the forms of illiberalism with which we must currently deal.

A related form of this sort of absolutism is the idea, now heard on some American university campuses, that liberal values are threatening and dangerous. An example is a 2018 development at Williams College in Massachusetts, one of the most prestigious American liberal arts colleges. The administration and faculty there had voted to endorse formally the University of Chicago’s statement of the necessity of freedom of speech on campuses as central to the mission of any serious university. This attempt at Williams to endorse that principle was met with stiff resistance by a number of students, who rejected it on the grounds that ‘free speech harms’, in the language of one of the posters students used. The idea is that free speech gives opportunity to racist, misogynist, and other voices hostile to some students to be heard. In the face of this resistance, many faculty members withdrew their support for the Chicago statement, as did the Williams president. The issue continued to be under discussion at Williams.

We should point out that there is also a form of moral absolutism that comes from the right. In the US this is found more than anywhere else in the activism of some religious fundamentalist communities. It is the moral certainty that fuels attacks on abortion clinics, and on doctors and nurses that perform abortions, or even counsel women on the subject. It is the certainty that inclines many to ignore science in the name of religion, on even such basic matters as evolution or the age of the universe. It takes the form of blind faith over evidence and reason, and lawmakers who fit this description will, in the name of such faith, drive policy and governance. We may also note that something similar can be seen in the form of traditionalism, without any specific tie to religion or religious belief. For many of us, the bonds and habits of tradition can be a powerful social impediment to liberal values. Whether the traditionalism mentioned earlier, as exemplified by La Manif, necessarily collapses into this sort of moral absolutism is an open question.

All five of these forms of illiberalism threaten the values we have identified as definitive of moral liberalism. The first two – populist nationalism and authoritarianism – are readily and commonly acknowledged as hostile to liberalism. The latter three – traditionalism, elitism, and moral absolutism – are much less commonly recognized as threats to liberalism as a value or moral concept. I would like to argue that the latter three are no less threatening than the others. Traditionalism is a tricky matter because it is possible for traditionalism and liberalism to coexist if both are willing to grant, as liberals certainly should, the right of individuals to disagree. Whether the religiously grounded traditionalists are willing to grant that is not clear. What is clear is that moral liberalism is no more preserved by allowing elitism and moral absolutism to prevail than it is by surrendering to xenophobic or populist nationalism or to authoritarianism. The difficulty we currently have, or one of them anyway, is that people on the so-called right can see the threat from elitism and moral absolutism, but they cannot see the threat from traditionalism, nationalism and authoritarianism. For many people on the so-called left, the situation is the opposite, in that they can see the threat from traditionalism, nationalism and authoritarianism, but not from elitism and moral absolutism; or, for many left-wing academics, they can accept that elitism is a challenge, and even that moral absolutism of the fundamentalist variety is a problem, but do not see the illiberalism of the moral absolutists among themselves. And of course, the many people in the center, so to speak, continue to think that if only we can overcome the nationalists and authoritarians, and return power and authority to the neoliberal economic and political elite to whom they are quite convinced it rightfully belongs, then all will be well.

To reinforce the point, it is worthwhile to take a moment to clarify how these several forms of illiberalism are a threat to the moral liberalism I will eventually champion, and we can do so succinctly. With respect to populist or xenophobic nationalism, the point is fairly straight-forward. Among the core values of moral liberal-

ism that was at the heart of European and American revolutionary theory of the 18th century, and has been central ever since, is the commitment to the universality of rights and freedoms. ‘All men are created equal’, Thomas Jefferson wrote in the American Declaration of Independence, and both the UN Declaration and the EU Charter speak to the equal entitlement of all people to the rights and freedoms we are here describing as central to moral liberalism. (There have been challenges to such universalism in recent decades in academic circles, more or less on the grounds that such appeals have an indefensible cultural hegemonic character to them. I think these objections can be answered, but we will leave that question aside.) Populist nationalism is a direct challenge to the universality of moral liberal commitments in that it explicitly defends the view that some people, that is some nations or ethnicities, are morally more important than others. We should note that the universality of which we speak does not necessarily imply that all people have an entitlement to a specific nation’s legal commitments, which is to say to any nation’s commitments to its own citizens. We can maintain the distinction between those who are and those who are not citizens while also maintaining the universality of liberal values. Populist nationalism is, in practice, willing to abandon universality when doing so is perceived to be in the ‘national interest’. Much of the deplorable treatment of immigrants in Europe, the US, and elsewhere is an example of this problem.

