

Liberalism, nationalism, and pandemics: a philosophy

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Abstract. The most well-known kinds of liberalism are based on the doctrine of the atomism of the individual, sometimes called “the separateness of persons.” But these doctrines do not seem to allow a country to restrict immigration for the purpose of protecting a national way of life, except for protecting liberalism itself. This can lead to considerable discontent. In this paper, I present a kind of liberalism that addresses this concern.

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The most well-known kinds of liberalism are based on a doctrine sometimes called “the atomism of the individual” and sometimes “the separateness of persons.”¹ This is an initial statement of the doctrine:

(Separateness of persons) Each person is a separate being and this separateness ought to be respected.

A person should not be forced to do something or undergo some sacrifice because it is good for some social whole that they are part of, such as a family or a nation. For example, they should not be forced to participate in a custom, even if the existence of this custom is an important part of the identity of the nation. If they do not wish to participate in the custom, it is within their rights not to.

¹ By “the most well-known kinds of liberalism,” I have in mind the minimal state kind and the third-way kind formulated by Rawls (1971). Perhaps the term “the atomism of the individual” should be reserved for a subtly different doctrine.

The doctrine of the separateness of persons can be formulated in more precise terms than I have above, specifying an exact set of rights. Different philosophers will probably not give the same precise rendering. Without going into this matter, we can already grasp a worry about any political philosophy based on this doctrine, by which I here mean any philosophy of what a government should do. The worry concerns the indifference to national traditions. The separateness of persons does not allow a government to restrict immigration into a country in order to protect features of a national culture, such as the dominant language, if there is one, and any customs that are central to the identity of the culture. This is bound to lead to some discontent.

A nationalist outlook is very different to liberalism, or at least liberalism based on the separateness of persons – I shall henceforth omit this qualification. It says that human beings are part of a national community, or at least many of them are, and that the good of the community as a whole takes priority over the good of any individuals. The distance between these two philosophies is so large that there is a question of whether one philosophy can ever succeed in absorbing the strengths of the other; but if this cannot be done, will the result not simply be an alternation between liberal and nationalist periods? There is a period of liberalism, but eventually nationalist discontent builds up to the point that a nationalist period is initiated; but laxity over the maintenance of individual rights and increasing discrimination, such as towards foreigners or anyone seen to not fit with the identity of the nation, and also the negative economic consequences of these phenomena, eventually lead to another period of liberalism.

If political philosophies were landmasses, liberalism and nationalism seem like two very large ones, separated by an ocean. But are there not islands between these two great continents?

What I try to present below is one such island. Let us suppose that a contagious and sometimes deadly disease is affecting all countries on earth. It spreads in the way that colds and the flu do. The government of a certain country accepts the following points, or a slightly qualified version of them, each of which I have given a label to in italics.

(i) *Aim*. This government should try to prevent the disease from spreading.

(ii) *Liberal or national justification*. The claim above can be given a liberal or a nationalist justification. On a liberal justification, the only reason for the government to exist at all, and do anything, is to protect the rights of separate individuals. Given such rights, a person who has the disease should ideally only be mixing with others who are informed of this fact and have granted their consent, much as one person should generally not physically harm another without consent. The government should make testing for the disease mandatory and enforce isolation for those who test positive, as part of protecting the rights of separate individuals, since otherwise they are very likely to mix with non-consenting others. On a nationalist justification, measures to prevent the disease from spreading are part of ensuring the good of the national community as a whole.

(iii) *Practical consequences assessment*. It is difficult to decide between the liberal view that persons are separate entities with corresponding rights and the nationalist view that the good of the national community has priority over the preferences of individuals. Each is attractive. One has to look at the practical consequences of systems built on one doctrine or the other.

(iv) *Emotional well-being*. Since, in the circumstances faced, individuals have to be isolated, it seems better for them to not see themselves as essentially community members, or think that the flourishing of a human being requires being part of a community, because then

they are at greater risk of feeling sad while being apart from others. This is especially likely if isolated individuals think of the community as like a herd of animals, and that they are members separated from their herd. If they just see themselves as separate individuals and this society as an association of such individuals, this will probably help them survive isolation better. So we should make the separateness of persons our official doctrine.

(v) *Absorbing nationalism*. The separateness of persons will not allow the government to restrict immigration as part of protecting the dominant language, national customs, the ethnic composition of the country, and so on; but given the presence of the disease, the government can justify policies that are closer to nationalist recommendations, which should reduce discontent from nationalists. It can restrict immigration to protect against the spread of the disease.

I believe these five commitments together constitute a novel political philosophy – one might describe it as “pandemic liberalism.”² But I also believe that some openness, far more than your average nationalist regards as sensible, is under normal circumstances very valuable for an economy (Hill 2012: 13). It is a philosophy for circumstances we do not at present regard as normal. If they become frequent, I suppose there will be disambiguation of “normal” and some effort to argue that these are still not normal circumstances, an approach which I shall not look into here.

References

Hill, H. 2012. Malaysian economic development: looking backward and forward. In H. Hill, T.S. Yean and R.H.M. Zin (eds.), *Malaysia's Development Challenges*. London: Routledge

² The appeal to (iii) and (iv) together in support of the separateness of persons is unusual, and even appeal to (iii) alone is.

Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.