

An Error Theory for Liberal Universalism*

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MANY people today believe that in some sense every human being deserves equal consideration. But we also know that most people in the past have not shared this view and that there are others in the world now who do not share it. Most political philosophers today—at least those in Western societies—assume that good government must mean that, in one way or other, the people must rule. But for many centuries beforehand, the opposite view prevailed: good government was thought to be government by an enlightened despot, or wise tribal elders, or property-owning males, or perhaps some combination of these. How do we explain that no one before the last two hundred years recognized that every human being deserves equal respect, that good government must mean some kind of liberal-democratic government? What do we say about distant persons for whom liberal considerations do not have force?

Bernard Williams claims that *liberal* universalists, who assume their “morality is universally applicable to everyone,” “lack an explanation of something which, surely, cries out for one.” What they lack is a “theory of error,” “a story about the subject matter of [political morality] and about past people’s situation which explains why those people got it wrong about that subject matter.” Williams also holds that liberal universalism is committed to the notion that what accounts for why past societies were non-liberal is that people back then “were bad, stupid, or something on those lines.”¹ In other words, unless liberal universalism claims that members of past societies were motivationally or cognitively deficient, it cannot explain why they failed to recognize the allegedly universal liberal values. More generally, Williams worries that this position may be an impediment to the achievement of historical understanding. In this article, I contend that liberal universalism can provide an adequate error theory and that it is not committed to simply claiming that distant persons were non-liberal because they were motivationally or cognitively deficient. Moreover, far from inhibiting the

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¹Bernard Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 66–7.

historical understanding of past societies, universalism can actually contribute to a better appreciation of them.

I. WILLIAMS'S DEMAND FOR AN ERROR THEORY

For the purposes of this discussion, I assume that liberalism is the dominant political morality of present-day Europe and North America and that it did not arrive on the scene historically until the eighteenth century. As Raymond Geuss writes, “one can trawl extant historical literature in search of anticipations of the liberal temper, but almost anyone can see that the catch will be very meager until the eighteenth century.”² I also assume that there are *independent* moral facts, whether or not they are *universal* (i.e., extend to all human beings and societies). That is, I assume that there are facts or truths about how to live and how to order society that are prior to and independent of any actual views about these matters held by any particular person or in any particular society.³ The question is whether there can be an adequate error theory for liberal universalism, given these assumptions.

In “Human Rights and Relativism,” Williams asks: “[i]f liberalism is correct and is universal . . . so that the people of earlier times had ideas which were simply in the light of reason worse than ours, why did they not have better ideas?”⁴ He demands that “the outlook of liberal universalism” provide a “theory of error for correctness” which would account for the apparent and frequent failure of past people to have what, according to liberal principles, are the ‘correct’ moral-political beliefs. In the other direction, an error theory would explain, as Robert Pippin puts it, “why essential features of a certain form of life, say essential features of modern moral and ethical and political identity, have come to have the grip they now do.”⁵

Williams is skeptical that liberal universalists can provide an acceptable error theory.⁶ He maintains that there is no plausible cognitive account that explains why people in certain parts of the world should recently have grasped the moral rightness of the principles of a liberal society.⁷ More generally, he criticizes “liberal philosophers” for “wanting to avoid any question of the history of their own views,” for not being “interested enough” in how their “[liberal] convictions

²Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 70.

³The relevant independence is similar to what Russ Shafer Landau calls “stance-independence” in *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

⁴Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

⁵Robert Pippin, “Hegel on political philosophy and political actuality,” *Inquiry*, 53 (2010), 401–16.

⁶Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

⁷Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 264. Williams doubts that ethical theory could “generate an adequate theory of error and account generally for the tendency of people to have what, according to its principles, are wrong beliefs” (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 151).

got there.”⁸ Liberal universalist assumptions, he suggests, exert a pressure toward accounting for non-liberal societies by supposing that “all those past people who were not liberals . . . ought to have been liberals, and since they were not, they were bad, or stupid, or something on those lines.”⁹ To motivate this last point, I want to discuss key assumptions in the outlook of liberal universalism.

II. LIBERAL UNIVERSALISM

Liberal principles represent an ideal for how societies should be ordered and designate certain rights and duties possessed by those to whom the principles apply. In general, liberals are committed to the rule of law, the protection of basic individual liberties, the democratic process, the equality of status in society of its citizenry, and the toleration of diversity with respect to people’s evaluative beliefs.

Here is Williams’s statement of the position of *liberal universalism*:

The outlook of liberal universalism holds that if certain human rights [or more generally, liberal values] exist, they have always existed, and if societies in the past did not recognize them, then that is because either those in charge were wicked, or the society did not, for some reason, understand the existence of those rights [or values].¹⁰

Two key assumptions are implicit in this outlook. The first, shared by some *non*-universalistic liberals, including Williams, is that liberal values apply to “the issues of one’s own time and place”;¹¹ that if one is a liberal, one must “apply his liberalism to the world around him.”¹² That is, being a liberal universalist involves taking liberal principles to be the one true or correct set of moral-political principles for one’s time and place. One question is how expressions like “the world around [liberals]” and “[the liberal’s] own time and place” are meant to be interpreted. For our purposes, they needn’t be understood in overly local or restrictive terms, so as to exclude (all) contemporary *non*-liberal

⁸Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a humanistic discipline,” *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 180–199, at pp. 193, 197.

⁹Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 65.

¹⁰*Ibid.*; Williams attributes “liberal universalism” to Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). There have been other ‘liberal universalists’ going back to Locke and Kant. Contemporary liberal universalists include: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Jeremy Waldron, *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers 1981–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 67. Williams rejects liberal universalism because he thinks liberal principles and practices simply did not “make sense” as an authoritative form of political order until a recent point in modernity. Other *non*-universalistic liberal views include Richard Rorty’s “ironic liberalism” and Joseph Raz’s view that “liberal values . . . apply only to advanced capitalist societies”; see Rorty, *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 152.

