Penultimate Draft

Encyclopedia of Global Justice

**Liberal Pluralism**

In modern political philosophy the term liberal pluralism denotes theoretical efforts to reconcile liberalism, in its broad philosophical sense, with value pluralism. With regard to global justice such considerations are of great magnitude, because of the ascendency of diverse religious and cultural value systems in modern societies. Liberalism, as a political system, endorses the primacy of human autonomy and the need to defend such autonomy from any comprehensive orthodoxy. This includes defending the choice to affiliate with groups that may, in some regards, advocate illiberal values as a prevailing attitude. Such values are tolerated in liberal societies, within reason, because traditionally liberalism has sought its philosophical foundations independently of private notions of the good. Liberalism emerges from the assumption that, in private moral and religious spheres, individuals will not agree on any one monolithic way of life, thus leading to a plurality of moral communities existing side by side in free societies. Therefore, politically speaking, the freedom to pursue any particular way of life ought to be protected under a liberal political consensus. This very effort to seek a foundational consensus for liberalism, begs the question, is liberalism in so far as it endorses certain values (e.g. the primacy of individual autonomy and freedom of conscience), already backing a particular conception of the good (i.e. A comprehensive endorsement of a way of life affirming liberal values.) If so, then why ought one to ultimately embrace liberalism over a more authoritative political scheme? Recognition of this tension is the animating influence behind approaches to reconcile traditional liberal values with pluralism.

**Value Pluralism and Liberalism**

Value pluralism, or moral pluralism, is the notion that disagreement over comprehensive value-laden systems of morality is possible even when all parties involved are fully rational and coherently thinking. Put differently, value pluralism acknowledges that rational people can and do disagree on what constitutes the good life, furthermore such disagreements are intractable. Disagreements about what constitutes the ‘good,’ both ethically and metaphysically are often rationally derived and mutually exclusive. Moral pluralism is posited to stem from conflicting metaphysical belief systems and epistemological limitations to inquiry, thus precluding the existence of one knowable true set of moral claims. Isaiah Berlin was instrumental in elevating concern over value-pluralism to modern philosophical significance in his essay, originally his inaugural Oxford lecture, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1969). Berlin believed that human beings could not escape the fact of value-pluralism, and thus must choose between incompatible and incommensurable goods. Indeed, the necessity of such choice, as seen by Berlin, is essential to what it means to be a human being.

The thesis of value pluralism challenges traditional attempts of liberal theorists to justify the values of liberalism itself (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press among others) as having a privileged status, given the plurality of other possibilities.

Philosophically speaking, enlightenment-style liberalism champions a conception of autonomy which is thought to be essential to human flourishing. Therefore, liberalism is the philosophical approach to politics that affirms the primacy of individual rights against any one value-laden conception of the good. Politically, liberalism transcends narrow party affiliations, and is essentially linked with democratic forms of government. Traditional efforts to produce philosophical foundations for liberalism result in what can be referred to, following John Rawls (1993), as comprehensive versions of liberalism. Some representative examples of comprehensive liberalism follow: The philosophically comprehensive liberalism of John Locke, as argued for in his *Two Treatise of Government* (1689), supports liberal civil government based on natural rights divinely bestowed. In contrast to Locke, Immanuel Kant suggest in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1790) that liberalism is grounded upon the rational autonomy of each citizen. The greatest happiness of society Mill argues, on utilitarian principles in *On Liberty* (1859), is promoted by the greatest freedom of conscience compatible with a liberal state. A more modern example of comprehensive liberalism is found in the early work of John Rawls, especially as argued in *A* *Theory of Justice* (1971) in which Rawls’ endorses liberalism by means of an abstracted fair choice approach to the social contract.

Such comprehensive defenses of liberalism, in so far as they require commitment to metaphysically robust and value-laden philosophical approaches, stand vulnerable to the difficulties associated with value-pluralism. Growing trends of multiculturalism in modern societies make the difficulties with traditional attempts to justify liberalism increasingly overt.

**Liberal Pluralism**

Theories of liberal pluralism are those which attempt to abate the tensions between the thesis of value pluralism, and the endorsement of liberal values. The goal of such theories is to provide sound reasons as to why a diverse population of citizens, made up of different moral and religious affiliations, ought to come together in the embrace of liberal values, even as they maintain their otherwise entrenched, but mutually rational disagreements.

**Isaiah Berlin**

In bringing the concept of value-pluralism to importance in modern political philosophy Isaiah Berlin provided one of the earliest attempts to defend a version of liberal pluralism. Berlin argues (1969), as mentioned, that choice between incommensurable and incompatible values is a permanent and essential feature of human life. The fact that such choice is a permanent feature of human life, according to Berlin, suggests that liberal government is the essential political form compatible with the human necessity and desire to freely choose. Liberal states are those which protect a citizen’s freedom to choose among a diversity of values, without coercion. This freedom from coercion, or Negative-Liberty, is viewed as the indispensable feature of liberalism. Negative liberty, undergirds positive-liberty, i.e. the liberty to choose, among competing options, how best to participate in one’s government, who to elect, and other valued types of choices among other goods. Positive-Liberty, according to Berlin is at risk of authoritarian influence, which ought not to be seen as a downplay of its importance in human life, but further reason to regard the protective qualities of negative liberty to be politically vital to the human condition.