Authoritarian leaders abandon liberal values even with respect to their own citizens. Among the core commitments to liberal values that we have described are the freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press, and it is worth reminding ourselves why these rights and freedoms are as important as we say they are. One practical reason, and this derives from John Stuart Mill’s mid-19th century defense of freedom of speech and expression, is that even if some speech is false, indeed hateful, the free engagement of ideas will be more conducive to the truth over time than will any limitations on speech and expression. I will simply say, without argument for

now, that Mill was right about that. To draw on another liberal strain, John Dewey argued throughout his writings that the importance of such freedoms is that they are necessary for individual and community development in the sense of achieving our self-defined purposes and potential. Restrictions on these liberties stultify us, and to that extent constitute a hostility to liberal values. One of the many problems with authoritarianism is that it is prone to just such restrictions, and in that fact lies its danger to liberalism.

This is not to say that speech may never be restricted, because there are well established cases in which some speech is illegitimate and proscribed. The general reason for this is that process can never be fully untethered to content. To put the point succinctly, and in a way that relates to our concern with illiberalism, speech should be free in the context of the entitlement of members of a relevant community to full participation in the community's activities and goods. For example, all students in a university have every reason to expect that their entitlement to the university's goods and activities be unimpeded. No university is required, on free speech or other grounds, to permit actions or speech that seeks to undermine that entitlement among students and other members of the community. Free speech is a paramount value, but it is indefensible when it undermines the moral legitimacy of individuals' participation and membership in their own communities. With that caveat, the right freely to express ourselves is central to moral liberalism, and it is challenged by modern authoritarian illiberalism.

As we have mentioned, nationalism and authoritarianism are commonly regarded as impediments to liberalism, while the challenges of elitism, traditionalism, and moral absolutism are less commonly understood. We need, then, to focus a bit of attention on those. The problem of elitism can be especially difficult to see because it has become characteristic of most Western democracies, we have become so accustomed to it that we easily miss it, and it constitutes the so-called political center of Western democracies that many of us simply

assume is a reasonable place to reside intellectually and politically. Whether we can readily see the problem or not, it is just this elitism of the center that has prompted the illiberal backlash in Europe and the US that is currently underway, and that fact alone should be sufficient to give us pause.

The problem can best be seen in the tension between elite and common judgment, which, we should point out, has been an issue in Western democracies since at least the 18th century. In the American case such prominent revolutionaries as John Adams argued that 'the rich, the well-born, and the able' are those who could be expected to have the ability to rise above undesirable influences, even if not over the allure of narrow self-interest, and embody necessary republican virtues, and Adams was not alone, having drawn this view from a deep well of European thinking on the subject. In the French case, the tilt toward elitism in the revolution gained a firm hand by the time of the Terror and then in the counter-revolutionary ideals of Bonapartism. There were always less elitist voices on the scene – Jefferson and Thomas Paine come to mind, and even Edmund Burke to some extent – so the tension was there, and it never went away. By the early 20th century in the US, Walter Lippmann would argue for the superiority of elitist policymaking, on the grounds that things had become too complicated to expect average people to understand and impact through their votes. It was precisely against Lippmann's call for an elitism of some kind that John Dewey wrote *The Public and Its Problems*.

It is useful to note, without going into the details, that this was an 'in-house' disagreement among liberals – can liberalism rest on the traditional notion of the competent citizen properly educated, as Dewey argued, or does it require, as Lippmann thought, a different politics that places extensive decision-making authority in the hands of elite managers? The elitists won the day, and in the process of exercising this form of liberal polity they have to considerable extent deprived citizens of the power that democracy is presumed to convey. This is the reason that the politics of so many of our societies in

Europe and North America can now be described as 'undemocratic liberalism', and it indicates the reasons elitism is hostile to genuinely liberal values. To the extent that such elitism denies individuals the power and authority to determine the policies that guide their governance, the purpose of the commitments of liberalism is undermined. Elitism does not necessarily obstruct the exercise of liberal values, but it eviscerates their potential to enhance individual and social development. The values of moral liberalism remain, but they are rendered impotent. While people do not typically put the point this way, this is, I would posit, the reason so many Europeans and Americans are resentful of the governing classes, and one of the primary reasons for the illiberal rebellions we are witnessing. Unfortunately, their response to elitist illiberalism has been illiberalism of another sort.

The question of the relation of traditionalism to liberalism is a bit harder to sort out. In fact, as we have mentioned, it is possible for even religiously grounded traditionalists to accept liberal principles. It appears, though, that this rapprochement is much less common than many of us had thought. Liberal values place an individual's freedom to choose his or her own sexual identity as among one's moral entitlements; religious traditionalism tends not to do so. Liberalism is committed to secularism as a principle of social and political organization; religious traditionalism tends not to be. Liberalism is committed to the freedom of religious belief and expression; religious traditionalism can all too easily not be.

