



CHAPTER 6
Freedom
to choose
Liberalism

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There is no such thing as society.
Margaret Thatcher

INTRODUCTION

Example 1 | On the way to work, you decide to stop by the local corner store to buy a newspaper and some chewing gum. This is something you do almost every day, rarely giving it a second thought once the purchase is made. You may or may not recognise the clerk at the till, and you certainly cannot be said to have entered into a lasting relationship with that person. You have connected only briefly in a superficial fashion, and that's it. You're out the door and on your way. Presumably the transaction is mutually beneficial, but neither of you is changed by the experience. You retain your freedom as individuals and go your separate ways. Your obligations to each other end once the purchase is made, and of course at any time you may decide to stop going to that store and change to one that has a better selection of newspapers. The 'rejected' clerk will not serve you with a summons or ostracise you if he or she sees you on the street.

Example 2 | You have been invited to become a member of a local camera club. The group specialises in nature photography and its members have won awards at art shows. Because you like photography, you decide to join. You remain a member for two years. At the end of that period, because you wish to improve your physical fitness, you decide to quit the group and join an amateur football club instead. No-one raises a fuss when you leave, because both groups are voluntary, with members coming and going at their discretion. You are *free to join or quit* such an association.

What if every human relationship was like the variety store purchase? What if every community were like the camera or football club? What if we were to enter only into those relationships that obviously benefited us and that we genuinely *wanted* to enter? What would the world be like? This has been the historic dream of liberals since the beginning of the seventeenth century in England and elsewhere: to conceive of human relationships, especially communities, as fundamentally voluntary in character.

*As implied
in the word,
liberalism focuses
on individual
freedom—is
rationalist and
secular in spirit,
suspicious of
tradition, opposed
to privilege based
on ancestry,
ethnicity or
religion, defensive
of individual
'rights' and largely
respectful of
conscience and
private property.
Craig Gay¹*

HISTORY

Although liberalism is generally said to have arisen in the seventeenth century, as secularisation swept Europe in the wake of the wars of religion, one finds traces of its beliefs in the Epicurean philosophers of the ancient Greek world. Epicurus (341–270 BC) and his disciples were adherents of what has come to be called individualism, namely, the conviction that all relationships are basically contractual, like purchasing an item or joining a football club. If every obligation can be reduced to contract, then I cannot be made to fulfil an obligation I have not freely and willingly taken on.

In the Middle Ages the *Magna Carta* ensured a mutual check between king and Parliament in England. Liberalism really emerged as a force in the seventeenth century as a reaction to the absolutist ambitions of monarchs who were consolidating their authority over previously fragmented territories. France, England, Spain and Portugal led the way in this.

In England, an increasingly assertive Parliament eventually put in place limitations to the power of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs. This was to become the origin of modern constitutional governments in Anglo-Saxon countries. In 1688 the Glorious Revolution toppled the Stuart dynasty and ensured that, from then on, Parliament would be supreme. This was a significant shift from the time of absolute rule—the norm in England and Europe; whereby the monarch attempted to rule with unfettered control.

By the end of the seventeenth century, this parliamentary curbing of the king's power was being defended on liberal, individualist grounds. At this time, the writings of Hobbes, and then Locke became hugely influential. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was arguably the first typically modern political scientist. He was an individualist to the core, and in this way might be considered the first liberal in so far as he understood political authority to be established by a contract amongst the subjects (the social contract). Nevertheless, if Hobbes was a liberal, in the end his all-powerful political system is answerable to no-one and is a potentially oppressive threat to freedom.

The philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) followed. The ideas expressed in his *Two Treatises on Civil Government* in 1690 seemed tailor-made for a new liberal order created by the ousting of the Stuarts two years earlier. Locke's

ideas had a huge influence, especially on the founding of America a century later.

Although there are elements of earlier influences, including Christianity, in his thought, the big story Locke told was a marked departure from these. Whereas Christianity's narrative sees human history as one of creation, fall and redemption, the Lockean narrative runs as follows: state of nature, social contract, civil commonwealth and, if necessary, an appeal to heaven—that last phrase a veiled reference to overthrowing a government that does not serve the self-defined needs of individuals.

