

Liberalism is a word of many meanings in the sense that it has meant different things to different people at different times. Also, it may mean different things to different people at the same time when the perspectives are different. This doesn't mean that we can't get a dictionary definition that pulls out a salient concept such as "a political philosophy advocating personal freedom for the individual, democratic forms of government, gradual reform in political and social institutions, etc." as in *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

The differences, sometimes heated, may reflect differences in underlying values. A dictionary of important theories, concepts, beliefs, and thinkers, which is the subtitle of the book *A World of Ideas* is more informative as to the differences. The first two sentences of the one page definition are as follows: "Political, social, and economic doctrine that in its classic construction emphasizes individual FREEDOM, limited government, gradual social PROGRESS, and LAISSEZ-FAIRE commerce, and in its modern incarnation favors STATE involvement in social WELFARE and economic policy while upholding personal liberty and opportunity. The term has the same root as 'liberty' and implies freedom of conscience and action." [The caps refer to other entries in the book.]

Considering those two sentences it makes sense to use a bridge analogy to wit; the right way to play the suit may not be the right way to play the hand. Applying that thought to our study of liberalism, built on reading selected excerpts and essays, there are two points. The first is that it is essential to understand what the author said, but to understand it in the context of the times and vantage point. The second is to understand the concepts espoused in the context of relevance to whatever our interest may be. Thus, knowing the right way to play the suit is necessary, but not sufficient. It is essential to know how to put the ideas into the relevant context if one intends to use the ideas for whatever they may be worth.

In order to do that, these notes may include references to the presumed context of the excerpts/essays and delve into the presumed underlying values implicit in the writings.

Session 1: July 10

Aristotle, Politics

Understanding what Aristotle said in the excerpt from *Politics* is aided by starting with item 7, "Further the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part;..." This is the major clue to the hierarchical structure advocated by Aristotle. The rest is a political philosophy predicated on the assumption of the search for the "good."¹

¹ From my notes last year: "Continuing with the discussion of the four explorations in the context of the Declaration of Independence quote, we now focus on what does Aristotle mean by *happiness*... As best as I can see now, whatever happiness is relates to obtaining *virtue* which is related to the function of man and

That search assumes a commonality of goals which is likely to unfold as an issue in liberalism which generally starts with the individual rights; a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down view. Recall that Aristotle's mentor was Plato and Plato's view was hierarchal as in *The Republic*.

All of this is tied to a quote from in the last sentence of the excerpt, "But justice is the bond of men in states,..." This will all tie to underlying values, especially the concepts of liberty (or freedom) and justice (especially social justice).

The relevance of the excerpt from Aristotle is the identification of some underlying values that give rise to particular concepts of liberalism.

John Locke, Of the State of Nature, Second Treatise of Government

Locke makes the point that man is naturally free, and though he may use force to protect his rights he has reason to join with others in society for the "mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name – property." [Note the use of the word property.]

Government is the establishment for this purpose and should function on the basis of "known law," administered on an impartial basis, and so enforced. This transfer of power to the government is deemed to improve one's individual position.

The footnote on the preamble to the Declaration of Independence is an application of the relevance of Locke's position. As I wrote last year in my notes, "The quote we have been considering as the unifying concept to our four explorations is as follows: 'We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.' The 'Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness' phrase is a takeoff on a statement in John Locke's *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, published in

furthermore relates to man pursuing that function. Additionally, the pursuit of that function, as essential to happiness, involves obtaining knowledge. One big clue is that Aristotle's mentor was Plato, and Plato's mentor was Socrates who equated virtue with knowledge. So, maybe the idea is to obtain knowledge in order to lead a certain kind of life...

...It looks like his focus is on the higher faculties used in pursuing activities to achieve the chief good through acquiring knowledge. Presumably, this chief good is happiness. His focus includes the state as well as the individual; and he ranks the study of politics as "most truly the master art." He sees politics as the integrating discipline of a broad variety of disciplines.

Happiness may then be considered in light of one's pursuing knowledge in order to live the good life, i.e., pursuing the "good." This is in the context of living in a society with others in which the knowledge is leading to the rules for living among others; this is the lead into the next topic in our series of four, justice."

Maury

1690. The quote from Locke's Chapter VII titled "Of Political or Civil Society" is as follows:

"Sec. 87. Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontrouled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature, equally with any other man, or number of men in the world, hath by nature a power, not only to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that law in others, as he is persuaded the offence deserves, even with death itself, in crimes where the heinousness of the fact, in his opinion, requires it.