**John Rawls**

In John Rawls’ later work, especially Political Liberalism (1993), pluralism is an issue of prominent concern. Rawls’ argues that human beings, in the course of reasoning, must contend with inescapable epistemological buriers to knowledge, what Rawls’ refers to as the “Burdens of Judgment.” These burdens include, but are not limited to, incomplete or ill-understood information and conflicting sources of understanding, as well as internal and unknown biases accumulated across a life. Rawls argues that given such intellectual barriers moral pluralism is the inevitable outcome of the free application of human reason. That is to say, value pluralism is a permanent feature of free societies, and cannot be curbed unless through violent oppression. Accordingly, Rawls argues that in a given free society there will be innumerable comprehensive doctrines. Comprehensive doctrines might best be understood as ways of life purporting to answer a variety of questions, metaphysical and moral. Some comprehensive doctrines will be reasonable. Reasonable doctrines are those doctrines that acknowledge the existence of pluralism. An individual can accept, from within a reasonable doctrine, that other members of society need not prescribe to the same doctrine, and yet have all the same rights and protections afforded by society. In contrast to reasonable comprehensive doctrines, unreasonable doctrines are those that reject the necessity of pluralism, and as a consequence aggressively seek homogeneity at the expense of opposing members of society. For Rawls, society is a system of fair cooperation over time, between members of various reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Thus, while unreasonable doctrines must be contained and protected against, reasonable doctrines are those which reach an overlapping consensus on foundational liberal principles. For Rawls, these are the very principles of justice he argues for in *Theory of Justice*, though in that text Rawls admits to be offering a comprehensive doctrine of liberalism. In *Political Liberalism* Rawls argues that an overlapping consensus is reached when reasonable doctrines obtain their own comprehensive reasons for endorsing liberal principles. In this way liberalism, as a political framework, is independent of any one particular comprehensive doctrine. For Rawls this means that liberalism is freestanding in a political and not comprehensive metaphysical way. Because, reasonable doctrines do not need to go outside of their own sphere for liberal justification there is no compromise needed to form a basis for liberal society. This, Rawls argues, ensures stability over time. In such a society, public discourse on items of legislation, regarding constitutional essentials and issues of basic justice, must be held in a neutral way that all citizens can understand, if not agree with, regardless of comprehensive doctrines. This commits public discourse to the standards of public reason, or arguments understandable from a neutral perspective. Thus, Rawls’ *Political Liberalism* is a theory of liberal pluralism in so far as it provides an argument for liberalism that allows for a plurality of comprehensive doctrines, without endorsing any particular one.

**John Gray**

As opposed to Rawls method, John Gray in *Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000) offers an account more reminiscent of the Hobbsian social-contract. Gray argues that one face of liberalism is the failed enlightenment project of establishing a comprehensive value-laden form of liberalism. This failure stems from the pluralistic tendency of rationality discussed above. The other face of liberalism, which Gray endorses, is a *modus Vivendi* as compromise. Unlike the overlapping consensus of Rawls political liberalism, Gray sees compromise as the necessary bridge between pluralism and liberalism. According to Gray, citizens that disagree on comprehensive ways of life, but agree to accept common institutions under a liberal framework, do so as a compromise in the interest of peaceful coexistence.

**William Galston**

In a work, which bears the name *Liberal Pluralism* (2002) William Galston attempts to offer a theory of pluralism inspired by Isaiah Berlin’s approach. Galston argues that given the intractable nature of rational moral pluralism the state cannot justifiably endorse any one comprehensive value upon its citizens. The very existence of value pluralism results from the fact that no comprehensive doctrine can be categorically endorsed. Therefore, the endorsement of any single comprehensive doctrine, or restrictive policies rooted in a comprehensive doctrine, must remain rationally unjustifiable. Accordingly, default liberalism follows from the existence of value pluralism because illiberal doctrines always involve rationally unjustifiable coercion.

Such liberal pluralist approaches to political theory, and others including Jurgen Habermas’ approach to discourse politics in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), share a common concern with the tension between liberalism and value-pluralism. This issue relates a broader relevance to issues of global pluralism and concerns over global justice.

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**See Also**

Appiah, Kwame Anthony; Barry, Brian; Buchanan, Allen; Communitarianism; Cosmopolitan Democracy; Cosmopolitan Justice; Cosmopolitanism; Cultural Cosmopolitanism; Deliberative Democracy; Democratic Legitimacy; Difference Principle; Disagreement, Reasonable; Dworkin Ronald; Fair Equality of Opportunity; Global Democracy; Global Difference Principle; Gutmann, Amy; Habermas, Jurgen; Hobbes, Thomas; Kant, Immanuel; Law of Peoples; Liberal Democracy; Liberal Internationalism; Liberal Nationalism; Liberalism; Libertarianism; Local Communities; Locke, John; Mill, John Stuart; Modus Vivendi; Nussbaum, Martha; Original Position; Pluralism; Pogge, Separation of Church and State; Thomas; Walzer, Michael; Political Cosmopolitanism; Political Freedom; Political Legitimacy; Political Liberalism; Public Reason; John, Rawls; Social Contract; Toleration/Tolerance, Liberal Principle of; Wenar, Leif

**Further Reading**

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