

Liberalism

Philosophy of individual liberty

Dedicated to Charlie Hebdo

Liberalism is a political philosophy or worldview founded on the core values of **individual liberty** and **equality**. All individuals are considered to have the same moral value (or dignity). The word was first used in a political context by the Spanish group *Liberales* in 1812.



Four pillars of liberalism (John Gray)

1. Individualism Only individuals count.
2. Egalitarianism All humans are morally equal.
3. Meliorism Striving towards progress, that is: more knowledge, more happiness, less suffering.
4. Universalism Liberalism has worldwide application.

Freedom, or liberty: the power or right to do as one wants.
Equality: all individuals have equal moral status and are accorded the same rights as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Towards the light of liberty



John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (1689): 'father of modern liberalism'; law of the people (social contract theory), freedom of the individual, separation of church and state, religious toleration (except for atheists).



Adam Smith: founding father of economic liberalism (capitalism). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) argues that self-interest can lead to mutual benefit.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. In The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) he pleads for sympathy for others.



Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791)

'Give to every other human being every right that you claim for yourself – that is my doctrine.'



John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859): No harm principle: no tyranny of the majority. *The Subjection of Women* (1869): classic of liberal feminism.

"The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right."



Karl Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945): No tolerance for intolerance:

"...the attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell. It leads to intolerance. It leads to religious wars, and to the saving of souls through the inquisition. And it is, I believe, based on a complete misunderstanding of our moral duties. It is our duty to help those who need help; but it cannot be our duty to make others happy, since this does not depend on us, and since it would only too often mean intruding on the privacy of those towards whom we have such amiable intentions."

Popper argues that politics should be about striving towards optimizing individual liberty by **piecemeal social engineering**. Freedom of expression is of fundamental importance for individual liberty.



Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958).

Negative freedom: The state guarantees that individual rights are respected and protected (police and army). The state does not interfere with individual lifestyles.

Positive freedom: The state facilitates opportunities for individuals to flourish, e.g. by organizing and subsidizing education, sports, theater, recreational areas, museums.

Libertarians value negative freedom much more than positive freedom.

Socialism tends to value positive freedom more than negative freedom.



John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971): philosophy of the welfare state; helping people in worst off position to be able to flourish.

"Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others."



Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (2006): capabilities approach

The capabilities approach focuses on achieving human well-being by securing a threshold level of opportunities that all citizens are able to achieve.



AC Grayling, *Towards the Light of Liberty. The Struggles for Freedom and Rights That Made the Modern Western World* (2007).

"People should be left to believe what they like, so long as they harm no one else. Apart from normal expectations of politeness, it is not however clear why people should require their personal beliefs to be treated with special sensitivity by others, to the point that if others fail to tip-toe respectfully around them they will start throwing bombs."



Dirk Verhofstadt, *A Plea for Individualism* (2013): liberalism as individualism.

Pleads for a cosmopolitan and universal liberalism striving to let individuals flourish to their fullest capacity. Verhofstadt opposes to obstacles to individual liberty, especially religion and patriarchy.



Ayaan Hirsi Ali: *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (2008).

"We need to stand up for our own principles as liberals. Specifically, we need to say to offended Western Muslims (and their liberal supporters) that it is not we who must accommodate their beliefs and sensitivities. Rather, it is they who must learn to live with our commitment to free speech."



Floris van den Berg, *Philosophy for a better world* (2009): universal subjectivism. Extending Rawls to nonhuman animals and future generations. Thinking liberalism through from the perspective of victims, including nonhuman animals and future generations.



Liberal decalogue

by Bertrand Russell

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once considered eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

Green liberal heptalogue

by Floris van den Berg

1. First, do not harm others, including non-human animals and future generations.
2. Strive towards a world with less suffering and more happiness.
3. Encourage yourself and others to excel.
4. Work on the critical thinking skills of yourself and others.
5. Let others be free, as long as they do not harm others.
6. Try to enjoy life.
7. Do random acts of kindness.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four freedoms (1941)

Freedom of speech

Freedom of worship

Freedom from want

Freedom from fear

Universal Declaration of Human Rights



A monument of moral progress for humanity. The UDHR was adopted by the United Nations Assembly on 10 December 1948. It represents the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled. The UDHR is a liberal document because it establishes individual liberty as a core value.