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"The phrase 'pursuit of happiness' was not in the John Locke statement, although 'property' was. We may speculate why 'pursuit of happiness' was used by the Founding Fathers rather than property (Locke used property to include life, liberty and estate), which may be construed to include slaves. But perhaps the Mill piece, "What Utilitarianism is," will shed some light."

Further to the relevance, beyond the derivation of government's power being derived from the governed is the idea that there may be different views as to the range of powers as regards various policies adopted by government. The position on various options is the subject of liberalism and its alternatives.

David Brooks, The British Can Teach us a Thing or Two

This op ed piece by Brooks discusses options in two dimensions. One is the older issue of "individual freedom" vs. the extending the role of the state;" the former being to the right and the latter to the left, presumably liberal. The other dimension accepts some extension of the role of the state on both sides of the aisle, but focuses on priorities in various dimensions of quality of life.

The individual freedom issue has not gone away. Rather within different ranges of the extent of that freedom there are the individual aspects of quality of life. Brooks makes the point that American conservatives are becoming more conservative and British conservatives are becoming less conservative, adopting some concessions to sociological criteria.

It is hard to follow, especially considering the statement of the reversal of the flow of ideas, since there is no development of the earlier direction of flow. Presumably, Americans were moving in the liberal direction becoming closer to the British situation, but recent decades in America have been dominated by the conservatives. Possibly, the title is telling us that it is time to become more liberal, and that is the likelihood with the November elections.

The confusion may be in comparing subgroups rather than the totality. Hopefully class discussion will shed some light on what Brooks means. But there is some confusion here rooted in the changing perspectives over time and context.

Session 2: July 17

Preface

Before discussing what I think each of the author's was saying, there are some comments that apply to both. Indeed, some of these comments might best be included in discussion of the second of the essays, but they are germane to both.

It is a truism that there is no copyright on words in the public domain. Consequently, it is easy for different meanings to be attached to a word that is loaded, either favorably or unfavorably. Liberalism is such a word.

Both authors are libertarians and apparently are making their interpretation according to their value system. Obviously, both labels have the same derivation in the word liberal, and by association the word freedom.²

Ludwig von Mises, Liberalism

The essence of this piece appears to be built upon a distinction between (1) the fundamental principles underlying the concept of liberalism and (2) the choices that go toward advocating a particular organization of society. The author argues that the fundamental principles of liberalism are unchanged in that liberalism is about "the conduct of men in this world" in the sense that it speaks to the organization of society. Furthermore the fundamental principles, although not listed apparently include only the material aspects of life. All of this speaks to the organization of society.

The choices that go toward advocating a particular organization are another matter. These choices have changed over time and are the subject of substantial differences at any point in time. One issue is the spiritual or inner well being. He rejects that as the focus of liberalism but apparently regards the materialistic as a matter of substantial influence on the spiritual.

He builds his case as a libertarian using reason as a tool for creating a productive society. His claim is that the freedom of liberalism will be more productive for society than would be the results of an organization of society with lesser forms of freedom. He denies that this view is designed to favor those better off, but concedes that there is a substantial difference in distribution of income and wealth. He sees a capitalistic society built upon his concept of liberalism.

As an evaluation of his position I would build upon the Isaiah Berlin two concepts of freedom. It is one thing not to restrict one's freedom. But it is another matter to have one empowered to utilize the lack of such restriction. That empowerment is dependent upon education, cultural as well as formal. The level playing field refers to the rules, but some cognizance needs to be taken of differences in abilities, natural as well as developed. This becomes very complex because it deals with many values, some of

² At the risk of jumping ahead it is useful to deal with Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty.

which may be incommensurate with others. The choices one makes with regard to the mix of underlying values may on one hand reflect a liberalism that focuses on freedom; it may also take a liberalism point of view that focuses on distributive justice.

This is a natural lead in to the discussion of the Hayek piece on liberalism.

F.A. Hayek, Liberalism

Hayek, also a libertarian, takes the concept of liberalism as being open to new ideas. He discusses two main sets of ideas in developing his perception.

The one that “traces back to antiquity” appears to be a reference to our initial discussion, Aristotle on politics. The key is the rule of law. That is the British thread and it is heavily built upon reason; but that reason was a product of an evolution that was different from the sea change that occurred on the continent. This use of reason also takes us back to the first session in that it is the view of John Locke and includes the source of authority from the governed.

