

MOVING BEYOND THE LEFT/RIGHT DISTINCTION

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Presentation outline

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I. Introduction

- a. What I'm going to do today is talk about some of my ideas from my upcoming book, *The Unbearable Resilience of Illiberalism*
- b. If you're like me, events like the rise of Trump and Trumpism in the US, Brexit in the UK, as well as the rise of the right throughout most of what we thought was an irreversibly liberal democratic world, have got you feeling a little depressed
 - i. What is depressing about this, I think, is not just that we seem to be lurching so far to the right, although this of course is part of it
 - ii. What is so depressing it that what this lurch to the right reveals is that we have not made nearly as much social progress since the 1960s as some of us thought he had
 - iii. We have made some, but what is happening today could not be happening unless the kind of illiberalism we see on display today was never actually eliminated from our social psyche, but merely suppressed, hiding, like an old virus, in our nervous system, just waiting for another chance to break out
 - iv. And break out it has, which is what I mean by the unbearable resilience of illiberalism
- c. So, what I am going to talk about today is why illiberalism is so resilient, and what we might do to counteract the apparently unavoidable periodic rise of illiberal feelings throughout the liberal world
 - i. Well, one of the things we can do is stop viewing what is going on as simply a struggle between the left and the right
 1. For liberals can be on either the left or the right, and illiberals, or *perfectionists* as I shall call them from now on, can be on either the left or the right too
 - ii. Obviously the left right distinction is an important one, and it is helpful to categorize people, political parties, and policies according to this distinction
 1. But it is also misleading in important ways
 - iii. So what I will be doing here is proposing that we use two scales to categorize people, political movements, and policies:
 1. The first, the traditional right-left horizontal axis

1. And the second, a new, vertical liberal-perfectionist axis
 2. For I believe doing this allows us to see more clearly what those of us who are on the moderate left or the moderate right are worried about, and why both the extreme left and the extreme right has many more things in common that we otherwise realize
 3. To really understand where someone stands, I will argue, you have to plot their views along *both* axes, not just one
- II. Liberalism v. Perfectionism
- a. Okay, to make my case, I will begin by offering a very thick description of what liberalism is
 - i. Now in common speech, the word “liberal” is often used as a shorthand way of referring to a set of substantive political positions that are typically associated with the moderate left
 1. used in this sense, the word “liberalism” refers to any political theory or program dedicated to the elucidation and promotion of these particular leftish concerns
 2. and in Europe, I know people often use the term liberal to refer to neoliberalism, which in my view is not a form of liberalism but a sharp departure from it, despite its misleading name
 3. neoliberalism actually began life as an economic theory, not a political one at all, and now that it has morphed into a political theory it does not exemplify liberal values but perfectionist ones
 - ii. In any event, I will not be using the word liberalism in either of these senses
 1. I will be using the word “liberalism” to refer to a collection of fundamental presuppositions or concepts that provide the background constraints within which a certain kind of political life can take place
 2. Liberalism in this sense encompasses many different substantive and often incompatible doctrines of political morality
 3. one can be a liberal and be for or against abortion, for or against greater redistribution of income and wealth, for or against greater government regulation of the market, and on either side of any number of hotly contested social, domestic, and foreign policy issues of the day
 4. if we abstract out far enough from these substantive views, however, we can come to a plane where there are certain fundamental core principles on which all forms of liberalism agree
 - a. in most cases, these fundamental principles are merely general concepts, not particular conceptions, and therefore need further content before they generate particular recommendations for action, which is why liberals can agree on these fundamental principles and still end up on