The problem of religious fundamentalism, which we have identified as a right-wing moral absolutism, is rather easy to see. Any unreasoned insistence on a perceived or assumed truth, whether on religious or secular traditionalist grounds, undermines the principles of criticism, reason, and evidence on which the commitments to rights, freedom, and equality are based. Moral liberalism cannot prevail in a fundamentalist or absolutist traditionalist environment because they embrace values that are not open to examination and development. In

such an environment, there is no soil and no atmosphere in which morally liberal values can prevail and expand.

The alternative displayed by much of the so-called left, which I have described as moral absolutism, is no better. I will assume that we can stipulate that the racism, sexism, and homophobia that has characterized all of our societies for centuries must be overcome, and that overcoming them is an implication of the moral equality, not to mention the freedoms and rights, that are at the heart of moral liberalism. There remains the question, though, whether all forms of anti-racism, -sexism, and -homophobia are conducive to the ends we all seek? I would submit that some of the ways that the resistance to racism, sexism, and homophobia is currently expressed are in fact hostile to the values of moral liberalism. When we shut down voices of those with whom we disagree, or undermine access to the writings and ideas of those of whom we disapprove, we are abandoning the very values that we ought to endorse. But these are precisely the sort of actions that are taking place, repeatedly in some places, in American universities and other social centers, and perhaps elsewhere as well.

One ought not to paint a picture with too broad a brush because there are often relevant differences from one case to the next, but efforts to remove statues of historical individuals because they owned slaves, or to eliminate a university course on the work of a famous film-maker because of his dodgy reputation with respect to sexuality, or the refusal to mount a production of an important author's play because of the way it depicts people from a particular nation, or petitions to major museums to remove paintings because of the ways they depict young women, or the refusal to host speakers who challenge a received opinion, are all attempts to censor our intellectual and cultural experience based on the moral certainty of the censor. Such certainty may be well intentioned in the sense that it is grounded in some understanding of social justice for those who have been mistreated on racial or gender grounds, but they are for that no less hostile to the moral liberalism that we need.

There are surely racists and sexists and homophobes among us, but we need to engage them, not try to hide from them or lock them away. If nothing else, hiding from them and locking them away does not work as a means to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia. Moreover, it is inimical to the values of moral equality, freedom, and genuine respect as among the liberal values that we want to endorse. Moral absolutism, even in the name of liberal moral virtues, is as hostile to them as are the other dangers we have discussed.

III

We have provided examples, and made the outline of a case, for the illiberalism of the left, right, and center. The presumption behind the examples and the argument, of course, has been that moral liberalism represents a virtue we ought to defend. What does such a defense look like? We have already pointed to it as these remarks have proceeded, but we may remind ourselves. Liberalism as a value or moral concept is not an end or virtue in itself. Its import derives from its consequences in practice, and it is those consequences that we want to endorse. Specifically, a society in which we are able to think, speak, and assemble according to our own lights serves our individual and social development better than any alternative. Moreover, having all reasonable opportunity to fulfill our potential, to reach for and possibly achieve that which inspires or motivates us, is as much as we can expect for our lives. There are alternatives as ends one might prefer to pursue – happiness, for example, or contentment, or service. Societies in which we have less opportunity to pursue our potential can nevertheless generate happiness or contentment, but they would be the result of chance or of others' decisions and judgments. We can live in such societies; many millions of people do, and they get along more or less well. But in the end, self-determination is preferable to determination by others, or so I would posit.

This is a point that we need to attend to carefully. Frequently, when philosophers, especially American philosophers, talk about political values, there is a tendency

to insist that whatever we prefer must be ideal for everyone else as well. This is understandable, given that typically philosophers are not interested in describing simply what people prefer but rather what ought to be the case, and equally typically we tend to argue in universal terms, so that whatever we determine to be best must be best for everyone. In some cases this is appropriate. Slavery, for example, is an unjust violation of an individual's integrity, and it makes no difference whether anyone prefers it or not, including a slave. Slavery is unacceptable as a universally applicable value.

But not all political virtues lend themselves to such generalizable conclusions. Democracy is one such virtue. As much as those of us who are accustomed to democratic circumstances would not be comfortable in others, there are millions of intelligent and morally trustworthy people who prefer other political arrangements. For anyone to claim that they are wrong to prefer political arrangements other than democracy is to indulge in an arrogance and self-righteousness that the most narrow-minded of colonialist administrators and missionaries would find congenial.