Other figures in liberalism's history include Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and in the twentieth century Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) and John Rawls (1921–2002). Following Locke, Jefferson justified the American War for Independence by appealing to the social contract. His *Declaration of Independence* borrows heavily from Locke's *Second Treatise*. For example, Locke's belief that government's chief task is to protect 'life, liberty and property' is slightly changed by Jefferson to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.

CASE STUDY: FRIEDRICH HAYEK (economist and political philosopher 1899–1992) | Hayek believed altruism (care for others beyond our immediate sphere of knowledge and relationships), was a hangover from primitive, tribal experience. He believed this urge must be overcome if we are, as he described it, to 'optimise our individual liberty through rational self-centred participation in the market'.²

In this area at least, Hayek's description presents Christianity and the (completely) free market as incompatible.

'As an example, continued obedience to the command to treat all men as neighbours would have prevented the growth of an extended order (that is, societies within markets). For those now living within (this) order, they gain from not treating one another as neighbours but by applying in their interactions the rules of the extended (market) order ... instead of the rules of solidarity and altruism.'³

The followers of liberalism sought, above all, to maximise individual freedom in the face of a variety of perceived oppressive forces. For the early liberals, the primary source of oppression is government. The *English Bill of Rights* of 1689 and its American counterpart of 1791 listed an array of liberties granted to subjects against the excessive power of government, such as freedom of speech, the right to petition for redress of grievances, and even a right to bear arms. However, as liberalism developed over the course of three centuries, the early liberals' preference for small government with few responsibilities was outweighed by the notion of contract, in which individual needs take priority over the size of government. This development led eventually to the expansion of the state, initially to check the economic power of corporate monopolies, then to guarantee freedom from want and finally, in the last decades of the twentieth century, to enhance individuals' ability to choose, full stop. This last stage of liberalism has seen followers questioning a variety of longstanding institutions, such as marriage and family, on the grounds that, as currently set up, they unjustly infringe individuals' ability to live their own lives.

LITIGATION MADNESS | The extreme elevation of the individual has been a function of the dominant liberal mindset. Of course elements of this have made life much better. It gives us great comfort to know we operate in a society that has mechanisms for protecting the rights of each person. Many of us enjoy the benefits of this freedom every day and take it for granted.

But can the interests of the individual be taken so far as to negatively impact communities? The modern desire to sue and make someone else pay for our misfortune or bad judgement is a function of rampant individualism (among other things). Outrageous stories of litigation in the US are well-known. The woman awarded \$4 million (reduced to \$1 million on appeal) for being scalded by a hot cup of coffee she bought from McDonald's; the man who successfully sued the New York subway after he threw himself in front of a train and was maimed—his claim was the train was travelling at the wrong speed; the 500,000 sick Florida smokers who are seeking about \$300 billion in damages from the top five cigarette companies.

But other parts of the West appear to be following the American model. In Australia a man who got drunk in a hotel and was left brain damaged when he was run over, was awarded \$278,000 after a court found in favour of him against the hotel and the driver.

Someone has to pay for these incidents, and presumably those in favour of such a litigious climate think the cost born by the community, in either higher taxes or insurance premiums (or fare increases in the case of the subway), is worth it. The individual, in these cases is supreme.

CENTRAL BELIEFS

1 | Like the adherents of other ideologies, liberals believe above all that the world belongs to us and is raw material for realising our dreams, whatever they might be.

The ideological centre of modern liberalism is the autonomous individual, presumed to be able to choose the roles he will play and the commitments he will make, not on the basis of higher truths but according to the criterion of life-effectiveness as the individual judges it.
Robert Bellah
Et Al⁴

To be sure, liberalism has not created the openly totalitarian régimes produced by socialism or nationalism. Its followers have generally not attempted to use obviously cruel means to enforce their agenda on a reluctant populace. Nevertheless, liberals have sometimes earned a reputation for engaging in social engineering—of trying to reorder society to conform to their beliefs, all the while claiming that their beliefs are not subjective and disputable, but merely conclusions that all rational persons should come to.

