Online Library of Liberty | April 2021 | Volume 9, Issue 3

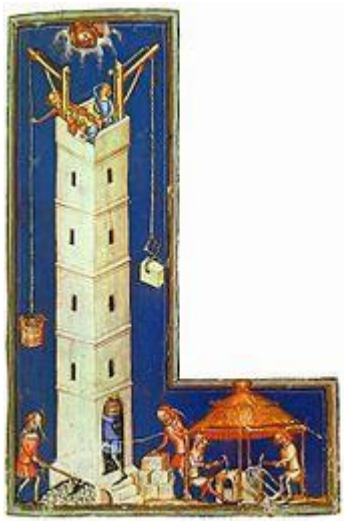
LIBERTY MATTERS

MEANINGS OF LIBERTY: ARON, CONSTANT, BERLIN

Raymond Aron, Benjamin Constant, and Isaiah Berlin are three thinkers whose work illuminates different aspects of the meaning of the idea of "liberty." This collection of essays and responses engages with the differing characterizations of liberty proffered by these individuals, but also looks for unifying threads running between and among them. Daniel B. Klein kicks things off in his lead essay exploring the ideational dimensions of "liberty" as talked about by Aron, Constant, and Berlin. Responses from Professors Helena Rosenblatt and Daniel J. Mahoney add texture to Klein's analysis, particularly as the three authors engage one another in "the conversation" section below.

MEANINGS OF LIBERTY: ARON, CONSTANT, BERLIN

by Daniel B. Klein



Tower of Babel

Liberty polysemy according to Aron, Constant, and Berlin

Raymond Aron	Benjamin Constant	Isaiah Berlin
1. Classical liberal meaning	"modern"	"negative" if given added specifications
2. Political participation	"ancient"	
3. National sovereignty		
4. Capabilities		"positive"

Benjamin Constant distinguished "ancient liberty" and "modern liberty." Isaiah Berlin distinguished "positive liberty" and "negative liberty." It is appropriate to see affinity among Constant's modern liberty, Berlin's negative liberty, and a classical liberal meaning of liberty.

Meanings of *liberty* are multiple. When a word has multiple meanings it is said to be polysemous – "poly" as opposed to "mono," "sem" (sign, signification) as in *semantics*. Polysemy may be contrasted with monosemy, the property of having only one meaning.

As much as we would like a word, such as *liberty*, to be monosemous, and to build a tower straight to heaven, like the Tower of Babel, the most important words are polysemous. We must learn to cope with polysemy. The way to do so is to track the different meanings.

It is challenging to sort out the different meanings. How many are there? Are the meanings really different? Are they different yet interrelated?

When I use the word *liberty*, I usually mean a classical liberal notion of it, which has to do with *others not messing with one's stuff*. But there are other meanings to track.

Raymond Aron (1966)

I participated in an event on Raymond Aron (1905-1983), a great French conservative liberal. For the event we read Aron's 1961 review essay of Friedrich Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*, in which Hayek attempts to advance a concept of liberty, describing it in a number of ways, including the absence of coercion. Aron broadly embraces an absence-of-coercion definition. But he raises doubts about how Hayek defines "coercion" and so on. Others too have found Hayek's elaboration unsatisfactory.

Later I give a few words to a classical liberal meaning of *liberty*. The thinker who best serves as fount for such a meaning is Adam Smith. But Constant's "modern liberty" also gives nice expression to a classical liberal meaning of liberty:

> It is the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone's right to associate with other individuals, either to discuss their interests, or to profess the religion which they and their associates prefer, or even simply to occupy their days or hours in a way which is most compatible with their inclinations or whims. (Constant 1819)

Aron enumerates four meanings of liberty. Besides **[1]** the absence-of-coercion definition, there are:

> three other ideas frequently linked in our time to the concept of liberty: **[2]** participation in the political order or, more precisely, the choice of rulers by electoral process; **[3]** the independence of a population governed by men of its own race or nationality, which rejects foreign masters, **[4]** and finally, the power of the individual or the collectivity to satisfy its desires or to attain its own ends. (Aron 1961/1994, 74)

Aron's enumeration invites some remarks:

1. Participation in the political order is aptly associated with republicanism or democratism, the latter especially when we emphasize direct and extensive participation, notably through voting. This meaning corresponds pretty well to Constant's ancient liberty. Ancient liberty, Constant said, "consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgments; in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them."
2. In the third meaning, the independence that Aron speaks of is national sovereignty, and hence not suzerainty or domination by a foreign state or power. This meaning of freedom or liberty looms large in issues of imperial powers and emergent secessionist movements—like the American War for Independence and the American Civil War. The meaning is also somewhat apt for an issue like Brexit.