Liberalism may well be another such value. Those of us who identify with moral liberalism and the possibilities it engenders should be expected to apply its flexibility and broad-mindedness sufficiently to be able to respect and acknowledge the wishes of those who prefer otherwise. But that fact does not preclude us from exerting the efforts required to defend liberalism when it is threatened. Some others may prefer a different sort of social and political values, but we are not required to accede. Moral liberalism, combined with other social possibilities such as strong educational opportunities, if properly embedded in a society, is more likely to produce opportunities for self-determination than any alternatives of which we are aware. The illiberalisms we have discussed militate against the values of moral liberalism, and hence against the virtues of self-determination. Consequently, they are to be resisted in the interest of moral liberalism.

There remains, however, one possible misunderstanding I would like to avoid. I have argued that the

primary virtue of moral liberalism is that its values enable self-determination, and that self-determination, as opposed to determination by others, is a circumstance we should value. It is possible, though, to misunderstand this point as an endorsement of a kind of traditional individualism over against the importance of social relations. This is not what I mean to say or endorse, and I would like to take the time necessary to indicate how we can avoid such traditional individualism while maintaining a commitment to self-determination.

The reason is simple, really, and it is that individuals are social beings. Our desires, our interests, our purposes, all arise in the context of the social and other relations in which we find ourselves and which contribute to our identity.³ To endorse self-determination is to embrace our individual capacities to act and to judge within the social relations that constitute us. From the perspective of social structures and political possibilities, the way we may both enact individual self-determination while embracing our sociality is through understanding and acting on common interests.

Members of any social group large or small, from neighborhood associations to ethnicities to states, have by virtue of their membership common interests. Dewey made much of common interests, saying in fact that holding interests in common, and pursuing common interests with those beyond the limits of a given group, is the foundation of any successful community. This, in turn, is the basis of his understanding of democracy (Dewey 2008). By 'common interests' neither Dewey nor I mean to refer to common beliefs, or to some commonly agreed upon sense of the good, but simply to garden-variety common interests.

Philosophers have tended to think that societies, or in any case the healthiest societies, are held together by a common sense of purpose, or outcome, or principles. Some think that the most well-structured society is one that enables and encourages the sort of ongoing social

discourse and deliberation that will tend toward consensus about 'the good', or about foundational values and commitments. This traditional approach tends to assume that a healthy society requires agreement among its members at some explicit or at least implicit level. In this respect, it is the heir to an even more traditional social contract theory, which also assumes an at least implicit agreement as the basis of the political legitimacy of the state.

There are serious problems with the notion that ideally members of a society will tend toward consensus. The fact is that we may, and usually do, disagree with one another over many ideas, principles, values, and other important matters. Moreover, not only is this the case, but on liberal principles it is a situation we would hope would continue. All the evidence of history and our own lives suggests that a society of free-thinking people will be one characterized by a range of opinions, ideas, commitments, and values. We should not expect ourselves to agree, even about basic commitments, nor should we even want such a situation.

But even in such disagreements, we have interests in common. My neighbor may think that a secular society is an abomination, and I may think that a religious society is an outrage, but we both want our street to be safe; neighbors want their schools to educate their children well, even if they do not agree on every point about what counts as a good education; fans of a particular team, regardless of their varied backgrounds, want their team to win; we all want our built environments to be well engineered and safe, regardless of the various basic values we may hold; members of a community want parks and recreation facilities, regardless of which activities and sports we prefer or which political party we support⁴; despite whatever disagreements we may have, we nevertheless need to pursue together those interests that we have in common. The simple ones are relatively

³ For an important and current description and defense of a relational understanding of the self, see Wallace 2019.

⁴ I would like to thank John Bing for bringing this example to my attention, and for demonstrating the extent to which parks and recreation are a useful illustration of democratic organization based on common interests.

easy, like rooting for the same team. Others, like ensuring the safety of our built environments, are much more complex and difficult. In both cases, though, to hold interests in common is to say that we can be expected to work with one another to best meet those interests. The only agreement required in such cases concerns how best to meet the interests, and even here there may be disagreements that require compromise and a willingness to settle for something short of our ideal in order to avoid failing to meet our shared interest as all.

If a healthy society rests not so much on people's opinions and ideas but on practical interests that we have in common, then we can begin to see how a society rooted in complex and constitutive relations among its members can simultaneously accommodate social relations and individual integrity as equally central. The fact of common interests indicates our sociality, and the fact that not all our interests are held in common with any one other person or groups of persons indicates our individual distinctiveness and its importance. As a general ontological point, each of us is related in complex ways to many people and various features of our environments, but not to everything and not in all ways. The same point applies to interests.