2 | Liberals believe in human autonomy, in other words, that people should, as much as possible, be able to determine, not only how they should live their lives, but the very nature of the world they inhabit.

Again socialists, nationalists and radical democrats would agree, but liberalism is nearly unique in locating the subject of this autonomy in the individual rather than in some community. This gives liberals a special affection for personal freedom or, as their name already indicates, liberty.

3 | Most liberals recognise the reality of death, but there is certainly no view of an afterlife.

Some liberals may believe in something like life after death, but they are likely to do so under the remaining influence of nonliberal elements, for example, Christianity or Judaism. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) did not openly espouse atheism, but it is evident from his writings that he was a materialist, believing that all physical reality, including human beings, is but matter in motion. Accordingly he took seriously the fact that most of his fellow English believed in an afterlife with rewards and punishments. However, the possible reality of such an afterlife lay beyond the realm of empirical investigation, a new and controversial notion for the time.

4 | There is a tendency among liberals, following John Locke, to believe that the human mind is a blank slate at birth, its contents taking shape only under the influence of outside agents, such as parents, teachers and political rulers.⁵

This is generally true although not all liberals will openly embrace a specific theory of knowledge. This leads liberals to downplay the reality of a stable human nature that might come into conflict with their social and political agenda. If human beings are capable of being moulded to suit the latter, then, despite their vaunted affection for liberty, liberals are likely to try to control the various means of socialisation, especially schools. Thus, with some exceptions, liberals are supporters of mass public (state-controlled) education.

5 | Liberals differ as to whether human actions can be intrinsically right or wrong.

Hobbes believed that in the state of nature, a condition supposedly existing prior to the formation of the civil commonwealth, 'might makes right'. The state of nature is a state of perpetual warfare in which everything is permissible as long as one succeeds in getting away with it. Locke disagreed, believing in a *law* of nature binding on everyone, even in the *state* of nature. Nowadays it is axiomatic that liberals believe in rights for everyone, but embrace no collective vision of the good. Such visions are properly within the scope of sovereign individuals and ought not to be enforced by the coercive arm of the state. However, even liberals believe it is *good* for people to possess

and exercise their rights, and this inevitably colours the public policies they pursue. The upshot is in practice liberals have a collective vision of the good, even as in effect they deny it.

6 | Contemporary liberals claim that no-one, especially government, should be able to tell us how to live our lives.

Of course, if an individual wishes to live in accordance with the precepts of Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam or Roman Catholicism, he or she is at liberty to do so. However, it is entirely up to the *individual*, whose personal choice is definitive. Accordingly, consistent liberals tend to distrust ecclesiastical *institutions*, such as the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, which claim the authority to teach and discipline the faithful. In the most recent phase of its development, liberalism has exalted choice for the sake of choice, as we shall see below.

A PARTY CONVERSATION

JOHN: I can't believe all the government regulations in this country! I mean how is it that a politician can tell me to wear a seatbelt and make it a law? And as for riding my bike with a helmet on, what right do they have to make me do that?

GINA: Well if you are stupid enough not to wear one, I guess it's up to you.

MEGAN: It's only trying to protect you John, can't you see that?

JOHN: What, are we in Stalinist Russia or something? Protect me! The point is, it's my choice to live the way I want. That's part of living in a democracy.

MEGAN: What about all the healthcare we have to pay for you when you fall off your bike exercising your right not to wear a helmet?

JOHN: That's not the point. Anyway, I pay for that with insurance.

MEGAN: Well John, you seem to think every law that's made is an imposition, so what role do you think the government has?

JOHN: Government should provide security, education, and some healthcare. And roads and bridges need to be built. I just don't think government should be telling us how to live. Things like censorship and legislating for moral reform make me nervous. People have to make their own choices and live the way they want. As long as they're not hurting anyone else, then that's OK with me.

MEGAN: The government has to intervene sometimes, or the community will fall apart. Take censorship for example. Sure, we want freedom of speech but there have to be limits.

JOHN: Why? When you're an adult you should be able to read and watch whatever you want.