3. In the fourth meaning we have notions of enlarged capabilities: Winning the lottery augments your liberty. George Stigler (1978) and other economists have associated expanded capability with liberty. Stigler did so in an unbecoming manner dismissive of any classical liberal notion of liberty. But the more important connection is to Berlin's positive liberty. Such positive liberty is far looser and vaguer than the two preceding definitions. Notions of capabilities and their expansion vary with each speaker's viewpoint and even with his every utterance, not only about his own inner desires, potential, and fulfillment but about the innerness of others as well. Berlin told us to beware of positive liberty. He said: "historically more damage has been done by pseudo-positive than pseudo-negative liberty" (1991, 41), and "positive liberty has been distorted more disastrously than negative liberty" (147).

So we have a classical liberal meaning plus those three. Here again is the table of designated meanings of liberty:

Liberty polysemy according to Aron, Constant, and Berlin

Raymond Aron	*Benjamin Constant*	*Isaiah Berlin*
1. Classical liberal meaning	"modern"	"negative" if given added specifications
2. Political participation	"ancient"	
3. National sovereignty		
4. Capabilities		"positive"

Berlin says that his concept of "negative liberty" involves an "always recognizable frontier" not to be interfered with (1969, 127). He describes negative liberty as "liberty *from*; absence of interference" (1969, 127), but he did not spell out any sort of grammar embedded within the concept. Berlin seems to associate negative liberty with Constant's modern liberty (163-166). Berlin left some equivocation and confusion around "negative liberty." For example, in Berlin and Jahanbegloo (1991), Berlin speaks of negative liberty as "the removal or absence of...obstacles" (151, 40), which makes it sound like positive liberty (see 1969, 146). But the overall drift of negative liberty is pretty clear, and, were we to give further specification to negative liberty, it would come more clearly into alignment with a classical liberal notion of liberty. I do believe that something of that sort is what Berlin was thinking.

A Classical Liberal Meaning of Liberty

I think that any classical liberal meaning of liberty or freedom ought to start with the virtue of commutative justice, which Adam Smith (TMS, 269) expressed as the duty to "abstaining from what is another's."[1] *What is another's*, or one's own, was expressed in Latin as *suum*. For a classical liberal meaning of liberty, one's own or *suum* is understood in a narrow or grammar-like way. This *suum* may be summarized as person, property, and promises due. (I like to see persons as property of a special sort, as I think of us as souls, each of which owns its person.)

Adam Smith

Suum or one's own (or one's "stuff") is delineated according to the rules of ownership of property and voluntary agreement (consent, contract) that operate among jural equals in the time and place of the society in question. Such rules may be said to be that society's most basic social grammar. Those rules constitute the individual's dominion that others are presumptively not to mess with.

Suppose your neighbor forcibly asserts that he is to get 25 percent of your income, or tells you that you are not to employ people for less than a certain wage. We'd consider such a neighbor to be initiating coercions. Classical liberals say it's coercion when done by government, too. Yes, government is a special sort of player in society. Its initiations of coercion are overt, institutionalized, openly rationalized. They are called intervention or restriction or regulation or taxation, rather than extortion, assault, theft, or trespass. But classical liberals maintain that they are initiations of coercion. Recognizing that helps to sustain a presumption against government coercions.

Whereas commutative justice is the duty of not messing with other people's stuff, *liberty* is others not messing with your stuff, particularly the government not messing with your stuff. In affirming this elemental concept of liberty, however, classical liberals do not equate liberty and the good.

The liberty maxim says: *By and large, in a choice between two reform options (one of which may be not to reform the status quo at all), the greater-liberty option is more desirable.*

Notice the "By and large." It is a maxim. When sustained within the culture, it expresses a presumption of liberty. But a presumption is defeasible. We maintain a presumption of innocence, but sometimes the defendant's innocence is *not* sustained.

The liberty maxim is formulated in terms of reforms. A reform implies a status quo. A status quo implies a society in time and place. From that status quo, the liberty maxim is directional, as opposed to destinational (Munger 2018). A classical liberal meaning of liberty need not be concerned with delineating "the free society" or "the proper role" of government. The contours of liberty may be grammar-like, but classical liberal claims for liberty are not grammar-like. They are loose, vague, and indeterminate, and they are circumstanced.

