



WHY LIBERALISM NEEDS AUTONOMY: ACHIEVING A MAINSTREAM SOCIETY WITHOUT INTERGROUP CAREGIVING EXPLOITATION

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Introduction

Domenico Melidoro's new book invites a reevaluation of liberalism's response to diversity. Central to his project is the recognition that many forms of diversity are inevitable because diversity is simply a (social) fact that liberalism must address. The result is an approach to liberalism that aims to secure conditions for peace when diversity and disagreement are inevitable.

Melidoro defends his claims with particular attention to India (p. 17)¹, a country with a particularly diverse national context, one that encompasses histories of caste, language, and region in addition to diversity of religion. Although I reject the form of liberalism Melidoro advocates, traversing the argumentative path he takes will yield important conclusions about liberalism as well as about the varieties and meanings of diversity. Ultimately, evaluating the Indian case against other national contexts leads me to conclude that we should not expect a unitary liberal approach to the law and policy when working across highly varied contexts. The contexts in which multiple cultural groups come together or retain a degree of separation are highly varied because they are influenced by their particular histories as well as their contemporary dynamics. For example, a politics of "indifference" (p. 96) has value if enacted at time t , when it would prevent the state, or the majority, from engaging in campaigns of

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¹ All page numbers are from Melidoro (2020) unless noted otherwise.

violence. But a politics of indifference will fail to secure conditions for peace and justice once violence has been enacted, at time $t + 100$, for instance. Therefore, liberalism's political approach to diversity needs to be varied and responsive to facts.

Liberalism, both as an abstract theory of justice and as an approach to the appropriate limits of the law, must be articulated from within, and in ways that are sensitive to contexts, histories, and relationships among groups. Melidoro is right to argue that philosophical liberalism cannot assume homogeneity of human experience, values, and contexts of significance. However, I will show that the variety of liberalism Melidoro endorses is inapt for the U.S. context, where it collapses into incoherence. Because the mainstream society in the U.S. would have to be characterized as the cultural and institutional mainstream—which is white—it becomes evident that the mainstream fails to meet Melidoro's first condition, which is the avoidance of exploitation across groups. Moreover, in conditions of modernity, many of the social groups that would most readily be characterized as occupying the mainstream of society depend on care workers from other ethnic groups. Thus, my argument also raises some questions about whether the account is coherent for India. Ultimately, I argue that a commitment to autonomy skills is a necessary component of philosophical liberalism due to the prevalence of exploitation and oppression in mainstream "liberal" societies. However, the liberal project that identifies the legitimate use of state coercion will require contextual and historical analysis, thereby resulting in a pluralist liberalism.²

1. Political pro-toleration liberalism

Melidoro defends two theses. First, he defends a taxonomy for liberal theories that disaggregates debates about whether the fundamental value of liberalism is autonomy or toleration from the debate over justification between comprehensive and political liberals. His taxonomy argues that the differing justificatory strategies of comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism can be combined with each value (autonomy and toleration), yielding four varieties of liberalism.

² Neither of my claims entail that every good society must be a liberal one.

The pro-autonomy branch of liberalism derives from Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, both of whom valued autonomy, but who endorsed drastically different accounts of the concept autonomy. My own account of liberalism endorses a set of autonomy skills derived from the Millian branch, (*infra* Section 4), which I justify through political arguments rather than with claims about the nature of the good life. The pro-toleration branch, impressed by the fact of religious violence, draws upon John Locke, with a focus on securing conditions of peace despite disagreement among religious conceptions. This branch of liberalism might be summarized by the dictum: do not murder people with different religious beliefs. Despite the long history of violence perpetrated in the name of religion, I see no reason to think that disagreement about faith *must* result in physical violence. Instead, a leap to violence seems to depend on an ethos of violence, toxic understandings of masculinity, a muting of empathy (Gruen, 2015), or ethical conception that require violence as retribution to maintain honor for one’s community. Consequently, if we wish for peace, we need to think beyond how to tolerate disagreement to evaluate, instead, why individuals are violent.

Melidoro ultimately defends a pro-toleration view with a political liberal justification. Its justification is a political liberal one because it is not based on an ideal of life or on a substantive conception of the good. And it regards toleration, not autonomy, as the fundamental value in liberalism. Rejecting autonomy’s role in liberalism at both the stage of justification and as a central value that defines the doctrine, he instead emphasizes individualism and egalitarianism.³ Melidoro further explains the justificatory strategy of political liberalism as centrally about the problem of political power, “whose core idea is that, given the persistence of disagreement about the way in which one should live, the liberal order should not be founded on the validity of a specific comprehensive doctrine, but on what different theories can share despite their differences” (p. 9). The account builds on Chandran Kukathas’s approach to toleration, which requires little more than indifference to those who are to be tolerated, as long as individuals have substantive freedom to exit their community (p. 102). Amending Kukathas’s view, Melidoro argues that a mainstream society is “necessary as a guarantee to the effectiveness of the exit rights” (p. 117). When people leave