MEGAN: Well, for instance I know you are into freedom of speech, but racist talk on the radio is unacceptable to you and rightly so. The thing is John, there are some extreme things—really sick sexual violence and stuff—that I don't want out there. When certain people are exposed to that it's dangerous for the rest of us.

JOHN: When I want someone else to tell me how to live, I'll ask them.

MEGAN: OK, whatever.

IMPACT

At the beginning of a new century it is safe to say that liberalism's long-term influence has been enormous, especially in English-speaking countries. So pervasive are liberal assumptions that Alasdair MacIntyre has observed that the contemporary political debate occurs between 'conservative liberals, liberal liberals and radical liberals'.⁶ In other words, even those who claim to repudiate liberalism nevertheless in large measure manage to accept some basic liberal assumptions.

Although liberalism is often contrasted with conservatism, this is not strictly correct, since it is common for professed conservatives to adhere to liberal political principles, albeit as expressed at an earlier stage in its development, especially the small government that refrains from interfering in economic activities. Australia's Liberal Party is a good example of a 'small-c' conservative party embracing an older form of liberalism in the name of holding onto a perceived good deemed threatened by, for example, socialism. Canada's Liberal Party is a centrist party, shifting at various times towards the 'left' and the 'right' as it takes the pulse of public opinion. The old British Liberal Party, now the Liberal Democratic Party, is only a minor party, yet liberal ideas are found within both the Conservative and Labour Parties.

Once again, liberalism is connected with our word *liberty*, or freedom. Liberals easily trumpet the virtues of freedom and rightly so. This is where they are at their best. Those of us living in constitutional democracies properly value freedom of speech, religion, the press, association and so forth. Liberalism had a huge impact on the foundation of Western democracy. As liberalism has progressed through the stages in its development, different political groupings have disagreed, not so much on basic philosophical issues, but on which is more faithful to the larger liberal project. In such contexts, true socialism—as opposed to the more moderate social democracy of the Australian Labor Party and the British Labour Party—has remained a minority voice.

POWER AND PARADOX | In an article for *The Australian Financial Review*, associate professor Greg Melleuish of Wollongong University writes of the tendency of modern democracies to impose greater control over their populations, all the while seeking to protect liberal values and goals. This, he suggests, is a paradox that is being repeated around the world:

'All Western democratic regimes in the twentieth century moved towards increasing their level of control, imposing uniformity and centralisation. Initially, this was done in the name of planning and the welfare state. Some of it, at least, could be justified in terms of what went by the name of national efficiency at the beginning of the twentieth century. And there is no doubt that proper national development could not have occurred in Australia without the growth of commonwealth powers.

[Former] British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sang the praises of Friedrich Hayek, who was the great champion of the idea that since individuals have the best knowledge of the circumstances that affect them, they, and not some distant bureaucrat, should be making the decisions regarding their lives. But Thatcher enhanced the power of the central state to combat those elements of society, such as trade unions, that she considered to be vested interests acting against the public good.

So we encounter another paradox in an age that has become increasingly committed to liberal values. A commonwealth government [in Australia]

committed to liberal values is seeking to centralise more and more power in its hands in the name of liberal efficiency and economic competitiveness.'

Melleuish asks how this continuation of a centralising drive will fit with a more complex and heterogenous society where westerners are 'taking liberal ideals such as rights, individuality and the capacity to control their own destinies much more seriously.'⁷

CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

Testing liberal claims

Does liberalism provide a true account of the world—and especially human culture and society—as we experience it? There is not a simple answer. On the one hand, liberalism has properly empowered individual people by bringing their unique identity to the fore. At one time and in virtually all pre-modern cultures, individuals were embedded in very few communities and institutions, the claims of which left little room for discretionary action on their part. Everyone remained in his station, and there was little if any social mobility. Challenging such entrenched social dynamics, liberalism provided the impetus for many of the worthwhile achievements of our society.