Classical liberals recognize that sometimes liberty must be sacrificed for the sake of liberty. A policy that reduces liberty directly might augment liberty overall. Areas of contention include immigration, foreign policy, weapons policy, pollution, and financial doings for which the taxpayer is on the hook.[2]

The liberty principle has its holes, gray areas, and exceptions; it does not speak to all important issues of government; and it is not self-justifying. Nonetheless, it remains cogent and gives a conceptual spine to classical liberalism. The liberty maxim – that the more-liberty option is presumptively the more desirable option – gives structure to the formulation of issues and positions on issues. We can argue over how strong the presumption is, and how it must compromise sometimes with another important presumption, namely, that of the status quo. But the liberty maxim remains the spine of classical liberalism.

Standing Up for a Meaning of a Word

To stiffen the spine of classical liberalism, Raymond Aron distinguished four meanings of the word *liberty*. That spine is stiffened and fortified by recognizing the polysemy of *liberty* and by seeing how a classical liberal meaning stands in relation to other meanings.

To some extent, meanings of liberty vie against one another. One camp may emphasize its favored meaning, hoping to edge out or shut down a meaning cherished by adversaries. Exponents of a classical liberal notion of liberty should take note: eradicating the spine causes collapse.

Recognizing the various meanings helps us to distinguish them. Then we can focus on one at a time. It is my hope that classical liberals will give more attention to articulating a classical liberal meaning of liberty and will stand up for it.

References

Aron, Raymond. 1994. *In Defense of Political Reason: Essays by Raymond Aron*. Edited by Daniel J. Mahoney. Rowman & Littlefield.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. Two Concepts of Liberty. In: *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford University Press: 118-172.

Berlin, Isaiah and Ramin Jahanbegloo. 1991. *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Constant, Benjamin. 1819. The Liberty of the Moderns Compared with That of the Ancients. https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/constant-the-liberty-of-ancients-compared-with-that-of-moderns-1819

Diesel, Jonathon. 2021. Two Superiors, Two Jural Relationships in Adam Smith. *Adam Smith Review*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3696171

Hayek, Friedrich A. 1960. *The Constitution of Liberty*. University of Chicago Press.

Klein, Daniel B. 2021. Commutative, Distributive, and Estimative Justice in Adam Smith. *Adam Smith Review*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2930837

Klein, Daniel B. and Michael J. Clark. 2010. Direct and Overall Liberty: Areas and Extent of Disagreement. *Reason Papers* 32: 41-66. https://www.reasonpapers.com/pdf/32/rp_32_3.pdf

Klein, Daniel B. and Erik Matson. 2020. Mere-liberty in David Hume. In: *A Companion to David Hume*. Ed. M. Polanco. Guatemala: Universidad Francisco Marroquin: 125-160. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3192142

Munger, Michael C. 2018. Can Libertarianism Be a Governing Philosophy? Law & Liberty (Liberty Fund), March 1. Link.

Smith, Adam. 1976. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed

Stigler, George J. 1978. Wealth, and Possibly Liberty. *Journal of Legal Studies* 7(2): 213-217.

[1] On commutative justice and the role it plays in defining two jural relationships (equal-equal and superior-inferior), see Klein 2021 and Diesel 2021. On the historical dependence of liberty on jural integration, see Klein and Matson (2020).

[2] See Klein and Clark (2010).

ENNOBLING LIBERAL LIBERTIES: TRUE FREEDOM FOR POLITICAL ANIMALS

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Liberty, as Daniel B. Klein stresses in his succinct and elegant essay for Liberty Matters, is indeed "polysemous," fraught with different meanings and equivocal in decisive respects.

> "MODERN LIBERTY, AS CONSTANT DEFINES IT, ALSO INCLUDES THE RIGHT TO FREELY ASSOCIATE WITH OTHERS, TO DISCUSS ONE'S INTERESTS, TO CHOOSE ONE'S RELIGION FREELY, AND EVEN TO IDLE AWAY ONE'S TIME ACCORDING TO ONE'S "INCLINATIONS OR WHIMS.""