³ Melidoro specifies an egalitarianism about fundamental moral status, claiming that this status does not require distributive justice. He writes, “A liberal theory is egalitarian in the sense that the same moral status should be accorded to all human beings... [but] it does not concern the outcomes of a distribution of goods, resources, or opportunities” (p. 3). I disagree. A commitment to equality cannot bracket assessments of the fairness of the system of practices.

their society, they need a place to go. Therefore, following Jeff Spinner-Halev, he argues for the need for a mainstream liberal society with few requirements for entrance, but whereas Spinner-Halev defends an environment that is supportive of autonomy, Melidoro defends three duties of the state in that mainstream society. First, the mainstream society must “prevent inter-groups exploitation” (p. 17). Second, it must “aim at making the mainstream society responsive to the needs of all individuals” (p. 17). Finally, it must “defend individuals from the violation of fundamental rights both within and outside the groups to which they belong” (p. 17).

These three duties of the mainstream society are extremely robust. In fact, and lamentably, one is hard pressed to identify a society that has met these conditions. In the proceeding sections, I bracket questions about rights to focus instead on the first two duties Melidoro outlines. He further specifies duty #1 as a guarantee by the state that stronger groups will not exploit “weaker and poorer ones” (p. 121). Because the notion of exploitation is crucial to understanding the proceeding argument, I will define it here, following Iris Marion Young. Exploitation is a form of oppression that “occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (Young, 1990, p. 49).

The combination of duties 1 and 2 require a mainstream society that is responsive to the needs of all individuals, and that responds to individuals’ needs without relations of exploitation among groups. In line with Kukathas, Melidoro remains silent, though, about whether exploitation within a group is permissible. Although exploitation *within* groups is also incompatible with liberalism, this paper’s argument does not require that claim, and so I limit my criticism to one that focuses on the conditions for meeting Melidoro’s condition against exploitation among groups.

2. Two liberal projects

Before I assess the implications of Melidoro’s duties #1 and #2, another distinction among liberal doctrines is needed. This distinction has to do with the very different projects liberal theorists engage in. First, there is the “what is a just society project”? (Bhandary,

2020; Rawls, 1958). This inquiry has an atemporal character in that its central focus is not about how to *get to* a just society. Instead, it evaluates the constituents of a just society. The “what is a just society” project evaluates virtues and the basic structure. It considers what a just society would look like, and typically includes an understanding of human nature as well as a characterization of the core problems social cooperation is meant to solve. I locate theories of distributive justice under this umbrella, but the question, “*what is a just society*” is a broader subject than evaluating the distribution of benefits and burdens. Rawls’s (1958) early formulation of justice as the assessment of the fairness of the system of practices captures this broader notion. The second project of liberalism defines the proper role of the state via the use of law and punishment, and therefore it is concerned with coercion and state-authorized violence (Dworkin, 1986; MacKinnon, 1989). This second project engages with the real world. Debates about whether to penalize people for expressing their religion occupy this domain, and thus a good deal of the multiculturalist discourse intervenes in this second project.

Specific contextual considerations are needed to evaluate the right policy approach to conflict between groups, but some general claims may be possible in relation to the first project. The remaining sections intervene in the “what is a just society” debate, before concluding with the claim that liberal specifications of the proper domain of the law and the role of the state must vary based on context. For these latter tasks, a pluralist liberalism is necessary.

3. Caregiving and the anti-exploitation clause

For the “what is a just society” project of liberalism, the system of practices must include the practices with which care is secured (Bhandary, 2021a, p. 148). Whatever else an assessment of exploitation includes, it must include caregiving arrangements. And, once an account of liberalism evaluates caregiving arrangements, it becomes evident that many mainstream societies today exploit members of other groups to serve as caregivers.⁴

⁴ Melidoro asserts an approach to liberalism that does not evaluate the justice of the basic structure, but the non-exploitation claim for the mainstream society requires thinking about the justice of a society’s system of practices.

Consequently, global forms of liberalism must pay attention to the relationship between societal caregiving arrangements, exploitation, and inter and intra-group hierarchies.⁵

Most significantly, when forms of caregiving exploitation are considered, it becomes evident that many mainstream societies in which freedom is apparently promoted are in fact locations where minority groups are exploited by transferring their caregiving labor to the members of majority groups. This transfer is significant because it goes beyond hours of physical work to include psychic energy that prioritizes the needs of the other. In this way, when members of one group care for another, a systemic transfer of attention can create relationships of epistemic inequality.