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

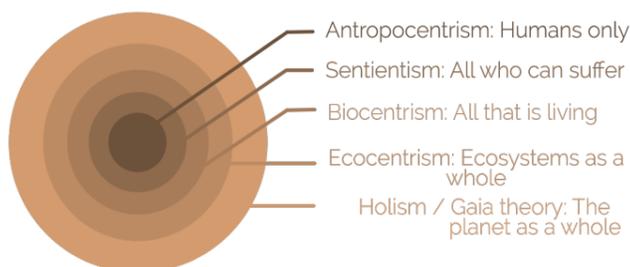
Liberty to whom?

Peter Singer,

The expanding moral circle (1981):

Who is in the moral club?

- From anthropocentrism to sentientism
- What is the criterion for inclusion into the moral circle?



Liberalism in context

Libertarianism/neoliberalism

Libertarians only take into account negative freedom (e.g. classical rights to personal security and property). Libertarians want a minimal state. (Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, (1974)).

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism tends to prioritize group rights over individual rights and thus tolerates intolerance. E.g. allowing nontherapeutic circumcision of boys (Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999)).

Religion

Religion is a private hobby. Religion should be an individual autonomous choice, based on objective information. All hobbies should be allowed as long as they don't harm others or interfere with the freedom of others. Children should be free from religion (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)).

Cosmopolitanism (global justice)

Liberalism has a universal moral claim. All individuals on the planet should be allowed to live according to their own wishes – as long as they don't harm others - without being suppressed.

Animal rights

It is inconsistent to oppose one kind of oppression and be an oppressor yourself at the same time. Total liberation strives to ban all forms of oppression, including nonhuman animals. Liberals ought to live a life trying to avoid harm to sentient beings, and thus it follows that liberals have a moral obligation to be vegan.

Economic growth

Economic growth should be curtailed by the (extended) no harm principle.

Democracy

One human, one vote. Universal suffrage.

Socialism/communism

Individual liberties are not protected in communism. Respecting individual liberties under socialism might be possible.

Paternalism

Paternalism: deciding for other people what is good and how to behave. There is a universal, intuitive temptation to tell other people what to do and what not to do.

However (contra Mill): soft paternalism as compulsory helmets for motorcyclists seems reasonable.

Science

Science is the best method for pursuing of truth. Religion should not interfere with science. Education and policy should be science based.

Feminism

Liberalism encompasses feminism: nobody should be oppressed on the basis of sex or sexual orientation.. In many (Islamic) parts of the world a sexual revolution is necessary in order to liberate women (and men) from cultural and religious suppression.

Environmentalism

(sustainable development)

Future generations should be taken into moral consideration.

Secularism

Secularism is the separation of religion and state. Liberals tend to favour strong separation of religion and state (laïcité), including opposition to faith based schools. (Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook. In defense of moral and political secularism* (2010)).

Secular humanism

Secular humanism is the worldview and life stance that harmonizes with liberalism. (Paul Kurtz, *Living without Religion* (1994)).

A hard case for liberalism:

Freedom of expression and the right to offend



"What is freedom of expression without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist." - Salman Rushdie

In the *Handyside v United Kingdom* case (1976) the European Court of Human Rights decided that: *"Freedom of expression...is applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population."*

Oxford Declaration on Freedom of Thought and Expression (2014) at the World Humanist Congress:

"There is no right not to be offended, or not to hear contrary opinions. Respect for people's freedom of belief does not imply any duty or requirement to respect those beliefs. The expression of opposition to any beliefs, including in the form of satire, ridicule or condemnation in all media and forms is vital to critical discourse and any restraint that is exercised in this expression must be in accordance of article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The best response to the expression of a view we disagree with is to reply to it. Violence and censorship are never legitimate responses. All laws that criminalise language on grounds of 'blasphemy' or of offence to beliefs and values impede human freedom and should be abolished."

Virtual Museum of Offensive Art & Censorship
 (www.kwestendekunst.nl)

holds a collection of art works, which have been censored or caused upheaval. The ethos of the museum is in keeping with liberal views on society that freedom should be as large as is logically consistent with the freedom of other individuals. Use of violence and incitement of violence are the clear boundaries of freedom. The right of freedom of expression logically entails the right to offend and insult. As such, it is possible that you can be offended or even insulted by the artistic creations of other people.

From classical liberalism

to

green liberalism

Extending the no harm principle from anthropocentrism to sentientism (*Can they suffer?* Bentham).

Maxim of Green Liberalism:

Anything goes as long as it does not (physically) harm other sentient beings, including nonhuman animals and future generations.