At the start of a new century, however, the claims of individual freedom are familiar nearly to the point of becoming trite. Standing up for one's rights may once have resonated with people as a sign of personal courage when facing oppression and injustice. But these days it can begin to look like self interest to the point of absurdity; or a way of pursuing a course of action that would otherwise be contestable. For some, almost any behaviour can be pursued in the name of asserting our rights. This has created a social climate in which potentially divisive 'rights talk' threatens to replace ordinary political deliberation.⁸ In addition such talk of rights is almost always divorced from associated *responsibilities*. Such a dynamic tends to produce fractured and divided communities, although liberal theory has little or nothing to offer such a problem.

UNEASY ALLIANCE | Craig Gay points out that the Christian faith poses a challenge to liberalism (as well as other modern political ideologies) because it 'insists on a living and active God, as well as the absolute incapacity of human beings to solve their problems by themselves. In doing so the Christian faith essentially denies the key tenet of modern political ideologies—faith in the autonomous human control over the world.'

This helps to explain why liberal and radical ideologies tend towards being atheistic—or at least agnostic in regard to Christian religion.⁹

Moreover, liberalism's professed individualism does not adequately account for our common experience of community. A person walking into a secondary school classroom where class is in session will see *more than just an aggregate of individuals voluntarily coming together for a shared purpose of their own choosing*. It will be immediately obvious that it is a classroom community and easily distinguished from, say, a family. Nor is the classroom a mere voluntary association. True, the students may be voluntarily enrolled in the course, but they have not determined the subject matter or how it will be taught, which are up to the teacher and, ultimately, to the school itself.

In short, liberalism as a theory cannot match up to our common experience of human society. Because liberalism undertakes to reduce human communities to voluntary contracts among individuals, it inadequately accounts for the reality that people easily distinguish one kind of community from another, even prior to theoretical analysis.

It has been said that Marxism is a Christian heresy. The same could as easily be said of liberalism, which has a similar pedigree. Both presuppose a secularisation of Christian faith in which salvation in Jesus Christ has come to be replaced by a human project for reform or even revolution. The love of freedom certainly has biblical roots. The Exodus recounts the liberation of the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery, while Ezra, Nehemiah and the second part of Isaiah tells of the return of the Jews from exile after the Persian king Cyrus permitted them to do so. In Galatians 5:1, the Apostle Paul urges his

readers, 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.' Paul further indicates, 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Corinthians 3:17b). Jesus said to his followers, 'then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (John 8:32).

However, while the biblical authors are concerned about achieving freedom from poverty and unjust oppression by others, their primary focus is on becoming free from the power of sin and death. According to the Bible the worst form of enslavement that human beings can experience is to their own weaknesses, failings, and evil tendencies, which are the source of other forms of oppression. Christian belief is that the ultimate source of such freedom is salvation in Jesus Christ, without which people remain in their sins, and thus in slavery.

While the Bible understands freedom to be freedom *for* living the obedient life, liberalism understands freedom primarily as freedom *from* some form of external constraint. What people do with their freedom is their own business, society—and especially the state—refraining from determining what that might look like. However, what liberalism cannot guarantee is that by maximising individual freedom, society as a whole will benefit. In its earlier stages liberalism champions the free market, assuming that self-seeking individuals will produce a kind of natural order. This 'spontaneous' order, says liberalism, is something no government should interfere with, as it would get in the way of the growth of material wealth. In its latest stage, liberalism ends up favouring an increasingly large state apparatus. It does this to compensate for the negative consequences of a society where individual freedom is paramount. Evidently there is such a thing as too much freedom.

Although some liberals recognise that freedom without responsibility is not a good thing, they generally have to look outside their world view to find this. Often it is Christianity, with its strong sense of individual freedom balanced by personal responsibility to the larger community that will play a role here.

RESPONSE

Question

- 1 | What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of liberalism?
- 2 | To what degree do you think responsibilities to communities should override individual choice and freedom?

Discussion

- A | What limitations do you envisage in the way liberalism locates the subject of human autonomy in the individual rather than some community? (See point 2 of Central Beliefs on page 102.)
- B | What are the most obvious points of agreement between liberalism and the Christian world view? What makes them less easily reconcilable?
- C | What is the significance of the distinction between liberal and Christian notions of freedom? (See 'Contact and departure' on page 107.)
- D | Do you agree that Christianity has a role to play in helping to establish a balance between freedom and responsibility? In what areas can you see this apply?