Yet the regime of modern liberty, as I will call it taking my lead from Benjamin Constant, requires the broad protection of the liberal liberties, the ones aptly sketched by Constant in his 1819 essay "The Liberty of the Moderns Compared With the Ancients" (and quoted near the beginning of Dan Klein's reflection): "It is the

right of everyone to express their opinions, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings." Modern liberty, as Constant defines it, also includes the right to freely associate with others, to discuss one's interests, to choose one's religion freely, and even to idle away one's time according to one's "inclinations or whims." Constant does not take his bearings mainly or exclusively from theoretical speculation, from a hypothetical state of nature as articulated by the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Constant's understanding of liberty, he tells us, is the one widely shared by the English, French, and Americans of his time. It is first descriptive, and only secondarily, prescriptive. It is the lived experience of those who inhabit modern liberal societies.

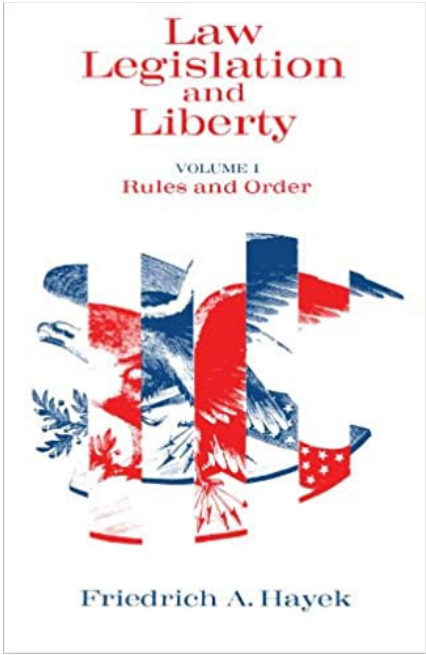
Benjamin Constant

The "modern liberty" that Constant evokes is more concrete than Isaiah Berlin's "negative liberty." It implicitly points toward a vision of a free and decent society appropriate to the conditions of modern life. It is at once an appeal to what is "natural," to what avoids despotic cruelty and undue interference in the private life of individuals, and "historical," depending as it does on a clear differentiation between the public liberty appropriate to the circumstances of the ancient city, and the private rights and enjoyments that mark the new, specifically "modern" historical dispensation. But, as we shall see, Constant would never condemn every effort to articulate a positive vision of the free, and good, society, and the "rational mastery" of the self and its passions, as a dangerous turn toward "positive liberty," as Isaiah Berlin does in his 1957 essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." Berlin's account of the two liberties, one "negative" and modern, the other "positive" and prone to coercion and despotism, goes too far in identifying liberty with "the removal or absence of…obstacles." Constant's account of the difference between ancient and modern liberty stays reasonably close to the texture of real political regimes and historical alternatives; Berlin's approach is more abstract, and hardly describes any viable *political* order.

Berlin is wary, too wary in my view, of pursuing the traditional questions of political philosophy that invariably address the question of the good life and the good society. I do not believe Constant abandoned those questions, even if he circumscribed them by making them, at least in part, historically contingent. But Berlin seems to confuse the search for truth, and rational self-command, with the quest for a "monistic" denial of pluralism and personal freedom. Berlin leaves us with no middle ground between eternal verities and the "relative validity" of our most "sacred" convictions as he states on the last page of his famous essay. Despite his protests, the Berlinian account of pluralism and the radical heterogeneity of values is hardly distinct from relativism. But a liberal society or political order presupposes a certain shared vision of freedom and human flourishing, one that is presupposed by Constant and no doubt by Berlin himself, a political thinker who admirably despised Communist totalitarianism and who wrote eloquently and movingly about the noble statesmanship of Winston S. Churchill. It depends on the preservation of a moral realm, where distinctions between right and wrong, better and worse, are not judged to be merely subjective. The conclusion is clear: Every articulation of the liberty appropriate for free men and women in the modern world inescapably contains an appeal to both negative

and positive liberty, of the good life and the good society that maintains an ample space for personal and economic freedom, intellectual inquiry, religious liberty, and moral self-development. That regime, the way of life, forms a "whole." Liberty can never simply be *freedom from*, with no positive articulation of the shared goods inherent in civilized life.