Each of us has some common interests with some other people, but not all interests in common with the same set of people. Any group of individuals with a common interest is likely to overlap with other groups defined by other common interests, but it is unlikely that any two groups will be identical. The reason is simply that we do not have all interests in common. In fact, there are some respects in which our interests may conflict or contradict one another. Marx developed an entire social, economic, political, and historical theory based on this observation, and he was right that in some respects, some individuals have conflicting interests. Some of those conflicts are not much of a problem: I want the Mets to win, and you want the Yankees; I support Man City and you favor Arsenal. These are conflicting interests that we can live with and usually laugh with one another about. In fact, in cases such as these, the

necessity of being able to live with them is an enabling condition for the relations to exist at all. There would be no competitive sports if we were attacking and killing one another over them.

Other conflicting interests are more of a problem, and Marx as well as others before him identified the most intractable of them. In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison famously pointed out that "The most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society." Madison went on to say that even among the propertied, interests differ and conflict among manufacturers and traders and financiers. Marx would have agreed. One important difference between the two is that Madison thought that a proper structure of political power could accommodate these conflicting interests, while Marx thought otherwise. For his part, this was the argument Madison made for the proposed Constitution, i.e. that government can be organized such that there can be a level playing field, so to speak, on which the differing interests can compete without any of them dominating the others and without destroying the political and social system. In this respect, the competing interests that Madison identified become more like Man City vs. Arsenal than like class conflict. One might argue, though, that in fact Madison's solution works for the competing interests among the propertied, but leaves out most of the rest (Ryder 1989). Marx might have agreed, because it is far less clear that the fundamental class conflicts between those with and those without property can be domesticated by political structures. There is a debate to be had here, and it is an important issue. It is, in fact, one of the basic differences between Deweyan liberalism and Marxism.

However, that debate is resolved, if it can be resolved, the fact remains that the human condition is a social one, and that its social condition is characterized by interests that individuals have in common. Following Dewey again, we may point out that not only is our sociality defined in part by interests we hold in common with others, but social health generally requires that we actively extend

the range of common interests. In other words, we make an effort, where possible, to extend the borders of our interests to include others, and that this be done with due regard for others' individual integrity. Dewey did not mean, nor do we, that we ought to extend the borders of Christianity by forcing others to convert, nor did he or we mean that we expand the borders of democracy by forcibly 'spreading democracy' to sovereign countries. The pursuit of common interests is not a matter of behaving like the Borg – 'You will be assimilated; resistance is futile' – but of expanding the opportunities for common ground and fruitful communication. The expansion of common interests makes it possible for neighboring communities to coexist and prosper, and it makes it possible for nations to engage constructively rather than competitively with one another.

To summarize: this social feature of our individuality can be recognized more and more broadly, in the sense that our interests are held in common in many respects and with many people. On that basis, there is a good deal of room for collaboration and common action without concerning ourselves with questions about who agrees with whom about what. Agreement on principles and ideas looms much less large than it does in other approaches to social and political engagement. If we add to this a commitment to the importance of education as a way to help us develop the habits of recognizing and even promoting shared interests beyond our immediate and accepted communities, we will have gone a long way to avoiding an indefensible individualism and to creating conditions necessary for individuals and their societies to prosper on morally liberal grounds, pending of course some resolution to the problems created by the fact that some of our interests are in conflict. Assuming that can be done, then the ground is cleared to defend the kind of moral liberalism that has been endorsed here, the sort that holds individual self-determination to be a paramount value, and consequently that supports

the features of social structures and engagement that enable such self-determination.

I do not want to suggest that this would be easy, but I would posit that a society and polity that rests on the recognition of shared interests, and the pursuit of shared interests beyond one's immediate geographical and cultural borders, enables us to endorse the central importance of self-determination while understanding the necessarily social nature of our own and others lives. If we can do something like this, then the values that constitute moral liberalism may have a fighting chance against the illiberalism of our moment. Moreover, if social and political life pursued in this way can be understood as a rich form of democracy, and if it can, as we have argued here, resonate with genuine moral liberalism, then the link between liberalism and democracy can be re-established on grounds less likely than our recent experience to collapse into illiberalism. The liberalism so described turns out to be more or less what Dewey had worked out long ago. He may have pointed us in this direction by designing an appropriate conceptual and social model, but it is up to us to understand, develop, and apply it.

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