¹²Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 65.

societies. This is because the present world is increasingly globalized—economically, politically, and technologically—and the practical concerns and responses of liberals reach far beyond the boundaries of liberal societies. In the modern world, geographically distant and culturally different people are bound together through their participation in global political and economic activities. For this reason, I shall follow Williams and use the expressions “the world around [liberals]” and “[the liberal’s] own time and place” in a way that excludes the societies of the distant past, but includes many (though perhaps not all) contemporaneous, non-liberal societies. Thus, on the basis of liberal principles, liberal universalists deploy ethical-political values in assessing features of the world around them, making judgments like: ‘Christian Fundamentalists ought to tolerate the practices of same-sex couples.’ ‘Elites in traditional Hindu societies are blameworthy for upholding caste systems and denying women access to certain roles in public life.’ ‘The present distribution of wealth in Russia makes it an unjust society.’

The second key assumption of liberal universalism is that if liberal values apply to the world around us, they must also apply beyond it, applying everywhere or to everyone. As Williams characterizes the assumption, “if liberalism is correct, it must apply to all those past people who were not liberals”; “you cannot really believe in liberalism unless you hold it true in a sense which means that it applies to everyone.”¹³ In accepting the second assumption, liberal universalists who apply liberal values to their time and place assume that it is appropriate to extend the scope of application of those values beyond that context, so that they are applicable to all societies and historical periods. Thus, applying liberal values to the distant past, liberal universalists may judge that: ‘Louis XIV ought to have aspired to democratize his government.’ ‘The Athenian Citizens were blameworthy for supporting a society in which cultural leisure for some people came at the cost of enslaving other people.’ ‘The aristocratic forms of social ordering that prevailed in pre-industrial Europe were deficient, because they relied on inherited privilege and the notion of divine right to rule.’ These judgments (taken together) reflect the claim that the applicability of liberal values extends to all places and times—a claim entailed by the conjunction of the two key assumptions of liberal universalism.

In addition to the notion that liberal values are universally applicable, there is another notion that Williams identifies with liberal universalism: that liberal values are *universally justifiable*. This assumption involves not just the idea that the considerations that support liberal values are stronger than those that support non-liberal ones; but also that these justifications do not simply come to an end within the liberal standpoint, or have force in the light of standards that are accessible only to liberals. Williams states the idea in negative terms: “the [non-liberal] people of earlier times had [non-liberal] ideas which were simply in

¹³Ibid., p. 67.

the light of reason . . . worse than [liberal ideas] . . .”¹⁴ An implication is that there is such a category of thought as reason, or reasoning, on the basis of which non-liberal ideas are evidently worse than liberal ones.

Nagel’s universalist claims in *The Last Word* exemplify the target of Williams’s concerns about liberal universalist assumptions about reasoning and justification. For Nagel, “[t]o reason is to think systematically in ways anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct” and to think some principles valid, we must suppose that our reasons “should also persuade others who are willing to listen to [them].”¹⁵ So when one accepts liberal values on the basis of reasons, one should believe that others should also be able to find reasons to deem liberal values correct. Furthermore, one should take the considerations on the basis of which one accepts liberal values to be rationally acceptable to all: other competent reasoners should also be able to acknowledge the force of liberal justifications, provided they are open to considering them.¹⁶

Williams questions whether those in the distant past really ought to recognize the thoughts involved in liberal reasoning as correct.¹⁷ Suppose a liberal confronted Louis XIV about the legitimacy of his absolute rule and about the justice of seventeenth-century France’s hierarchical social structure. If liberal values are universally justifiable, then, assuming that Louis XIV is open to considering the reasons the liberal brings up as relevant, he should eventually be able to recognize the correctness of the liberal’s arguments; admitting the rationale of liberal principles, he would have to acknowledge that his political authority is illegitimate, his society unjust.

III. COGNITIVE AND MORAL DEFICIENCY AS AN ERROR THEORY

In light of the liberal universalist assumptions just outlined, we can see why it is natural to link liberal universalism with an error theory that says past people were non-liberal because they were either motivationally or cognitively deficient.

Williams’s demand for an error theory arises out of a worry that liberal universalists cannot account for a certain kind of historical person who holds moral views that are incorrect from the liberal standpoint. The past person need not be assumed to be unaware of the moral issue or the dispute between his outlook and the liberal outlook. After all, we can understand the person to be holding onto moral principles that are of the same subject matter, so to speak. So that person can be construed as not unreasonable, as understanding the words the liberal is saying, as discussing the matter in good faith, but as remaining unmoved by liberal arguments.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵Quoted in Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

¹⁶Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 4.

¹⁷Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

On the one hand, because liberal universalists cannot persuade, say, a historically imagined Louis XIV to accept liberal principles, they may be tempted to ascribe to him some intellectual defect. In suggesting that liberal universalists are committed to saying that past people were non-liberal because they were stupid (if not wicked), Williams is deliberately being polemical. Stupidity is one form of epistemic defect, but there are many others: one could be irrational, unreasonable, unimaginative, or thoughtless. One might be intellectually lazy—that is, disinclined to work to get past mere appearances—or intellectually careless—that is, unwilling to take care in getting at the truth. An agent may also be cognitively deficient in virtue of being bad at distinguishing between reliable and unreliable authority, or at determining when a sufficient amount of evidence has been gathered.

Part of what is driving the tendency to ascribe such intellectual defects to past non-liberals is a specific notion of what it is to justify our moral principles to *Louis XIV* (or someone like him). What liberal universalists want, in principle, is to be able to present past non-liberals with considerations that would move them to accept *their* reasons for liberal principles, and to be able to do so from an independent standpoint. But these individuals, one imagines, are aware of the reasons, consider them, yet are not persuaded. Liberal universalists do not know what else to say except to repeat their reasons. But the repeated insistence on these reasons is ineffective. Before long, it can seem like a poor way of justifying something to someone who remains unconvinced.¹⁸ Out of frustration and irritation, a liberal universalist might throw her hands up, and conclude that these people are stupid (or something along those lines), accusing them of not having Reason aright their soul.