The other, the continental view, was built upon the French Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, is also built upon reason, the transition was violent. The French Revolution delivered some progress by disposition of the royal authority, but it has been argued that it also ended the Enlightenment.³ Hayek refers to a

³ That argument is made by Edward O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, to wit, “The French Revolution drew its intellectual strength from men and women like Condorcet. It was readied by growth of educational opportunity and then fired by the idea of universal rights of man. Yet as the Enlightenment seemed about to achieve this by means of political fruition in Europe, something went terribly wrong.” [Page 16.]

Wilson goes on to explain that Rousseau’s “Social Contract” of 30 years earlier, while inspiring the later slogan of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” also “invented the abstraction of ‘general will’ to achieve these goals. ... Those who do not conform to the general will, Rousseau continued, are deviants subject to necessary force by the assembly. There is no other way to achieve a truly egalitarian democracy and thus break humanity out of the chains that everywhere bind it.” [Page 16.] Wilson continues:

“Robespierre, leader of the Reign of Terror that overtook the Revolution in 1793, grasped this logic all too well. He and his fellow Jacobins across France implemented Rousseau’s necessary force to include summary condemnations and executions for all those who opposed the new order...

“... Thus took form the easy cohabitation of egalitarian ideology and savage coercion that was to plague the next two centuries...

“... The decline of the Enlightenment was hastened not by just tyrants who used it for justification but by rising and often valid intellectual opposition. Its dream of a world made orderly and fulfilling by free intellect had seemed at first indestructible, the instinctive goal of all men. Its creators, among the greatest scholars since Plato and Aristotle, showed what the human mind can accomplish. Isaiah Berlin, one of the most perceptive historians, praised them justly as follows, ‘The intellectual power, honesty, lucidity, courage, and disinterested love of the truth of the most gifted thinkers of the eighteenth century remain to this day without parallel. Their age is one of the best and

“mental attitude.” It was in the context of emancipation, but there was not a tolerance for a different view, even from within. See footnote quoting Wilson.

Hayek blends the two views, but asserts that the United States did not have a comparable liberal movement, but rather had the ideas embodied in the Constitution; which I assume to refer to the adaptation of Locke’s rights to life liberty and property. He makes the point that what may then have been called liberal in Europe would be conservative in the U.S. today; and liberal in the U.S. today is what would be called socialism in Europe. This should shed some light on the stuff I am not grasping from the Brooks article, but it needs more attention.

This takes me to item 2, “The liberal concept of freedom,” but I will have to finish later.

Later has arrived! Items 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9, are respectively labeled “The liberal concept of freedom,” “Liberalism and justice,” “Liberalism and equality,” Liberalism and democracy,” and “The service functions of government.” Together they set forth the critical concepts and issues that define liberalism in its transition to contemporary times.

One may not agree with Hayek, but understanding his position is helpful in drawing the distinction between what many of us see as liberal thought as contrasted to conservative thought. Item 2, “The liberal concept of freedom,” is simply the “negative freedom” as described by Hayek’s contemporary, Isaiah Berlin in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969). Hayek wrote his essay four years later. Wikipedia describes him as “...an [Austrian-British economist](#) and [political philosopher](#) known for his defence of [classical liberalism](#) and [free-market capitalism](#) against [socialist](#) and [collectivist](#) thought in the mid-20th century.” He was influenced by Ludwig von Mises, a fellow Austrian. He may be contrasted to Isaiah Berlin, who has been described before his death in 1997 as the greatest living British philosopher. As I noted earlier in these notes, “[his]two concepts of freedom. It is one thing not to restrict one’s freedom. But it is another matter to have one empowered to utilize the lack of such restriction.” The footnote that follows expands on that comment.⁴

most hopeful episodes in the life of mankind.’ But they reached too far, and their best efforts were not enough to create the sustained effort their vision foretold.” [Pages 16-17.]

Had Rousseau spoken of general reason rather than general will, events might have unfolded differently. Wilson puts the end of the Enlightenment as March 29, 1794, the date of the death of the Marquis de Condorcet. The imposition of “the general will” had left no room for reasonable differences.