To identify whether exploitation is occurring, an analysis that employs my arrow of care map is needed to obtain transparency for the practice. The arrow of care map requires fact-finding to determine who is caring for whom, and to evaluate these patterns at a system-wide level that abstracts away from individual relationships to be able to assess patterns across groups (Bhandary, 2017). For instance, in the U.S., black and brown people are in caregiving relationships toward whites, which coincides with a cultural coding that shapes and frames relationships of attendance.

These arrangements conflict with the idea of equal basic worth, which is one of the normative foundations for Melidoro's view. Melidoro endorses a commitment to egalitarianism rather than to autonomy, but both the egalitarian disambiguation of the liberal tradition and the anti-exploitation framework go much farther than Melidoro explicates, because caregivers often come from groups with less global privilege. The mainstream group is simply not a self-supporting group. This means, then, that removing exploitation within the mainstream society requires interventions to remove these patterns of inequalities. In particular, "gender egalitarian" majority societies are those where caregivers are women from other ethnic groups. These societies may appear to better respect the rights of all people, when a gender egalitarian lens is adopted, but they fail to respect rights once everyone is

⁵ The liberal arguments Melidoro canvasses leave untouched the caregiving exploitation that might occur within a group, and it is often the case that women are exploited. While noting the absence of a feminist analysis in the book, I also note, here, that women are not exploited as caregivers in every society. For instance, on reciprocity in native societies, see Bhandary (2021a).

included as a rights-bearer. Consequently, attaining equality of status in mainstream society will require dramatic modifications to many of these mainstream societies.

Perhaps the “liberal archipelago” – a normative vision of a just society in which cultural communities can live separately without interfering with one another (Kukathas, 2003)—could work if groups met their care needs in a manner that is self-contained. In most western nations, however, as well as a many non-western nations, caregivers arrive from other cultural groups.

4. The autonomy argument

From a premise that grants that relationships of exploitation across groups are part of the system of practices with which mainstream society secures caregiving, I defend the need for a liberal commitment to autonomy skills. These autonomy skills, which include memory, introspection, firmness and self-control (Bhandary, 2020, p. 109) are crucial for citizens to articulate their own values and to make the society’s system of practices transparent. They are necessary to protect against and safeguard new forms of exploitation, and my defense of them is a political one.⁶

A liberalism that endorses a form of egalitarianism, where each person counts as one, must also value individuals’ own articulations of their values and needs. For this reason, individual autonomy is needed. Individual autonomy is related to personal autonomy, and it is not equivalent to the moral autonomy of Immanuel Kant. Moreover, the autonomy I defend is not the autonomy of masculine individualism. Instead, it is a set of skills for articulating what one values, where these skills do not require articulating value outside the context of one’s horizon of significance. Consequently, a commitment to a form of autonomy as a set of skills is necessary as a positive commitment for liberalisms that aim to identify, in order to reduce or eliminate exploitation.

As a political liberal, Melidoro rejects autonomy-based liberalisms based on the tenet of political liberalism that many people cannot accept a comprehensive articulation of the

⁶ For the complete account of autonomy skills and my argument for them, see Bhandary 2020, Chapter 5, “Autonomy Skills”.

good that asserts the value of an autonomous life. But my account of autonomy does not assert a comprehensive account of the good. Instead, my argument rests on the spare premise that exploitation and oppression are troubling features of human societies and relationships among groups. Anti-oppression liberalism must endorse the value of autonomy skills among their members as a legitimacy condition for the organization of these societies.

The doctrine of political liberalism rejects autonomy on the grounds that it makes liberalism a sectarian doctrine. It is indeed important for liberal societies to avoid expressively subordinating their members. But this does not mean that autonomy must be rejected. Instead, a criterion to avoid expressive subordination of religious believers, for instance, can be achieved by communicating policies to teach the skills for autonomy in terms that are acceptable to those groups.

Moreover, feminist philosophical revisions of the concept of autonomy have moved beyond the notion of the rugged individual without dependencies on others, or the ideal of the life lived in accordance with the dictates of reason. What has value in every form of liberalism is transparency and a set of autonomy skills through which people can engage with their way of life and others within their own context of intelligibility. The meaning and manifestations of control, autonomy, and exploitation require contextual information, for which individuals' articulations of value are necessary. Consequently, the state's duty to prevent exploitation cannot be achieved without the autonomy of its members.

5. Can mainstream liberal societies fulfill a duty to not exploit minority groups?

Today, the form of life experienced by people who occupy mainstream positions in “liberal societies” is supported by paid caregivers. My use of “liberal societies” here means societies that self-identify as liberal or where liberalism is an endemic doctrine. It is not an evaluation of these societies as societies that satisfy the requirements of liberalism. Instead, liberal societies, as a descriptor, is a statement of their commitment to a certain self-understanding and aspiration, rather than a success term.