On the other hand, if liberal universalists do not go down the route of ascribing cognitive defects, they might instead charge our imagined Louis XIV with moral defects—for example, charging that Louis XIV is “wicked.”¹⁹ Again, Williams’s talk of ‘wickedness’ is a useful caricature that highlights the tendency of some liberal universalists to label those who do not accept their values as morally deficient. But ‘wickedness’ is not the only moral defect that agents can exhibit; one could be greedy, complacent, selfish, irresponsible, lacking in empathy, or corrupt. Notions of moral vice like these are both psychological and moral. In applying them, we ascribe a psychological trait and make a negative moral assessment about someone in virtue of their possession of that trait. Importantly, that someone has certain moral-psychological attributes can also function as an *explanation*. In arguing that moral statements about persons can

¹⁸“The insistence that a given person is wrong, disconnected from any possible understanding of how it comes about that he is wrong, tends to leave the commentator entirely outside that person, preaching at him” (Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 241).

¹⁹In explaining the notion of distant people being “wicked or stupid” (as *contrast* cases), I present deficiency of character as if it is separable from deficiency of intellect. However, competence in moral reasoning may actually depend on the quality of one’s character.

have explanatory force, Nicholas Sturgeon calls attention to the role that psychological characterizations play in explanations of behavior. He claims that if asked to explain the fact that Hitler instigated and oversaw the degradation and death of millions of persons, one might appeal to his moral depravity.²⁰ When asked to explain the fact that a person thinks and acts in a way that is morally unacceptable, often we simply cite a person's moral deficiency. So if liberal universalists do not want to assume that there is a deficiency in Louis XIV's moral reasoning, they might suppose that something is defective in the structure of his psychology that prevents the recognition of injustice to motivate opposition to it.²¹ In this way, liberal universalists can end up attributing moral deficiency to members of past societies.

To be sure, *some* cognitively and morally deficient individuals have existed in the distant past, and political power has sometimes been in the hands of such individuals. There is more than a little moral evil and stupidity in both past and present—in nearly every period of human history, some display of willful ignorance, simplemindedness, cruelty, brutality, and viciousness—and this fact can go a long way towards accounting for many non-liberal practices. But the general worry with simply ascribing either cognitive or moral deficiency to account for *all* of the non-liberal tendencies of earlier societies is that it just lacks the ring of truth. It does not seem to interpret those of the past in a way that feels satisfying. Why, after all, should we have to think that those of the past were in general “stupid or wicked or something along those lines”? Confucius, Thucydides, Aristotle, and many other great thinkers in the past did not subscribe to liberal ideals, but were any of them “stupid or wicked or something along those lines”? It is not obvious that any of them were. The point is not simply that these individuals are considered to be generally intelligent and decent, but that they are also seen as intellectually and practically wise *in ethical and political matters*.

If, then, liberal universalists are restricted to simply ascribing unintelligence and wickedness to explain the failure of past societies to recognize liberal values, Williams's demand for an error theory perhaps constitutes a serious objection. However, there may be another way for liberal universalists to account for the non-liberal tendencies of distant societies. Since I think it represents the strongest response that liberal universalists can provide to the demand for an error theory, I want to put forward, as a suggestion to liberal universalists, an explanatory framework that does not involve merely ascribing cognitive and moral deficiency.

²⁰Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, ed. D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), pp. 49–78.

²¹There are different ways by which people can fail to be motivated to act as morality requires even when they have the correct moral beliefs. People may be hypocritical, self-deceived, or morally weak-willed. One may argue that these are not moral deficiencies, but rather forms of practical irrationality.

IV. APPEALING TO SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONDITIONS

At an intuitive level, we can observe that any given culture sets boundaries to the ethical understanding of its people, constraining their access to ethical ideas. We can notice that membership in a particular culture can be essential or helpful to understanding various moral matters and to adopting certain moral sensibilities and modes of moral thinking. Like epistemic access, effective moral motivation also depends on the character of one's institutional surroundings; culture shapes the psychological bases of effective moral motivation. The particular character of the social practices under which a person lives influences the motivational power that a given set of moral considerations can have; it shapes whether certain considerations are treated by individuals as reasons for action.

Even if liberalism is not necessarily linked (conceptually) to any specific religious or scientific outlook, nonetheless it is more amenable to certain historical circumstances than others. There may be no logical impossibility in the idea of distant persons being liberals. Still, there is a psychological and historical implausibility to it: given the circumstances in which past people were placed, it is hard to imagine realistically how they could have grasped liberal values. We are often unsurprised to learn that humans in certain circumstances were non-liberal, given what else we know about their social conditions.

Building on the idea that social conditions can place moral considerations closer to and farther from cognitive and motivational reach, an error theory for liberal universalism could appeal to the particular and concrete conditions of the past historical situations to show that they: (1) made liberal values and their justifications epistemically inaccessible; and/or (2) made motivations to live up to liberal values unavailable. Certain social conditions better enable the human achievement of liberal thought and practice; it was only relatively recently that the complex of social conditions upon which this achievement depends came into existence. Call this explanatory option *the appeal to socio-historical conditions*.

In general terms, this explanation states that (other) social facts—such as the state of technology, the progress of science, the existence of certain types of legal systems and economic structures, the size of one's social world and the extent of its exposure to and interaction with other societies, the level of reflectiveness in society, the character of the prevalent set of religious and metaphysical ideas, and the population's literacy rate—are crucial factors in determining people's ability to understand the force of considerations bearing on a thing's moral significance, distinction, or status. They also make a difference in shaping the motivations available to people such that they can actually or realistically aspire to live in accordance with the values that they believe apply to their lives. For the difficulty presented by social conditions is not simply an *intellectual* one of being misled from seeing matters aright; there are also interpersonal pressures that can place limitations on behavior. Maintaining one's moral convictions and acting to uphold them when they are at odds with the prevailing moral practices of one's

society can be difficult in the face of the opprobrium and disapproval that one would naturally be subject to in such a situation. In short, social conditions can constrain (or enable) the cognitive and motivational force of liberal ideas. Thus, liberal universalists should devise a substantive account of how social conditions set limits to the possibilities of liberal thought and practice—an account that is grounded in historical inquiries into past social conditions. Such an account would provide liberal universalists with the sort of error theory that Williams claims they need.