⁴ The two concepts of liberty discussed by Isaiah Berlin in his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” [Four *Essays on Liberty*, pages 121-122.] are as follows: The first concept, using the label of negative liberty, is “What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?” The second concept, using the label of positive liberty, is, “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”

Liberals of that era accepted the negative liberty concept, i.e., freedom from coercion except as necessary for equality of rights and the appropriate taxation for proper governmental affairs. The differences arise in governments' assurance of results from individual efforts.

Hayek's section 6, "Liberalism and justice," deals with the results issue, where I believe Hayek buys into commutative justice rather than distributive justice.⁵ It is the results that are at issue, and Hayek deals with it in the next section, 7, "Liberalism and equality."

Hayek's position is that in liberalism the state deals only with the rules. Others use liberalism to deal with the results. Hayek's liberals would mitigate the differences in results by fostering vertical mobility, especially through education. But, somewhere along the line other "liberals" go farther, especially with progressive taxation. Somewhere along this line is where the battle for the label rages, and that might be what the Brook's essay referred to in suggesting that the Brits could teach us a thing or two,

Berlin sees a conflict in these two perspectives of liberty in that they are different values, even though they are related, and there may be some overlap in the answers. There is one long paragraph by John Gray in his book, *Isaiah Berlin*, which is especially enlightening on the comparison and contrast. It is as follows:

"It will readily be seen that, if negative freedom as Berlin understands it presupposes the capacity for choice among alternatives, it shares a common root with positive freedom. Unlike negative freedom, which is freedom from interference by others, positive freedom is the freedom of self-mastery, of rational control of one's life. It is plain that, as with negative freedom, positive freedom is impaired or diminished as the capacity or power of choice is impaired or diminished, but in different ways. An agent may be unobstructed in the choice of alternatives by other agents, and yet lack the ability or power to act. This may be because of negative factors, lacks or absences - of knowledge, money or other resources - or may be because there are internal constraints, within the agent himself, preventing him from conceiving or perceiving alternatives as such, or else, even if they are so perceived, from acting on them. Such conditions as phobias or neurotic inhibitions may close off an agent's options, even to the point that they remain unknown to him, or else he may be constrained by irrational and invincible anxiety from acting so as to take advantage of them. In this case the power of choice has been sabotaged or compromised from within. An agent may possess very considerable negative freedom and yet, because he is incapacitated for choice among alternatives that other have not closed off from him, be positively unfree to an extreme degree. What both forms of unfreedom have in common is the restriction or incapacitation of the powers of choice." [Page 16.]

An additional explanation, according to Michael Ignatieff in his book, *Isaiah Berlin*, is as follows:

"Until Rousseau, liberty had always been understood negatively, as the absence of obstacles to courses of thought and action. With Rousseau, and then with the Romantics, came the idea of liberty being achieved only when men are able to realise their innermost natures. Liberty became synonymous with self-creation and self-expression. A person who enjoyed negative liberty - freedom of action or thought - might none the less lack positive liberty, the capacity to develop his or her innermost nature to the full." [Page 202.]

⁵ The difference may be noted as discussed by Abraham Kaplan in his *In Pursuit of Wisdom: The Scope of Philosophy* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1977). The explanation uses the classifications of commutative, distributive, and social. In Kaplan's words, "*Distributive justice* is the adherence to moral norms of both form and content in the allocation of resources and products [Page 418.]...*Commutative justice* is the allocation to each person of neither more nor less than he deserves. [Page 418.]...*Social justice* is a comprehensive category comprising a certain degree of equality and security, as well as distributive and commutative justice." [Page 418.]

possibly that we should be moving more to the social justice model. His essay is still not clear to me.

The “Liberalism and democracy” section is especially germane to the current situation of terrorist organizations winning a democratic election. Hayek writes that democracy is concerned with who directs the government; but, liberalism requires that power be limited. Thus, he would oppose a “tyranny of the majority.”

The final section, “The service functions of government,” Hayek expresses his concern that governments may go too far in providing services, winding up as a Welfare State forsaking the liberalism principles.

My assessment of this is that many things that are supposedly discrete are really part of a continuum. Liberalism is obviously rooted in the rights of the individual. The issues surround what rights are surrendered in living within a community.

Surrendering the rights, setting the rules, may be heavily dependent on the differences as to the distribution of ability and opportunity that exist in the community. It may be viewed as a matter of justice.

Claimants to the label of liberals, and opponents to liberals, have different concepts of justice. It looks as though these differences in concepts of justice will come into play as we move on to discuss the use of markets in the structure of the political-economy.