Tolerance, liberal democracy and pluralism

TOLERANCE AND THE IDEAL OF A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Liberal democracy

Liberalism is the political view that claims liberty is the central, most important political value. In the history of ideas, liberals have argued that human beings are ‘naturally’ free, and so any restraint on their liberty needs to be justified. That means that the state – with its powers to pass and enforce laws that limit liberty – needs to be justified. Most liberals also argue that while some restrictions on liberty can be justified, extensive restrictions cannot. A liberal society, then, is one in which citizens have a large degree of individual liberty.

The most common answer – certainly the most common liberal answer – to how to justify the state is some form of democracy. The theory is that through democracy we can be governed but also be free – because we have consented to being governed (or if ‘consent’ is too strong, at least, we have some say in the matter).

But a liberal will not be happy with any form of democracy. Democracies can pass laws that restrict individual liberty when they should not. A liberal democracy recognises the individual’s right to liberty, and other rights that are based on the importance of liberty. These rights – whether enshrined in a constitution or just in the political culture – restrict what laws the government can pass.

A very influential argument for liberalism comes from J.S. Mill’s On Liberty. Mill argues that ‘the dealings of society with the individual’ should be regulated by ‘one simple principle’, known as the Liberty or Harm principle:

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… Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (On Liberty, pp. 68-9)

Mill thinks liberty should be very extensive, as extensive as possible, without giving us the freedom to harm other people. Mill wants to protect individual freedom in three key areas:

1. freedom of thought, which covers all areas of belief – factual, religious, moral, and so on;
2. freedom in how we live our lives; and
3. freedom to unite with others for any purpose to which we agree.

Mill’s work marks the beginning of the modern idea of toleration. Before Mill, discussion of toleration was limited to whether religious differences should be tolerated or not.

The tyranny of the majority

In the days of monarchy, there was a threat of tyranny from the monarch. Many people felt that threat diminished with democracy. Democracy is rule of the people by the people; and the rulers express the will of the people.
But Mill remained concerned. ‘The people’ who rule are not the same ‘people’ who are ruled, even when the rulers express the will of ‘the people’, because within any society, there will be majorities and minorities. The rulers express the will of the majority, not the will of all people within society. We need to protect the minority from a ‘tyranny of the majority’.

The majority might exercise power over individuals through the processes of democratic government, i.e. eventually through the physical enforcement of laws by the police. A democratic government could pass a law forbidding people to practice a particular form of religious belief, if that is what the majority of people in society wanted. A different example: homosexual practices (at least between men) was a criminal offence in the UK until 1967. And it was not until 2003, that the US Supreme Court ruled that individual states could not criminalise homosexual practices.

The majority also has a tendency to impose its ideas and practices (‘what we do/think around here’) as rules of conduct on everyone, so that people who don’t abide by them suffer social consequences. This can be worse than political oppression, says Mill, because

> it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. *(On Liberty, p. 63)*

It is a kind of psychological coercion.

Think of the disapproval of other religious practices, of other cultures’ traditions, of homosexuality, even though they are legal. Think how such attitudes are communicated in the press. These feelings of approval and disapproval, when they become ‘public opinion’, affects how people think and what they do; they are not free to think, feel and experiment with life as they please, knowing it will incur the disapproval of others.

A liberal democracy, for Mill, is more than a democracy; it is a democracy in which individual freedoms are protected against legislation and social opinion.

**The place of tolerance**

Upholding individual liberty is going to require tolerance, i.e. it is going to require refraining – both in legislation and in the way social opinion is formed and expressed – from acting on opposition to the views of others in such a way that would suppress or interfere with those views. In particular, it will involve tolerance of the majority, which has the social and political power to act on this opposition.

Because liberalism extends liberty very widely, then tolerance will also need to extend widely. This is a trait of liberalism: it aims to tolerate as much as possible. Mill says that we may ‘argue, entreat, remonstrate’ with other people; but we are not to exercise power over them in our opposition to their views.

**TOLERANCE AS THE VIRTUE OF A PLURALIST DEMOCRACY**

A pluralist society is one in which there are different views on questions of politics, morality, religion, and what it is to lead a good and meaningful life. Many liberal philosophers argue that disagreements, opposition, and conflicts of ideas and practices
are an inevitable and permanent part of human society. Even if one tries to get rid of them by force, in the use of that force, there is still a conflict. While many conflicts can be resolved by political means, conflicts about what to think, how to live, how society is best organized, or how to achieve salvation, cannot.

We can respond to pluralism by trying to force everyone to agree with us—either by changing people’s minds, or simply by killing or forcing out of the country those who disagree. Historically, this has been a common response. The thought that everyone must become a Christian or a Muslim or a communist, or at least, must lead a life that is in accordance with the rules and values of Christianity, Islam, or communism, has inspired a great deal of political and social conflict.

If pluralism is permanent, the only alternative to force is tolerance. If we are not to act to suppress or interfere with those practices and values with which we disagree, we must tolerate them. Of course, as Mill notes, we can still try to persuade other people of our point of view. But either we use force or we do not. If we do not, then this is tolerance.

So tolerance becomes the virtue that characterizes a pluralist liberal democracy. Without it, such a society is not possible.