To clarify how past social conditions impeded the accessibility of liberal ideas, and how present conditions facilitate it, I turn to historical cases to help carry my argument. Consider those people who lived in the time after human prehistory, after the earliest stages of human association, but significantly before the appearance of the Judeo-Christian tradition. These people lived in conditions that would have made the rise of the great monotheistic religions hard for them to envision. I submit that it would have been very difficult, if not strictly impossible, for individuals untouched by the cultural developments of the last three thousand years to be gripped by the universalistic moral notions and principles that were introduced in the wake of the great monotheistic religions, and later elaborated upon in the liberal tradition. These include notions such as that all human beings have dignity, that they are in some normative sense free and equal, that vengeance should be morally rejected, and so on. Without some grasp of these notions, one's acceptance of various liberal conceptions of rights and duties would have been difficult.

Members of any given relatively stable and peaceful human society will share a certain number of moral concepts, understandings, and expectations. However, what moral, and more broadly normative, conceptual resources actually exist in a given society varies dramatically. What concepts are available to a person determines what possibilities of thought are open to her; but what concepts are available to a person depends on the society in which she is embedded. Thus, members of different historical situations will have differently effective ways of coming to liberal judgments.

Consider those people within the Judeo-Christian tradition, who lived significantly before the sixteenth century, before the emergence of what were in effect single polities with heterogeneous populations in Europe. Living in societies that lacked substantial diversity in their population's background beliefs and values, it would have been very hard for them to see toleration *as a moral virtue*. That is, it would have been hard for them to see the moral good in itself (rather than simply instrumental good) of keeping in check feelings of opposition to practices that they found “blasphemously, disastrously, obscenely wrong.”²²

²²Bernard Williams, “Toleration: an impossible virtue?” *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 18–27, at p. 19.

Historically, the *practice* of toleration—that is, putting up with the existence of the disapproved of group *as a matter of fact*—emerged during and after the European Wars of Religion as a set of practical arrangements aimed at defusing violent sectarian conflict. Importantly, the emergence of toleration as a practice preceded the belief in toleration as a virtue; the former was sustained by the recognition of the need for a *modus vivendi*, and not by the belief in the moral good in itself of toleration.²³ As Samuel Scheffler remarks, “[w]e may view it as a rare stroke of political good fortune that, in their efforts to defuse violent sectarian conflict, liberal societies devised arrangements and institutions that turn out also to make available their own distinctive satisfactions and rewards.”²⁴ It was only at a later stage of liberalism’s development—after the practice of toleration had taken hold—that members of these societies developed an ethos that included the virtue of toleration. If this is right, then it would have been very difficult for those people living long before the emergence of the practice of toleration to see toleration as a moral virtue, for certain historical developments—namely, populations composed of groups of people with very different cultural histories and identities—were not yet in place.

In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams himself offers a kind of appeal to socio-historical conditions to explain the “standard Greek attitude to slavery.”²⁵ According to Williams, the Ancient Greeks acknowledged that slavery rested on coercion and was terrible for those who experienced it, but they did not think that slavery was a just institution or that it was an unjust institution. The Greeks neither questioned the legitimacy of slavery nor sought to justify it because it was seen as a social and economic necessity. In that sense, slavery lay outside the considerations of justice; for those subjected to it, it was simply bad luck. “Considerations of justice and injustice were immobilised by the demands of what was seen as social and economic necessity,”²⁶ precluding the Greeks from considering the alternative of life without slavery as an alternative *for them*. This account implies that social and economic facts, and people’s attitudes about what is possible for their society given how they understand these facts, shape whether they apply (or do not apply) considerations of justice and injustice to given social practices.

²³On how toleration as a practice can be sustained by a mix of attitudes that fall short of the virtue of toleration, see *ibid.*

²⁴Samuel Scheffler, *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 11.

²⁵Note that insofar as Williams denies that a “cognitive account” can explain the recent emergence of liberalism, he does *not* think these conditions explain why the Greeks (and others in the past) were *blind to the truth* of liberal morality. But in holding that liberalism does not “make sense” for those who came before modernity, he may be committed to something like the appeal to socio-historical conditions (perhaps minus the cognitivism): “[a] political theory will seem to make sense, and will to some degree reorganize political thought and action, only by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented. . . . [It] will always be subject to the condition that, to someone who is intelligent and informed in that situation (and these are not empty conditions), it does or does not seem a sensible way to go on.” (*In the Beginning was the Deed*, p. 25.)

²⁶Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 125.

According to the historian Thomas Haskell, economic factors help to explain the eventual recognition of slavery's injustice in England and America. Haskell argues that new conceptions of "personal agency and moral responsibility" were necessary in order for people in these places to morally reject slavery.²⁷ He traces the origins of these new conceptions—the appearance between 1750 and 1850 of a new sentiment of "humanitarianism" and a "new moral consciousness"—to the development of the capitalist market economy, which, he argues, helped expand people's concept of causation and enlarge confidence in the power of individuals to intervene in the course of events.

In addition to altering people's sense of self and responsibility, the rise of national and international markets also made slavery more visible as an institution than ever before. These factors brought about changing moral attitudes toward slavery. While questions about the precise causal sources of ethical ideas are difficult and complex, Haskell's analysis—if it or something like it is correct—suggests the following: that historical developments (such as the development of capitalism, scientific and technological advancement, and globalization) can create new forms of human experience (such as an expanded sense of agency and responsibility, and greater reflectiveness), which can in turn generate in people the felt need to justify certain long held practices—demand for justifications that (from the liberal standpoint) cannot ultimately be met. The result is the gradual emergence of liberal attitudes (such as the moral rejection of slavery, racism, and discrimination).