- opposing sides of the same issue
4. but even though these fundamental principles are not determinate enough to generate specific recommendations for action, they do provide the general background framework within which such

further specification can take place

- i. indeed, in contrast to the family of political theories which we can group under the heading of liberalism, there is another family of political theories, which derive from a very different set of fundamental presuppositions, which we can group under the heading “perfectionism”
 1. just as there are many different forms of liberalism, there are many different forms of perfectionism
 2. but what I intend to focus on today right-wing perfectionism, the kind of perfectionism that is usually seen as an alt-right form of populism
 - a. Of course, so we could simply refer to these movements as fascist
 - b. But to avoid arguments about what fascism really is, I will not do that
 3. in any event, this right-wing of perfectionism typically panders to racism, misogyny, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, and nationalism, ostensibly as a way of explaining why “the people” are suffering
 - a. who counts as one of the “the people”, however, is very narrowly defined, often on racial, ethnic, religious, and other grounds
 - b. many people think these movements are simply a way of satisfying a lust for power, fame, money, and success by certain members of the economic and political elite
 - c. but I am going to deny this—I am going to suggest that these movements actually have a consistent, coherent ideology behind them—a perverse ideology, of course, but an ideology no less
 4. For regardless of its particular form, all forms of perfectionism expresses a comprehensive and very specific vision of what would constitute an ideal life, the kind of life that everyone should lead, and contend that it is the role of government is to ensure that everyone leads exactly this kind of life and no other
 - a. Perfectionism, as I am using the term, is accordingly not merely a *moral* perfectionism—a vision of the ideal life for a person—everyone, even liberals have a vision of what would constitute an ideal life for a person
 5. What I am talking about, however, is a *political* perfectionism, a vision of an ideal society, where state power is used to ensure the

creation and proliferation of a certain type of ideal person

5. As the Great American liberal political philosopher John Rawls said, perfectionism is therefore a certain kind of teleological theory, one that defines the good by reference to a particular view of communal excellence and makes achievement of this good the central goal of political life
- ii. while the forms of perfectionism that will be of particular concern to us here are all on the political right, perfectionists can also come from the political left

1. just as there are many different forms of liberalism, there are many different forms of perfectionism
 2. communism, for example, is also a perfectionist view, for while its conception of the ideal person is radically different than that of alt-right populists, at a higher level of abstraction, it embraces the same fundamental presuppositions as these more right-wing perfectionist views
 3. just as all forms of liberalism share certain fundamental presuppositions about the nature of our political life, all forms of perfectionism share certain fundamental presuppositions, and these are very different from the set of presuppositions that liberals embrace
- a. but why use the term “perfectionism” to describe this family of political views?
- i. For example, why not collect these views under the heading “anti-liberalism,” as some theorists do
 1. But this suggests that the primary organizing feature of these theories is their opposition to liberalism and not the promotion of their own “positive” content, and this would be misleading
 2. Indeed, it would probably be less misleading to call liberalism “anti-perfectionism,” for perfectionist views were around long before liberalism came into existence and the rise of liberalism was in many ways a reaction to these
 - ii. Alternatively, because I will be talking mostly about right-wing perfectionist views, I could collect them under the heading “alt-right,” the contemporary term that is now becoming popular to refer to a neo-fascist, racist, and ultra-nationalist views
 1. But one of my important points is that at a higher level of abstraction, left-wing and right-wing perfectionist views are members of the same family, and this point would be lost if I used a term which implied that communism and other left-wing versions of perfectionism were somehow different at this fundamental level, for they are not
 - iii. I could use the term “illiberalism” throughout, as I have in the title of my book

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6. this term does indeed do the required substantive work, and others on both the right and the left use it as well
 7. but it is so visually and aurally similar to the term “liberalism” that I fear it would cause confusion if I were to use it exclusively to refer to what I have in mind
- iii. why not just use the term “populism” then?
1. like perfectionism, this term can be used to refer to movements that arise on either the left or the right, but it is also misleading in many respects
 - a. first, the suggestion that these are popular movements is almost always false—they are rarely embraced by a majority of the electorate
 - b. they are instead usually small radical movements that are embraced and come to power with only minority support

