

Round One: What Liberalism Is

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The most direct route to political fundamentals is to ask: What should governments do? The different ‘isms’—liberalism, socialism, fascism, and so on—answer that question based on their most cherished values, holding that the purpose of government is to achieve those values. Yet societies are complex and we create many kinds of social institutions—businesses, schools, friendships and families, sports teams, churches/synagogues/mosques/temples, associations dedicated to artistic and scientific pursuits, governments, and so on—to achieve our important values.

So the next question is: What is *unique* about government, both in terms of *what* values it is responsible for achieving and *how* it should do so?

A government is a social institution distinguished by two traits: (1) its principles apply to the whole of society and (2) they are enacted by physical force or the threat of physical force. That is, governments claim and practice *universality* and *compulsion*.

In these two respects government is distinguished from other social institutions, such as businesses, religious associations, sports teams, and so on, which are *particular* and *voluntary*. Not everyone in a society does business with a given company, joins a given religious association, plays a given sport, or participates in a given musical group. And when a member of one of those social institutions disagrees with or breaks one of its rules, the most that institution can do is dissociate itself from that member.

A government, by contrast, claims and enacts the authority to apply its rules to everyone in a society. Furthermore, it claims and enacts the authority to use physical force such as confiscation, imprisonment, and execution against those who break its rules. It is a universal institution of compulsion.

Consequently, the key questions to answer when defining the proper, principled role of government are: What principles are *so important* that *everyone* in society should respect and live by them? What principles are *so important* that *physical force* may be used against those who violate them?

That is to say, the question of government power requires deep *moral* thinking.

And that is what puts the various ‘isms’ in conflict with each other, as liberalism, socialism, fascism, and so on bring to their politics different—often fundamentally different—values, value hierarchies, and philosophical justifications for their values.

The liberal answer to the value questions is, of course, to say that liberty is the top political value. By *liberalism* I mean the social philosophy that makes foundational the liberty of the individual in all areas of life—artistic, religious, economic, sexual, political, and so on.

Liberalism’s key political claims are that *all* individuals are entitled to liberty and *all* individuals should respect each other’s freedoms. That is the *universality* element. Any individual who violates the liberty of another can properly be subject to physical force. That is the *compulsion* element. The justification of government’s unique social power is thus based upon the value of liberty.

All other values to be achieved socially, liberalism says, are to be pursued by particular and voluntary institutions. The job of particular businesses is to pursue wealth with those who choose to associate with them. The job of particular religious institutions is to pursue worship with those who choose to do so in a similar way. The job of particular sports is to pursue physical challenges with those who choose to participate. The job of musical associations is to pursue aesthetic values with those who choose to be interested. And so on.

Most of society's work, liberalism thus says, is to be done *outside* the political sector by particular voluntarily formed institutions. The job of government, by contrast, is to use its uniquely universal and compulsive power in the service of one value: the protection of the liberty of individuals as they pursue their chosen values.

To put it negatively, it is *not* the task of government to provide any of us with friendships and enriching romantic and family lives, nor with good-paying jobs or spiritual fulfillment, nor with scientific understanding or aesthetically sublime experiences. It is our personal responsibility to seek and create those for ourselves, individually and/or socially as part of voluntary institutions. The task of government is *only* to provide the liberty-space to do so.

To protect freedoms, liberal governments devise a network of institutional elements. They specify religious liberties, property rights, free-speech rights, liberties to engage in commercial activities, artistic freedom, and more. They set up police, courts, and prisons to investigate those who violate others' freedoms and to restrain those guilty of doing so. And, most uniquely among political philosophies, liberal governments place explicit limitations on the scope and power of government itself—especially given the historical lessons of often terrible abuses of government power—in order to lessen the risk that government itself will violate liberties.

Yet advocates of other political philosophies disagree, and the debate is joined. Is liberty really the *most* important political value? What about security, prosperity, equality, justice, peace, efficiency, or spiritual purity? Is liberty *compatible* or *in tension* with them? In either case, why *prioritize* liberty?

The radicalism of liberalism is often daunting to its opponents. In part this is because liberalism is a relative newcomer in human history, after millennia of tribalism, feudalism, and many types of authoritarianism. Strong elements of liberalism had short-lived successes in classical Greece and Rome, more recently in some Renaissance Italian and Baltic states, and arguably in a few other places. Only in recent centuries has liberalism become a major contender in theory and practice, and only in some parts of the world.

Furthermore, aside from resistance from traditional forms of politics, liberalism faces formidable opposition from other newcomers such as modern socialisms, fascisms, updated hierarchical authoritarianisms, and systems that try to mix them.

Socialisms and fascisms fundamentally reject liberalism's prioritizing *individuals*, instead making a collective the top value, holding that individuals and their assets belong to their preferred collective. Accordingly, they conclude that the government should deploy its universal compulsive power to use individuals and their assets on behalf of the collective.

Hierarchical authoritarians fundamentally reject liberalism's prioritizing *freedom*, instead making the possession of power itself the top political value. Or they argue that some individuals are more worthy of power due to their differing natural or supernatural endowments and/or their success in the struggle to acquire power. Accordingly, they hold that the government's universal compulsive power can and should be used in the service of whatever values its possessors decide.

While all of the 'isms' recognize that the government is a uniquely powerful social institution, they differ over the values that justify the government's use of its unique power. That is to say, politics depends upon more fundamental *philosophical* beliefs about morality, human nature, and the meaning of life.

Liberalism believes in the individual and in the individual's fundamental need for freedom to pursue his or her meaning of life. Other 'isms' devalue the individual and/or deny the importance of any individual's need for freedom.

Liberalism has been a robust success in the modern world, yet societies are complex and a few centuries is a brief amount of time in political theorizing, experimenting, and institutionalizing. So liberalism is an ongoing project. It is not against conserving previous generations' political accomplishments, some of which are now traditions, as long as those accomplishments are justified by their liberty-enhancing effects. And it is committed to ongoing reform or the outright abolition of any still existing illiberal political traditions.

Liberalism is a work in progress.