There are other ways in which a society's economic or material conditions can impose constraints on the moral thought and action of its people. Even on the assumption that disinterested, rational reflection on non-liberal practices creates a demand for justification that cannot ultimately be met, harsh environmental circumstances and limited material resources may mean that some people have no choice but to live constantly in the present moment, as the demands of mere survival take up all their time and energy. Being always too busy and exhausted, they would have little opportunity for the kind of moral reflection that involves questioning whether they are leading ethically defensible lives.²⁸

Mistaken non-moral views—scientific, metaphysical, and religious—also contributed to the non-liberal outlooks of those of the past. Aristotle, for example, believed that some human beings were naturally slaves: lacking the

²⁷Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 339–61 and 547–66.

²⁸See Michele J. Gelfand et al., "Differences between tight and loose cultures: a 33-nation study," *Science*, 332 (2011), 1100–104, on the differences between cultures that are "tight" (have many strong norms and a low tolerance of deviant behavior) and those that are "loose" (have weak social norms and a high tolerance of deviant behavior). The authors argue that tightness is explained by an array of ecological and human-made societal threats, which increase the need for strong norms and severe punishment of deviant behavior in the service of social coordination for survival—for example, reducing chaos in societies that have high population density, dealing with resource scarcity, coordinating in the face of natural disasters, defending against territorial threats, and containing the spread of disease.

capacity for deliberation and foresight, they are appropriately subordinated to those possessed of adequate powers of deliberation and foresight.²⁹ We might say that it is not because Aristotle was cognitively defective that he accepted the natural subordination of slaves to masters and of women to men. Rather, it was partially on the basis of adherence to misinformed biological theories that he did so. By contrast, the modern scientific view of the world inclines us toward a more naturalistic view of society, making it easier for us to reject the notion of natural subordination (and other non-liberal notions like divine authority). After all, modern biology does not hold that within any species, nature provides its members with a *right* way to behave. And evolutionary theory is incompatible with the notion that a long time ago, divine beings communicated with humanity through prophets. That these notions do not square with our scientific knowledge helps to explain why we find many non-liberal ideas unacceptable. It also helps to explain why those without our scientific understanding tend to find non-liberal ideas less unacceptable.

Social conditions also influence action—both the kinds of things that people are willing to do and the kinds of considerations on the basis of which they do them. The fact that modernity is more secular than the Middle Ages implies significant differences in the kinds of considerations that move the people of these respective historical situations to act. For example, appeals to religious authority and institutions motivated people in the Middle Ages in a way that they simply do not motivate those in modern Western societies. The notion that the royal line has an extremely ancient pedigree going back to a demigod is plainly ineffective as a political device for bolstering the loyalty of subjects to a political head in modern societies.

The level of a society's homogeneity and integration is another factor that shapes the motivation of its people. Contemporary liberals, living in a socially fragmented and atomistic social order wrought by the Industrial Revolution, have difficulty wrapping their minds around the possibility of being motivated to kill oneself and many others in a single act of martyrdom, carried out for the sake of achieving political ends demanded by religious or nationalistic decree. But for some Islamic fundamentalists today and for many Japanese during World War II, this is not something so unimaginable to ask oneself to do.³⁰

Consider the following depiction of life in a highly integrated traditional warrior society:

War was not a concern of a class nor even of the male sex, but of the whole population, from cradle to grave. Girls as well as boys derived their names from a famous man's exploit. Women danced wearing scalps, derived honor from their husbands' deeds, publicly exhibited the men's shield or weapons; and a woman's

²⁹Aristotle, *Politics*, I.5–7.

³⁰Emile Durkheim's *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1997) attempts to understand suicide as a social phenomenon.

lamentations over a slain son was the most effective goad to a punitive expedition. . . .

Most characteristic was the intertwining of war and religion. The Sun Dance, being a prayer for revenge, was naturally saturated with military episodes. . . . [S]ince success in life was so largely a matter of martial glory, war exploits became the chief content of prayer.

Training for war began in childhood . . . boys counted coups on game animals, girls danced with the hair of a wolf or coyote in lieu of a scalp.³¹

Existing over one hundred years ago, the Native American Crow tribe was a nomadic group whose territories shifted with their migrations. Survival and welfare for the tribe depended on success at hunting animals. The totalizing character of their warrior concerns and sensibilities can be attributed partially to the fact that it was a matter of survival that they defend their boundaries from other tribes to secure their food resources. It is hard to conceive of how, in the absence of powerful external pressures on the tribe, anyone acculturated in this tribe could develop, much less tolerate, motivations that strayed from the totalizing concerns of war.

But we need not see their non-liberal patterns of emotional and practical response as moral deficiencies, if we can see that their harsh environment did not set the conditions for them to treat liberal considerations as reasons for action. When studying members of distant societies, we can sometimes learn enough about their culture and its history—and perhaps also about human beings in general—to be able to see how their patterns of emotional and practical response helped them to negotiate the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. And we can learn enough about the particular circumstances in which they found themselves to see that those circumstances made understandable their non-liberal patterns of emotional and practical response. It seems to me that in those cases where we are able to do this, we start to lose the sense that we are warranted in thinking that the individuals in question have a moral deficiency (something in the way of what Williams might call a form of ‘wickedness’).

To account for the recent emergence of liberalism, it is not enough to point out the good reasons and grounds that support a liberal society. It is also not enough to say merely that liberal beliefs and practices came about because people came to perceive liberal values, for then there is the question of how liberal values become perceivable when they previously were not perceivable. And this is not the end to what we would want to ask. Just because one is in a position to appreciate the moral virtues of a liberal society, this does not mean that one is thereby in a position to take the practical measures needed to bring a liberal society about. Even once people are in a position for liberalism to recommend itself to them, they may not be in position to follow its recommendations. This may be because the level of technological development is inadequate or because

³¹Robert Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 218.

the motivations and dispositions of the members of society at large are not quite what they have to be in order for certain forms of social cooperation and collective action to be achievable.³² So the difference between what explains why liberal institutions came into existence, on the one hand, and the justifications liberals accept for such institutions, on the other, should be kept clear. Sometimes, the emergence of liberal institutions in a society is explained by historical forces that do not strictly involve the recognition of the liberal justifications of those institutions by its members, and it is only at a later stage that the relevant justifications come into view for them.

