

*'Liberalism is beset by a paradox at its core' (266/156). - What is the alleged paradox? In your view, is the paradox real or only apparent?*

***“ I Disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it” (Voltaire)  
“We cannot live in peace with those we believe to be damned” (Rousseau)***

Mill says of liberalism;

*the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. (On Liberty).*

I have a right, even a duty to prevent someone from harming others, but I have no right to interfere with their behaviour citing “their own good” as a reason.

Many believe that there is a fatal flaw at the heart of liberalism, an irresolvable paradox. A paradox is a statement or belief which makes contradictory observations, or requires people to hold contradictory views. The inference is that a belief which contains a paradox is thereby weakened, in that our grounds for holding it are insecure. The paradox at the core of liberalism can be stated as follows;

*“To be a liberal is to stand for each person’s right to uphold what he or she believes in, to pursue their personal interests and the causes they are committed to, so long as that pursuit does not interfere with the rights of others to engage in a similar pursuit. What then is the cause of liberalism? It seems that the true liberal must forswear all commitments or causes that would favour one party or grouping against another.” Course notes Unit 14 266.*

Liberalism stands for respect for the individual, who he is, and his background. But suppose that person’s cultural identification is grossly illiberal, involving for example the denial of equal rights for women, or persecution of homosexuals? Some of us will staunchly maintain the Enlightenment tradition under which the proper treatment of human beings means the upholding of a set of universal and generally uniform rights regardless of the claims of local politics and culture. Others interpret respect for persons as involving respect for their religious or cultural beliefs and practices, even where these run counter to the traditional liberal concept of human rights. In particular, a liberal state’s job is to hold different world-views in balance, but it cannot resolve conflicts between them. It cannot, for example, say to Muslims “You are wrong” and to Christians “You are right”, because it then ceases to be liberal.

There have been many attempts to define liberalism, or to “fine tune” its meaning. Many of these attempts can be viewed as attempting to keep the concept of liberty whilst validating interference in others lives. Mill himself held that liberty of action and liberty of expression could not be treated in the same way. The former would often require justified restriction, whilst the latter should always be unrestricted.

Rousseau attempted an ingenious approach in “The Social Contract”. He makes it explicitly clear in his writings, that he believes strongly in personal freedom and autonomy. But it seems that we must give up our rights to protect our rights. We must obey the “General

Will”, which is an attempt to avoid the tyranny of the majority. No mere majority – not even an overwhelming majority – is sufficient to validate interference with our liberty. The General Will is a mysterious affair which somehow so completely encapsulates the wishes of us all as to make it legitimate to “force us to be free” if we depart from its rulings.

Isaiah Berlin attempted to distinguish positive and negative liberty. Negative liberty defines the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons. Positive liberty is a more difficult notion to grasp. Put simply it is freedom *to do* something rather than freedom *from* interference. ‘Who is master?’ I want to be in control of my life, but there may, for example, be internal obstacles to my living the way I want.

John Gray has also written about liberalism from a strongly historicist perspective; liberal states should not be seen as a culmination, an end of a process, but merely as another stage in that process, which may or may not last. The point of his idea is to assert that we have no justification for regarding liberalism as superior, and thus have no ethical grounds for imposing our will on others.

Rather than describe the problem of liberalism as a paradox, I would prefer to use the word “tension” which I think better describes what is happening when we preach and practise liberal ideals. There is a tension between our wish to give the other person some space, and our feeling that we ought to interfere in certain situations. There is a tension in civil society when we worry about whether to allow the expression of beliefs such as fascism or Stalinist communism to be expressed, even when those beliefs, if realised, would destroy liberal society. The writings of Rousseau show very clearly the tension at the heart of liberalism. In trying to square liberty with intrusive state activity he ends up with a system which is decidedly illiberal. Berlin’s attempts to distinguish positive and negative liberty fail to establish any guide to action. Positive liberty may result in cosy but meaningless talk about such concepts as “empowering” at one end of the scale, but may be a recipe for aggressive interference at the other end. It may also be noted that many politicians are liberal in an economic sense, whilst arguing for interference in people’s social activities. Others advocate interference at the economic level whilst being libertarian with regard to the social sphere. It can also be mentioned that such politicians appear to be either unaware of these tensions, or perhaps able to balance them.

Just because we have noted this problem with liberalism, does not mean that it becomes invalid as an ethical choice. So there is an inherent tension in liberalism; how do we manage this tension? We participate in a permanent balancing act. Espousing liberalism does not require us to practice complete permissiveness any more than an illiberal position demands that we must have a zero tolerance position. We may decide that although we believe in free speech, there are certain actions, such as racist, homophobic hate language which should be confronted. We may even believe that we should restrict political movements which seek to undermine and destroy the democratic consensus, although this is always a sensitive issue. We must perform this delicate balancing act, and decide on a continual basis what position we should occupy on the scale between complete permissiveness and zero tolerance. This does not remove the tension within liberalism, but it does help to manage it. If we live in an open society then this is the best environment to encourage dialogue, and it is this dialogue which allows those of a liberal disposition to agree to limits on human behaviour whilst still holding on to the liberal faith.