MEDIA

LIBERTY AND COMPROMISE? | *X-Men: First Class (2011)* deals with societal change in the 1960s as seen through the fictional appearance of mutants. Civil liberties for mutants are threatened in order to protect freedoms for the greater population.

Liberal democratic governments are committed to assisting people to enjoy a set of basic freedoms. There are legitimate questions as to how far these governments are prepared to compromise on individual freedom, in order to protect liberty as a whole.

What if, for example, a political group or party forms that is seeking totalitarian rule, or imposition of a particular religion, or a system that would entail oppressive intrusion into people's lives? For our purposes, imagine this party has real chance of success.

Should the government allow that party to continue, on the grounds of honouring the principle of freedom? Or should it ban the group on the grounds that, while they may interfere with the freedom of that particular party, it allows for the greater enjoyment of liberty overall?¹⁰

Consequentialists (discussed in chapter 4) would say that you only honour a set of values in so far as you are promoting them.¹¹ They would be comfortable banning this group, bugging phone conversations, and arresting people if they felt they were becoming a threat.

Contemporary examples might include censorship of material that could incite hatred, or refusing a visa to a person who denied the holocaust. In the 'war on terror' many governments in the West have taken action that has restricted people's freedoms, in the name of the greater good and ultimately, they say, the protection of freedom. Civil libertarians however, speak out against these restrictions, claiming that there is enormous danger in compromising the value that a democracy holds dear. The liberal stance in this instance might seek to protect the idea of individual freedom and give this priority over a perceived safer environment.

Discussion

E | In what situations would you be happy to compromise individual freedom for the greater good? Are there issues that you think should be 'written in stone' without room for compromise or selective judgement? What are the potential problems with such an approach?

FREEDOM AT A PRICE | In an article titled 'It's time for the Liberal party to live up to its name', Richard Allsop, research fellow of the Institute of Public Affairs, and former senior adviser in the Liberal government in Victoria, gives a clear articulation of a liberal vision for Australian States.

Urging the party to be the party of small government, he called for a consistent liberal agenda. 'There are large swathes of state government responsibilities where the Liberal Party can position itself firmly on the side of citizens who want to live their lives free of unnecessary government-imposed rules and regulations', he wrote. Allsop then proceeded to warn against the dangers of going down the path of racial vilification laws, citing Rod Liddle's take on the British experiment in this area, 'Today you can be prosecuted for insisting that homosexuality is a crime against nature and yet also prosecuted for denigrating the Koran, a book which insists that homosexuality is a crime against nature. Let the Liberal Party be the party of free speech', said Allsop.

Market-based opportunities for development were next on Allsop's agenda. Restrictive planning regulations and prohibitive costs were placed alongside 'busybody neighbours', and 'control freak local councils' as the writer called for the market to determine policy. Presumably Allsop is not facing the prospect of the view from his bedroom becoming nothing but a brick wall any time soon!

His call for the lifting of any restrictions on shop trading hours was based on what he called a defence of the rights of the consumer. We have become used to being able to shop at any time of the day or night, but some would argue such practices, if completely unrestricted, begin to impinge on the interests of employees (who also happen to be consumers), not to mention debates that call into question the benefit of non-stop shopping. Consistent with the liberal agenda however, Allsop offers the market as the ultimate judge of what is good and proper.

He turns his attention next to the need to protect the interests of gamblers. Allsop suggests poker machine players are a group who are becoming the 'most maligned in the country'. The problems of a minority are no reason to restrict the freedom of the rest.

He says 'stifling genuine community activity' (not usually the way poker machine playing is regarded) is not the place of government.

'An agenda of personal freedom', is one that voters are likely to embrace, believes Allsop, and in that he may well be right. Yet one is left wondering if freedom of this nature comes at some price.

Discussion

F | How does the article shed light on what might be concerning about liberalism?

G | In what areas would you see liberals most needing to compromise in their push for freedom?

Perception

1 | What appear to you to be the most appealing aspects of liberalism as a way of viewing the world?

2 | What are its most identifiable weaknesses?