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Confronting Autonomy: The Merits of Liberalism

Among moral and political theories, liberalism has remained one of the most heavily debated ideologies. Centered around liberty, equality, justice, and mutual consent to governance, philosophers have disagreed on the practical application of liberalism. While Kant and Rawls promote the role of persons, rational autonomy, original position, and the veil of ignorance in establishing a just society, Mills argues that liberalism is idealistic and inherently oppressive. In analyzing the merits of liberalism, I found there to be significant benefits and shortcomings of each philosopher's conclusions and deduced that although I believe there to be a future for liberalism, society must be cautious of the consequences that may derive from the wielding of liberal thought.

For Kant, liberalism is a profound moral philosophy that people must use to cultivate a morally just society. To highlight the individual aspect of liberalism, Kant provides a clear proposed role for all persons. First, Kant establishes that all nothing "could be considered good without limitation except a good will,"¹ which implies that people are not righteous unless they complete the right action for the right reason. Based on the good will that must underlie all actions and choices, Kant insists that persons also possess a duty. The duty is the practical purpose of good will and contends that all persons have an obligation to uphold moral law regardless of consequences.² To provide agency, Kant also develops the notion of rational autonomy to explain why individual actions are consequential. The first parameter states that a true application of reason would lead

¹ Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 1997. 7

² Kant. *Groundwork of Morals*. 10.

people to “produce a will that is good, not perhaps as a means to other purposes, but good in itself.”³ Thus, the idea is to treat people not as a means but as an end in and of themselves. Part of the duty in practicing liberalism is to be beneficent when possible and sympathetically spread joy to others without any motive of self-interest.⁴ These two distinctions provide a foundation for Kant’s categorical imperative: one must act only in a way that would allow them to will their maxim to be universal law.⁵ Since persons are neither divinities nor animals, we have the ability to choose between right and wrong actions and must endure the consequences of our actions. As Kant’s categorical imperative states, the guiding principle that will ensure morality and prevent harm is to consider whether it would be positive for everyone to follow the precedent set by one’s actions. The application of Kant’s liberalism centers around the conclusion that “what counts is not actions which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see.”⁶ The only way to guarantee liberty for all is to judge actions based on their universality. In treating each person as an end, one must remember that each person’s greatest end is happiness. Therefore, the meritorious duty in Kant’s liberalism is to act in a way that allows for the happiness of all.

Both aligning and departing from Kant’s analysis, Rawls believes that liberalism is sustainable as a political philosophy. Similar to Kant, Rawls believes that persons have complete rational autonomy and must be judged on their intentions rather than their actions.⁷ In practice, this means that the measure of justice cannot be contingent on

³ Kant. *Groundwork of Morals*. 10.

⁴ Kant. *Groundwork of Morals*. 11.

⁵ Kant. *Groundwork of Morals*. 31.

⁶ Kant. *Groundwork of Morals*. 19.

⁷ John Rawls. “Justice as Fairness.” 1971. 3.

external factors. To eliminate the inequalities between people that drive differences in opinions on morality, Rawls touts his thought experiment that returns all people back to their original position behind a veil of ignorance. The original position is a reference to the state of nature that is discussed in social contract theory.⁸ The experiment relies on hypothetically stripping people of their place in society, including their class, race, and gender, and putting everyone on the same level of equality. At this original position, the position where everyone once was, the true parameters of justice can be effectively agreed upon: “The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.”⁹ Since everyone is equal behind the veil, the principles will be decided in a fair context. Once justice is defined, it can be applied identically to every member of society regardless of extenuating circumstances that have tended to lead to discriminatory implementations of justice. However, Rawls clarifies that justice is not synonymous with fairness, much like how the phrase “poetry as metaphor” [does not] mean that the concepts of poetry and metaphor are the same.”¹⁰ Essentially, the best political system would be based on values established when all members of society are equal. However, beyond the initial agreement on definition, there is no way to ensure continued fairness. Overall, Rawls conclusion—“Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others”¹¹—mirrors Kant’s categorical imperative; persons have a responsibility to attempt to provide happiness and equal liberty to all.

⁸ Rawls. “Fairness.” 1.

⁹ Rawls. “Fairness.” 1.

¹⁰ Rawls. “Fairness.” 2.

¹¹ Rawls. “Fairness.” 6.

In response to Kant and Rawls, Mills illuminates the idealism that prevents liberalism from being a relevant moral and political theory. Above all, Mills emphasizes that liberalism proves to be oppressive because it only applies to a certain portion of the population. Since Rawls treats liberalism as a contract theory and is inspired by social contract theory, he is following a system in which the people in power are allowed to decide the universal moral law. Yet, Mills argues that “a perspective from the bottom up is more likely to be accurate than one from the top down”¹² because it accounts for the struggles that the oppressed face and the oppressors choose to ignore. Furthermore, Mills criticizes philosophers like Kant and Rawls for being far too idealistic when it comes to judging liberalism as a theory rather than a practice. In a perfect world, everyone would have an equal chance to practice rational autonomy and be treated as an end, but “The crucial question is whether nonwhites are counted as full persons, part of the population covered by the moral operator, or not.”¹³ It is illogical to create a political philosophy that only covers a select portion of persons. A system of justice cannot be just if people are excluded from the protection of justice. It creates a system of white supremacy that leaves non-whites being treated as a means: “The terms of the racial contract norm nonwhite persons themselves, establishing morally, epistemically, and aesthetically their ontological inferiority.”¹⁴ As Mills concludes, the implication of Kantian theory in particular is that non-white individuals are denied the ability to participate in the social contract because of the ignored realities of racial contract. Overall, many philosophers

¹² Charles Mills. “The Racial Contract.” 1997. 230.

¹³ Mills. “Racial Contract.” 231.

¹⁴ Mills. “Racial Contract.” 236.

emphasize the corrective justice that liberalism provides without understanding the real necessity: restorative justice.

In theory, I believe that liberalism is a strong foundation for moral and political philosophy to be built upon. However, I agree with Mills on the obscene issues in the current and historical application of idealized theories. In analyzing Kantian theory, I felt that the categorical imperative is an effective way to establish whether an action is just. Likewise, I find intentions to be just as important as consequences. Yet, when I think about a situation like the Kim Potter trial (a police officer who shot and killed an African American man claiming she intended to use her taser), I am torn about whether liberalism can adequately apply justice to all situations. What happens when there are different opinions on what universal law should be? Do intentions actually matter when someone has positive intentions but impedes on another person's happiness and liberty? Overall, I find that there are major gaps in the reasoning of Kant and Rawls when it comes to the practical application of liberalism, and I believe that Mills raises critical questions about the members of society that are ignored in liberal theory. The attention paid to happiness, intentions, universal law, and justice are crucial in choosing a moral and political philosophy to follow, but there must also be an emphasis on the people that are left behind in any given theory.

There is no perfect philosophy; each philosophy must choose a central theme to focus on and create an approach that will work as guidance for people on that specific topic. On the topic of individual liberty and the duty that people have, liberalism is quite

effective at establishing the implications of rational autonomy and providing possible solutions to the subjectiveness of universal moral law and justice. However, while Kant and Rawls argue for the efficacy of liberalism, Mills highlights the idealism that is embedded in liberalism. For me, as promising as liberalism is in theory, its hypothetical nature prevents it from being the ideal basis or moral or political theory.

Bibliography

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