Can mainstream liberal societies meet the anti-exploitation condition? One of the consequences of eliminating the exploitation of less powerful groups would be that members of the mainstream would no longer feel at home in their society. This is because the habit of members of privileged groups is predicated on the invisibility of members of other groups and the appropriation of their energy. For example, the mainstream way of life in the American south was shaped by dependence on slavery, and contemporary understandings of whiteness have been continuous with that history. In most societies, the dominant mainstream is also largely patriarchal, thus relying on the exploitation of women’s labor via a process of “grafting the substance of another”.⁷ Thus, a mainstream society that satisfies Melidoro’s prohibition on inter-group exploitation must grapple with questions about cultural change in the face of exploitative practices.

To respond to the necessity of cultural change when societies are based on unjust caregiving arrangements, I have developed a concept called “being at home”.

Being at home is a state of affairs achieved through the dynamic interaction of a person with their social environment and intimate others. It is influenced by the ease with which a person can access a range of primary goods. It also includes our cherished relationships. If our access to other primary goods causes us to lose important relationships, this diminishes the extent to which we feel truly at home. Although “being at home” has value to everyone, how a person lives such that they feel at home will be highly variable (Bhandary, 2020, p. 180).

This concept serves as a conceptual building block for a liberalism that values people’s connections to their cultures. With this concept in hand, it is possible to express due value for a context of intelligibility while simultaneously grasping the reality that societies—both “mainstream” and “minority”—often fail to satisfy the requirements set forth by Melidoro. My concept of *being at home* can flexibly accommodate the role of culture in individuals’ lives, but it does not assume an immutable culture. A liberalism that appreciates culture can see differences in our ability to be “at home” as the core good under dispute.

The value to liberalism of the concept “being at home” should not be confused with the value of being at home in diversity. Whether a person is able to be at home in diverse cultural contexts seems dependent on exposure as well as individual proclivities. For example, some

⁷ See Bhandary (2021b, p. 2) for this use of the phrase, which is originally Marilyn Frye’s (1983, p. 66).

people simply have a disposition to conservatism, manifest as difficulty with change, and it seems that this disposition, like many others, is simply part of human individuality and variability.

Because we take responsibility for ourselves within particular practices and cultural forms, a just liberal state should not barge into peoples' lives. This is an important consideration for liberalism, and it is one that the toleration strand of liberalism prioritizes. For purposes of determining the state's interventions in cultural practices, a hands-off approach would likely do less harm if adopted from the beginning of inter-group interactions. A politics of indifference would not perpetrate state-enabled forced sterilizations, nor would it actively kill native peoples.⁸ A politics of indifference at time t would also preclude birth control campaigns such as those in El Paso as described by historian Lina-Maria Murillo, where "birth control campaigns targeting Mexican-origin women were part of a longer history of immigration and border controls that sought to protect the body politic from non-white immigrants while simultaneously exploiting their labor" (Murillo, 2021, p. 314). However, once these histories exist, forms of liberalism in different nations must reckon with those nations' particular forms of exploitation and oppression. The particular histories and systems of exploitation also structure whose needs are met, and how well those needs are met. Therefore, Melidoro's egalitarian commitments, paired with his two conditions for the mainstream society, necessitate an understanding of the distributive justice of the extent to which people's needs for care are met.

In cases where groups truly have the separation Melidoro describes, his account might be valid. However, affluent groups in India do not have this kind of separation, as they rely on members of other groups for domestic labor. Similarly, in the U.S., a variety of forms of caregiving are provided by members of minority groups. In both countries, systems of care include less powerful groups serving as caregivers for members of majority groups.

Considering specific national contexts in which liberal debates about diversity arise reveals the value of a pluralist liberalism for the domains of policy and the law. In addition, I have defended a limited set of values as the foundation for the abstract project of liberalism.

⁸ See Rand (2008) for a history of U.S. settler interactions with the Kiowa people.

The value of transparency requires autonomy skills for real people, and an understanding of the significance of culture results in the value of *being at home* (Bhandary, 2020). Furthermore, autonomy is the condition for giving meaning to the notion of exploitation. In light of these requirements, multiple ways of life and social practices can coexist.

Despite my disagreements with Melidoro, engaging with his taxonomy is a fruitful endeavor that enables new assessments of the roles of these values and of the nature of political justification across diverse national contexts. I hope future engagements with liberalism will continue to engage with previously overlooked national contexts where the doctrine of liberalism is valued, for doing so will shed further light on the unity or disunity of distinct aspects of the liberal project. Melidoro's book thus helps liberal theory shed the parochialism of the assumptions resulting from a largely Anglo-American approach to the doctrine. In doing so, *Dealing with Diversity* portends the development of a new stage in liberal understandings of inter-group relations.

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