The discussion so far might suggest that my error theory is meant to apply only to members of historically distant societies, but not to members of contemporary non-liberal societies. However, the appeal to socio-historical conditions can, in principle, apply both to historically distant individuals *and* to present individuals, specifically those who are *culturally distant*—that is, members of contemporary societies that have very different conceptual resources, religious outlooks, metaphysical worldviews, scientific achievement, technological development, material conditions, degree of exposure to other human societies, and so on. Williams's demand for an error theory is stated as a request for an explanation of why those in the *distant past* were non-liberal; but one could request a similar explanation with respect to those in the present who are very different.

Concerning an error theory, there is no significant distinction between members of societies that are separated from us by time and members of *certain* societies that are separated from us by space—'certain' because of the development of the modern world into a *global village*. Because of increasing global integration—because the modern world now *stretches around the earth*—many people in existing traditional and hierarchical societies have some access to the ideas, moral and otherwise, that liberals accept, through some form of contact with liberal societies. Cultures and subcultures are coming into contact constantly, shaping, and drawing themselves into, each other at a rate greater than before. Given the high degree of cultural interaction and interdependence, there are some individuals in contemporary non-liberal societies for whom the appeal to socio-historical conditions would *not* apply—or apply as straightforwardly—for it may be harder to claim that they lack sufficient access to liberal ideas. After all, there are few remaining societies that are thoroughly insulated from all other societies.

Insofar as an individual's cultural or institutional surroundings are seen as providing sufficient access to liberal ideas, an appeal to socio-historical conditions to explain a person's non-liberal tendencies will appear less fitting than an appeal to cognitive or moral deficiency. Of course, whether we conclude that the appeal to socio-historical conditions applies to a given person in a given

³²This is the case with some in contemporary non-liberal societies who have a desire to emulate the liberal way of life.

contemporary society (or even a person in a non-liberal subculture within a liberal society³³) will depend on the details of the situation in question and our judgment as to whether relevant social factors are imposing significant constraints on that person's access to liberal values. This goes for explanations of historically distant persons as well as explanations of our culturally distant contemporaries. But the point here is that some people at present occupy circumstances which diverge dramatically from that of the Modern West and the social conditions on which the accessibility of liberal values depends. For them, the appeal to socio-historical conditions could be an appropriate error theory.

I have argued that liberal universalism is not committed to simply claiming that distant persons tend to be non-liberal because they are motivationally or cognitively deficient. Instead of appealing primarily to *personal* factors to account for the non-liberal tendencies of distant societies, such as the moral and cognitive deficiency of their members, liberal universalists should shift their explanatory focus to *structural* factors, such as the way that one's cultural-historical circumstance can impose constraints on one's access to important moral considerations. A substantive error theory along these lines would cite concrete socio-historical conditions and developments as factors limiting the access to liberal values in distant societies but enabling it for those in much of the modern world. These developments, which of course take time and luck, include the remarkable advances in science and technology in recent centuries; the continuing revolutions in travel and communications; and the increased economic and political interdependence among the societies of the world.

VI. IMPLICATIONS: WITHDRAWING UNIVERSAL JUSTIFIABILITY AND BLAME

Let me highlight two implications that liberal universalists who accept my explanatory framework should allow: (1) that liberal values are not universally justifiable; and (2) that judgments of blame of historically and culturally distant people for failing to be liberal are inappropriate.

A. UNIVERSAL JUSTIFIABILITY

In characterizing the universal justifiability of liberal values, I said that liberal values were ones whose rationale everyone (who meets the required kind of cognitive criteria—that is, is not cognitively deficient) should accept, irrespective of their cultural-historical situation. But universal justifiability is in tension with

³³Proponents of the “cultural defense” in law make similar arguments to the effect that because culture strongly influences cognition, perception, and motivation, the legal system should take the cultural background of ethnic minorities and indigenous groups into account in criminal and civil cases. See Alison Dundes Renteln, *The Cultural Defense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the appeal to socio-historical conditions—that is, with citing structural factors, such as the specific ways in which one’s cultural-historical situation constrains access to liberal considerations—to account for the non-liberal tendencies of past societies. If liberal values are universally justifiable, this would rule out applying the appeal to socio-historical conditions, because the universal justifiability of liberal values implies that the social conditions required for liberal justifications to be epistemically accessible are equally present everywhere. Conversely, the appeal to socio-historical conditions depends on the idea that liberal values are sometimes epistemically inaccessible—their grounds are not ones those to whom we are applying that explanation can find rationally acceptable—and therefore, not universally justifiable.

To address the tension, the liberal universalist need not deny that there are liberal justifications—that is, there are good grounds for liberalism, arguments for liberalism that can be acknowledged by some—but must deny that distant persons, in virtue of their cultural-historical situation, could likely access those justifications. This claim assumes, as seems to me plausible, that whether someone who is intelligent and informed can find reason to deem liberal principles correct and to admit their rationale, will depend on what other beliefs she accepts. Those of the past may not have been in the position to see a reason to embrace liberal considerations, for their other convictions may have been quite different from ours. Even if we assume that all humans share certain natural concerns about things like pain, reproduction, nourishment, physical aggression, and death—and that they all need some sort of cultural-normative framework to live together as a group in some kind of peace and order—still it is doubtful that there are sufficiently substantial bases of agreement implicit in the background norms and practices of all cultures throughout history, sufficient common ground or enough ‘fixed points,’ to serve as premises in an argument for liberal ideals with which all may be able to agree.