- c. Second, the term tells us nothing about the ideologies to which it refers—indeed, it is specifically designed not to do this—and since its most salient substantive suggestion (that a movement has wide popular support) is false, this is problematic
 - d. Third, the term also deceptively de-emphasizes that fact that while populist leaders may energize widespread feelings of discontent, they often care little about the lives of their own rank and file and instead cater to small groups of predatory elites while implementing policies that will actually make most of their supporters' lives demonstrably worse
 - e. So by using the word populism, we are effectively engaging in misleading advertising for the other side
- iv. The terms “authoritarianism” and “totalitarianism” are also alternatives I could use here, but they are also problematic in their own way
 - 1. Authoritarianism is typically used to describe dictatorships on the right while totalitarianism to describe dictatorships on the left
 - a. but this falsely (in my view) suggests the two are different in decisive ways, and both suggest the primary organizing factor for such modes of political organization is the leader principle rather than actual political ideologies involved
 - 2. This focus on the individual who is head of government in these cases, in turn, tends to encourage a Stalinesque solution of “no man, no problem” as the primary form of opposition, an attitude (very common, for example, among those opposed to Trumpism) which dangerously underestimates how much these political movements are actually driven by ideology and not just personality
 - a. Indeed, a perfectionist government does not even have to

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- be dictatorship—democracy is always a matter of degree, and our primary concern here is not with formal dictatorships but with supposedly democratic governments that have taken a disturbing perfectionist turn
- v. In contrast, the term “perfectionism” is the overarching label that liberal political philosophers have been using to refer to the family of political theories I have in mind for a long time
 - 1. Switching to another term at this point would accordingly confusingly disassociate my argument from the philosophical tradition to which it belongs
 - 2. Besides, in addition to being neutral between the left and the right, an important aspect of the argument I am about to make, the term perfectionism emphasizes both the comprehensiveness and the rigidity of the ideologies involved without tacking these too closely to a particular individual
 - 3. So, while I acknowledge that the term may be somewhat misleading in its own right, I am afraid that for our purposes, “perfectionism,” peppered with occasional references to its equivalent, “illiberalism,” will have to do

- b. Let me say a little more now about the importance of seeing what is going on today as a contest between liberalism and perfectionism and not just a contest between the right and the left
 - i. Both liberalism and perfectionism encompass political theories that can appear on either the right of the left
 - 1. But in my view, it is the liberal/perfectionist axis, not the left/right axis, that provides the most insight into what is happening in the US now and indeed throughout much of the liberal democratic world
 - 2. If we look at what is happening along this scale, we can see the enormity of what is now at stake—an end to what Hegel called “civil society,” an end to any further movement toward an enlightened future, and a dive into the illiberal darkness of the distant past, and very possibly, an end to liberalism altogether
- c. In any event, in my view, there are ten fundamental presuppositions on which liberals and perfectionists differ
 - i. Liberals believe in toleration, while perfectionists reject this.
 - 1. Note that by toleration, however, liberals are referring to what they see as a moral imperative, and not merely a *modus vivendi*
 - 2. That is, liberals believe there is sometimes good reason to tolerate the expression of views with which the government seriously disagrees and could successfully suppress
 - 3. Perfectionists, in contrast, believe that toleration is the first step toward self-destruction, for it allows society to be irreparably

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- undermined by ideas to which it fundamentally objects and which it could have suppressed but were instead allowed to take root and spread
- vi. Liberals believe that government should be neutral between reasonable but controversial conceptions of the good, while perfectionists believe that there is one true path to leading a moral life, and that government’s primary role is to enforce this conception of the good and ensure that all members of society support and abide by it
- vii. Liberals favor liberty over authority, distrust concentrations of private power, and believe that the role of government should be strictly limited, although they disagree dramatically on how these ideas should be cashed out
 - 1. Perfectionists, in contrast, believe that government must have sufficient authority to ensure conformity within society with their particular detailed conception of how people should act and what they should believe, even when this conception is highly controversial

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