

## Liberalism and the Public Good - Enbysk

1. Liberalism, as a political philosophy, and as the dominant political philosophy of western, liberal countries like the United States attempts to provide a theory capable of establishing the legitimacy of the state and its' political institutions. In other words, it is an attempt to justify and defend a theory of political authority.
2. The attempt to legitimize the state and its' institutions is only necessary if there is some reason to question and worry about the legitimacy of those institutions. Given that the political setting in Western, liberal countries is 1) one that displays plural, competing and mutually exclusive visions of the good life, political institutions are called upon to 2) distribute goods and resources in ways that are just (whatever that ends up meaning) so as to contribute to an ongoing recognition of the state as legitimate. Together, these two issues constitute the problems of (A) tolerance, and (B) social and distributive justice.
3. As there is wide disagreement about 2) because of 1), it follows that political societies like the U.S. face a crisis of legitimacy that philosophical liberalism is challenged to address.
4. This crisis poses a challenge for notions like "the public good" or "the public interest" or "common interest". Government must find a way to satisfy the demands of tolerance and justice from the perspective of a wide variety of conceptions of the good and there may be no good reason to suspect that such disparate visions of the good life can find any common ground with regards to such a notion. There may be good reasons to be skeptical about such a philosophical project from the get-go.
5. Still, there is good reason to postpone such skepticism until consideration of the problem has been philosophically exhausted. Likewise, if the crisis of legitimacy is to be solved in peaceful, as opposed to violent means, it makes some moral sense to make the philosophical effort.
6. What is Liberalism? (Credited to Craig Carr, who blatantly cribbed if from Dick Flathman, who in turn blatantly "borrowed" it from Bruce Ackerman (Cf. R. Flathman, "Liberalism and Authority, " in Flathman, *Toward a Liberalism*; and Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State*.)
  - a. Human beings are purposive agents whose actions cannot be understood apart from their conception of the good.
  - b. Conceptions of the good and action goals are irreducibly plural.
  - c. There is a scarcity of the goods necessary for the effective pursuit of the good.
  - d. Given (b) and (c), it follows that there will invariably be competition and conflict, but it must be managed in ways that render it non-destructive.
  - e. The objective of politics is to manage this conflict in a way that allows everyone the freedom to pursue her or his vision of the good (or the good life) to the maximum degree consistent with the need for effective constraints against destructive conflict.
7. Liberal attempts to address this challenge. (Again, blatantly "borrowed" from Craig Carr, et. Al.)
  - a. Liberals can claim that there is one theory of the good that is true/valid and that it should therefore be adopted by the state and imposed upon those who would not accept it.
  - b. Another way to address this challenge is to defend a theory of neutrality in politics: political institutions must be neutral (both in aim and purpose) between competing theories of the good.
  - c. A third way to address the challenge is to insist upon the value/virtue of rational dialogue for achieving the commonality that will enable political institutions to achieve and sustain a viable neutrality.
  - d. A fourth way to address the challenge is to argue that liberalism contains its own political ethic that provides a sufficiently thick theory of the good to enable liberal communities to sustain themselves.
  - e. Other possibilities?