Thus, what is justifiable to one person given that person’s cultural-historical situation may well not be justifiable to another given *their* cultural-historical situation. It is wishful thinking to suppose that by simply raising questions on liberal grounds to an intelligent person who is very distant, we should be able to set her straight, even if she considers our questions honestly and with an open mind. Louis XIV would need significantly more or different cultural experiences than those he actually had in order for it to be true that looking over my shoulders, he ought to find my liberal justifications to be compelling. We would not expect him to drop his absolutist hat at the drop of a liberal argument, even a very good one. To change *his* mind would require engaging in some complex process of restructuring the way of life of French society during his time, and more particularly, his upbringing. In short, liberal universalists should acknowledge that it is only within the viewpoints available to those of some but not all cultural-historical formations that liberal justifications have rationally persuasive force; they should give up the assumption that liberal values “are

simply in the light of reason” superior to other sets of values. (I will return to one potential consequence of dropping the assumption of universal justifiability.)

B. BLAMING THE DISTANT

The liberal universalist’s acknowledgement that the rational acceptance of liberal values is rooted in only certain cultural-historical situations does, however, require that she not bring her liberal outlook to bear in at least one class of moral judgments. Specifically, the set of evaluative statements that blame members of distant societies in virtue of their non-liberal tendencies should now be seen as inappropriate.

To say that a person is blameworthy is to say that it would be appropriate or fitting to blame that person, where blame is to be understood as involving a range of emotional responses including resentment, guilt, and indignation.³⁴ The attitudes of blame presuppose that the target of the attitudes has epistemic and deliberative access to the relevant reasons. If it was very difficult or unlikely (even if not strictly impossible) for distant persons to recognize and to act on liberal values, the liberal universalist could not justifiably or appropriately blame them for failing to do so. This claim turns on the notion that judgments of blame and blameworthiness are appropriate only if it is reasonable to expect the target of such judgments to have known better and acted differently. Reasonable expectation is conditioned on being able to view the other as being in a position to understand the relevant moral consideration and treat it as a reason for action.

For example, it would not be reasonable to expect a distant person to reject feudal hierarchies if every person in that person’s lifetime and before regarded such hierarchies as acceptable, and moreover, the practice’s significance was embedded in their normative and religious framework. If we think that due to their cultural-historical conditions, distant people are not in a position to access liberal considerations, blaming them for their non-liberal tendencies would be inappropriate. Insofar as liberal universalists think that Louis XIV did not have access to various liberal values, they should agree with Williams that we should “not get indignant with Louis XIV.”³⁵

To be clear, I am not claiming that judgments of blame directed at distant persons are always inappropriate, but rather judgments of blame *in virtue of violations of liberal principles* are. For instance, murderers in distant societies may still be judged blameworthy for failing to adhere to the consideration that it is wrong to take the life of an innocent person, for they have access to the relevant moral consideration in these cases.

³⁴See R. Jay Wallace’s *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³⁵Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

C. UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY

Even if liberal universalists recognize that it would be unfair or inappropriate to blame distant persons, given their cultural-historical situation, for failing to think or do what they could not reasonably be expected to think or do, this does not imply that liberal universalists need to give up completely on the idea that liberal values are universally applicable in moral judgments. The acknowledgement that it is inappropriate to blame distant individuals for being non-liberal need not undermine liberalism's claims to universality insofar as it is compatible with maintaining that there are still *some* moral judgments on the basis of liberal values that it would be appropriate for a liberal to make about those who are historically or culturally distant.

Liberals could still claim that the non-liberal *actions* and *practices* performed by members of past societies (for example, the first Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang's decision to ban books) were morally wrong and that they should not have done what they did. They could judge the *lives* of currently existing members of culturally distant societies (for example, the Sentinel Islanders, the pre- and minimal-contact tribes in the Amazon and in Papua New Guinea) as impoverished along certain moral dimensions, even if they are admirable and rich along other dimensions. They could hold that certain liberal principles designate rights and duties possessed by all persons as such, which determine the just distribution of goods for societies everywhere, at all times. They could hold that the liberal notion of a society of equals expresses a universal normative ideal of human relations. They could criticize the *moral-political systems* of historically and culturally distant societies for failing to serve the needs of all their members, for excluding groups within the society from having the chance to develop their talents properly, and for rejecting the notion that all people have equal moral worth. They may even hold that distant ethical outlooks and societies are morally underdeveloped, not fully realized, deficient, or something along those lines, insofar as they do not allow their people to direct their lives without undue interference, or prevent the flowering of a significant range of their people's talents and capacities. But what liberal universalists should avoid is blaming distant persons for failing to live up to liberal principles in these ways.

I should, however, register one lurking worry for the notion that liberal values are universally applicable, given the assumption that liberal values are *not* universally justifiable. If there are liberal moral judgments that might not be justifiable specifically to some of the agents to whom they apply, then one might wonder if they really apply to them in their full literal meaning. At least this will be true for those judgments which seem to imply that the agent whose actions are being characterized had reason to comply with them, for example, 'Louis XIV treated some of his contemporaries impermissibly as he ought not to have done.' For if an agent did not have epistemic access, in virtue of his or her

cultural-historical situation, to the justifications for doing X, it might be wondered whether they really could have had reason to comply with the requirement to do X. (The plausible assumption here is that reasons must be epistemically accessible to the person who is said to ‘have’ them, or about whom we would say that they ought to comply with them.) Perhaps we could say, from our present perspective, that ‘there was’ reason for them to do X; but the historically and culturally distant agents did not really ‘have’ reason so to act—the reasons in question were not really reasons for them.³⁶

One potential consequence of this kind of concession is that the claim that liberal values are universally applicable could also be threatened. If whether a set of moral-political values is applicable to a given society depends on whether it could be justified *to* its members, the fact that liberal values cannot be justified to everyone would imply that liberal values are not universally applicable. One would then be forced into a non-universal liberal position—holding, for example, that liberal values “apply only to advanced capitalist societies,”³⁷ denying that there are universal liberal principles like: ‘Every society should be a representative democracy.’ ‘Every society should give all of its (adult, sane) members an equal voice.’ Note that such a position is still compatible with maintaining some moral universalistic ambitions, just not *liberal* universalistic ones. One could still hold that there are universal moral-political principles, albeit ones more abstract than liberal principles, such as: ‘Human suffering is bad, and other things being equal, society should do what it can to prevent and relieve suffering.’ ‘Manifestly cruel treatment of people for entertainment purposes is wrong.’³⁸

