

## **On a troublingly holistic liberalism, compared to the Rawlsian kind**

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*Abstract.* This paper presents a more holistic variety of liberalism than the Rawlsian kind, which involves judging that various things are not properly liberal, things which the Rawlsian would seek to avoid conflict with, e.g. “This is not liberal poetry,” “This is not liberal computer programming.” Such judgments seem to be based on an emotional, or aesthetic, sense of coherence.

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*“How did you apprehend the whole?”*

—*“With my soul, with my soul.”*

A liberal society places a high value on freedom; but how much freedom can it give people? It seems the society has to impose some rules in order to prevent one person’s use of their freedom from reducing the freedom of another: one person’s freedom to strangle another versus the other person’s freedom to live and breathe. Also it seems some measures have to be taken against people who would appeal to freedom to promote a system that replaces a liberal one. Must not some measures be taken in some circumstances to ensure the long-term stability of liberalism? Surely a liberal state should require that most citizens are publicly committed to its values, or so it makes sense to think. The American liberal philosopher John Rawls offers the most worked out version of this view (see Rawls 1993; Quong 2011). In a liberal society, most

citizens are supposed to accept that this society should be a cooperative system of free and equal citizens. Rawls aims to allow for considerable diversity in beliefs while ensuring that the vast majority of citizens are committed to liberal values, so as to ensure the long-term stability of liberalism. In this paper, I wish to examine a troubling alternative to Rawlsian liberalism.

This kind of liberal agrees that most citizens in a liberal state should be committed to liberal values, but they desire to restrict the diversity of other commitments available to such citizens, albeit not by official restrictions. They are a more holistic liberal, a troublingly more holistic one! Here are some examples of their troubling holism in action – let us give the liberal a name: Wholly L.

*Marjorie's poetry club.* Imagine that Marjorie sets up a club called “Classical Poetry Writing.” You have to write in neat rhymes according to a rhyme scheme. Few people pass the strict requirements of her club. Even I sometimes don't.<sup>1</sup> “You are not visiting next time unless you do that properly,” she says. Our holistic liberal, Wholly L, hears about this and he is not happy. He does not think, “It's Marjorie's club and it's her rules,” as Rawls would. He thinks that Marjorie is not acting in a properly liberal way. A liberal should not be too fussy about rhymes and certainly should not incentivize others to be. If you want to rhyme, you can rhyme; if you want to use slanted rhymes, you can; if you prefer free verse, so be it. This classical approach is not properly liberal, in Wholly L's eyes. But he does not have a logical argument that liberal principles exclude such an approach – it is more like an emotionally satisfying, or aesthetically satisfying, inference from liberal values to poetic values. Once he has made his inference, he is busy figuring out ways to crash Majorie's club.

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<sup>1</sup> “What do you mean ‘Even’?” Sorry: I sometimes don't.

*Dosman's programming club.* Another club that Wholly L does not like is a certain programming club. It still works with an old Microsoft operating system, not Windows, or Apple's operating system, or any system which runs multiple programs at once. As a programmer, you just give instructions to the computer and the computer does it, such as the following strange instructions in 1980s BASIC:

```
10 AGAIN = 0
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20 PRINT "OOPS I DID IT."
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30 AGAIN = AGAIN + 1
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40 If AGAIN > 0 THEN GOTO 20
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Wholly L passionately insists on the term "coding" over programming and he prefers that people code for an operating system which can run multiple programs at once, so that the programmer has to learn to respond to user events, rather than just controlling the computer with a sequence of instructions. That is more liberal in Wholly L's eyes, whereas DOS programming is authoritarian. With the latter, the programmer is (largely?) in charge of whether his program responds to any input from the user or not. Again, the Rawlsian aims to leave Dosman's club alone, and Wholly L does not have a logical argument for regarding the club as illiberal. Again, what he relies on is an emotionally or aesthetically satisfying inference from liberal values to programming values. And then it is time to crash that club.

*Analytic philosophy tutorial.* There is an extra tutorial at a university where someone is helping some students of analytic philosophy with their argument reconstructions. They teach them inference rules and formalization and its benefits and more. "This is not quite right," they say to one student. "That is not quite right," they say to another. Wholly L does not feel this is

properly liberal either. “If the reconstruction communicates the basic idea, that’s okay. Getting involved in all these details is totalitarian!”

*A worry.* A worry about this holistic liberalism is that it goes well-beyond creating obstacles for Nazis and other extremist threats to a liberal society. Wholly L is getting involved with just about every hobbyist and many professionals, with his sense of “This is not properly liberal.” Perhaps there are logical arguments for why liberal principles are not consistent with the wide range of views Rawls has in mind, but they are hopefully not this restrictive; and anyway it is one thing to argue carefully for such restrictions and it is another to make inferences from an emotionally or aesthetically satisfying sense of coherence.

(Another worry is that liberalism depends on fairly high levels of technological advancement to implement – otherwise economic ends have to be prioritized over liberty – and Wholly L is against the normal processes of developing the craftsmanship skills needed to secure that. He wants the benefits of those skills without the normal way of achieving those benefits. Is there another realistic way of developing these in enough cases than by fussing over details? He seems after some combination that rarely exists.)

## **References**

Quong, J. 2011. *Liberalism without Perfection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rawls, J. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.