VII. HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

I want to end by setting liberal universalism in the context of our efforts to understand and realistically characterize distant societies. Williams remarks that we should not blame Louis XIV because “if we don’t, we may do better in understanding him and ourselves.”³⁹ Judgments of blame are a central class of moral judgment and Williams probably worried that those who assume that liberal values are universally applicable would assume that it is appropriate to blame members of past societies for their non-liberal tendencies. As discussed

³⁶This issue cannot be settled without a careful examination of the notion of *reasons* (or of action judgments that seem to entail claims about what the agent had reason to do). This is more than I can do here.

³⁷Raz, *The Practice of Value*, p. 152. See also his *The Morality of Freedom*. Williams also thinks it is a mistake to treat liberalism as normative for pre-modern societies. Because liberalism fails to “make sense” for these people, it does not meet a necessary condition of legitimacy (for them); see Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed and Truth and Truthfulness*.

³⁸One could argue that these abstract principles still deserve to be seen as distinctly liberal principles, insofar as their animating spirit is the equal moral standing of persons. In other words, implicit in these abstract principles is the ideal of moral equality, the notion that every human’s interests counts, no matter who the human. It is, after all, a characteristic of *non-liberal* societies that they tend to deny the equal moral importance of everyone’s interests.

³⁹Williams, “Human rights and relativism,” p. 66.

earlier, blameworthiness presupposes access to the relevant moral considerations; people cannot be appropriately blamed for not being guided by values they cannot understand. Williams would have been concerned that liberal universalists who blamed members of historically distant societies for their non-liberal tendencies would overlook the fact that they were precluded in various ways from considering ethical alternatives that are available now for liberals to consider. I agree that in blaming past persons, we can end up misconstruing the conditions of life and the people in the past. But sympathetic as I am to this thought, I believe there are nonetheless still ways in which liberal universalism, specifically the idea that liberal values are universally applicable, can actually contribute to the achievement of historical and cultural understanding.

A significant part of the process of appreciating distant societies consists in coming to understand the particular values, commitments, and practices of their members. In coming to understand these things, we begin to grasp the kinds of considerations that their members treat (and do not treat) as reasons for action. What a society values most, and what its members regard as morally fundamental, is manifest in their reasons, and in the way those reasons get expressed through their practices. It is through learning about the reasons that a group recognizes that we get a sense of the structure of its members' motivations and grasp the members' deepest evaluative concerns.

When trying to characterize distant people's perceived reasons, it helps to understand how, if at all, those reasons are different from our own. This is where liberal concepts can have a role in the process of cultural-historical understanding. To grasp the reasons that members of a distant society recognize, it helps (for us) to understand the extent to which they are compatible with the reasons recognized by members of our society. By considering the relation between the considerations that members of some distant society treated as reasons and those that we treat as reasons, we can deepen our understanding of their perceived reasons. For example, it helps our comprehension of the outlook of medieval Europe—of how the people of that time treated roles in a religious hierarchy (such as layperson and Pope) or aristocracy (such as vassal and lord) as sources of political claims—to consider how *that* treatment is morally different from the liberal notion of citizenship as a basis of political claims.

Liberal notions are also helpful in thinking about the interpersonal relations and institutions of distant societies. We deepen our understanding of political relations under feudal society when we see that they are not based on the notion of 'persons' as 'free' and 'equal.' It helps in trying to appreciate the demands of life as a serf under feudalism to think about how that life is different from the life of citizens in liberal-democratic societies: while citizens enjoy the right to make claims on social institutions to advance their interests, serfs were not permitted to make any such claims. Such judgments may implicate the moral value we place on distant institutions—whether we see them as just, that is, as respecting the

rights of their members and promoting their interests. By drawing on liberal conceptions of ‘rights,’ ‘justice,’ ‘liberty,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘well-being’—and supposing that they refer to things that would make a difference in the lives of distant people—we can come to see the structure of a distant society as unjust for being hierarchical; for placing obstacles in the way of social mobility; for promoting large discrepancies in levels of income, wealth, and life expectancies; for favoring the interests of the privileged at the expense of the poor; for stifling liberty and free expression; for standing in the way of equality; and so on.⁴⁰

I have been claiming that understanding the various moral deficiencies (in liberal terms) of the historically and culturally distant can be a kind of heuristic—it helps us when trying to understand the cognitive and affective situation, as well as the practices and institutions, of distant others to be able to see how they contrast with those of our own. But one might argue that this heuristic use of moral assessments of the distant is compatible with their being strictly dispensable: though it helps us to understand the outlooks of distant societies to see how they differ from our own, we could in principle achieve the same understanding without relying on our moral assessments of them.

However, I believe there are aspects of the situation of distant people that are best appreciated by applying our own liberal values in moral assessments of their practices and institutions. For example, judging that Greek slavery involved violations of people’s rights or entitlements might force us to get clear about the features of the Greeks’ epistemic and social situation that prevented them from seeing clearly this fact that is now obvious to us. We will be inclined to ask questions like: ‘What social facts account for their blindness to certain morally salient features of their situation?’ ‘What features of their circumstance hindered their ability to recognize the considerations bearing on the moral status of persons?’ By applying liberal moral judgments to distant others, we are compelled to understand their cultural-historical situation in a way we would otherwise be unable or unlikely to do, if we refrained from applying those judgments to them. In this way, universalistic assumptions in liberal moral judgment can help our thinking about why options are seemingly framed for members of distant societies as they are, and why these options seem different for those in modern societies. This, in turn, leads to a deeper historical and cultural understanding of distant others.

⁴⁰Of course, the process of understanding distant societies may also reveal to us elements of their outlook that are admirable, or able to teach us something.