Still, it is hard to quarrel with Dan Klein's view that the "classical liberal" meaning of liberty, the "spine of liberty," as he suggestively calls it, involves "others not messing with one's stuff." The distinguished French political philosopher and political sociologist Raymond Aron (1905-1983), mentioned and intelligently discussed by Dan, did indeed argue that "liberty as capacity" was a question that naturally arose in any modern productivist society. Aron was a critic of doctrinaire egalitarianism that he believed "vainly contradicts biological and social nature, and leads not to equality but to tyranny." He did not believe that liberty should be confused with a frenzied passion for equality, or that an ill-defined quest for "social justice" would serve either the political or economic well-being of a free society. But "formal liberties" require certain material goods to exercise them sufficiently. Without them, disgruntled citizens will use the representative or electoral processes to achieve through politics what they cannot achieve through market competition or individual effort. This end-run around the "general rules" of market arrangements is built into the very structure of representative politics. No liberal utopia can do away with this problem or dynamic. There is a liberal way of addressing this dynamic, but it should not be confused with the project of radically depoliticizing the regime of modern liberty and substituting unchangeable rules for the give-and-take, the rough and tumble, of free political life. Friedrich Hayek seemed to move in the direction of an anti-political liberal utopia in his last great work, his three-volume, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*.



That was not, in Aron's judgment, the case with Hayek's earlier *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), a true book of political philosophy in Aron's estimation. As Dan points out, Aron profoundly admired that 1960 work. He shared Hayek's concern for maintaining the private sphere of civil society, property rights, the absence of undue coercion and restraint on individuals endowed with free will, and the need to respect the rule of law and the constitutional framework of the free society. But in addition to being a conservative-minded liberal, Aron was also a critic of any conception of liberty that dreamed of fundamentally depoliticizing human and social existence. For Aron, following the emphatically *political* liberalism of his great predecessors and inspirations Montesquieu and Tocqueville, the protection of private rights, and liberal liberties, could not be severed from the broader goal of the self-government of free persons who in important respects govern themselves. This not only provides a salutary restraint on arbitrary government, with its inevitable efforts at self-aggrandizement, but it allows properly civic virtues to flourish. Human beings, Aron liked to say, are citizens as well as consumers. Their talents and capacities can hardly flourish if life is reduced to a strictly hedonistic calculus.

This is Aron's challenge to the liberal definition of freedom: Can liberalism, classical liberalism, defend "the

spine" of truth at its heart without succumbing to the utopian temptation to create a world without politics (a dream paradoxically shared by Marx and the Marxist tradition if much more blindly and fanatically). Aron's most radical criticism of Hayek involves faulting the Austrian economist and social philosopher for dismissing the entire "problem of interior liberty" out of hand. In Aron's considered judgment, there can be no free society without some "metaphysical" or philosophical confidence in the capacity of human beings and citizens to choose reasonably, prudently, responsibly. Aron rightly remarks that the liberal "ideal of a society in which each would be able to choose his gods or his values cannot flourish before its individuals are educated in the common life." A free society is inseparable from freedom, responsibility, lawfulness, and self-restraint on the part of individuals and citizens in both the private and public realms. This is an essential element of self-government. In the spirit of classical political philosophy, Aron unhesitatingly affirms that "a society must first exist, before it can be free." Liberal theoreticians, Aron suggests, tend to take for granted the fundamental and enduring problem of political philosophy—and common life.

In his final lecture at the Collège de France on April 4, 1978, published in French in 2013 as *Liberté et Égalité*, Raymond Aron reiterated that he unhesitatingly shared the liberal "ideal of permitting to each person the freedom to choose his path" in life. But Aron refused to confuse this necessary and salutary right with the right of each to choose his own "conception of good and evil." That should be a bridge too far for the liberal or conservative, for any decent person committed to the search for the Good Life and the preservation of a free and decent civilized order. Moral nihilism is as much a threat to the liberal order as the urge to collectivize human and political life and, in our age, they tend to reinforce each other.

Constant himself ended his famous 1819 address on the liberty of the ancients and the moderns by reminding his auditors and readers that modern liberty needs public liberty both to check power and to "enlarge the spirit" and "ennoble the hearts" of modern individuals who are perhaps too prone to exercise their "individual independence" in ways unworthy of the human soul. The dialogue between ancient and modern liberty, liberal economics and conservative liberal political philosophy, will endure as long as human beings cherish individual independence, political liberty, material prosperity, and the enlargement of the human spirit at the service of truth and moral self-development. But one thing should be clear: "Negative liberty" is too narrow and abstract of a notion to do justice to the capacious liberties that inform and vivify a truly humane and free political order.

RESPONSE TO DANIEL B. KLEIN

by Helena Rosenblatt

Thanks for the invitation to participate in this forum!

As I see it, the aim of Dan Klein's piece is twofold. First, he wants to remind us that "liberty" is a "polysemous" word. It carries multiple meanings. Second, he wants to make a case for his own, very pithy, definition. To Dan, liberty means "others not messing with one's stuff." He urges classical liberals to "stiffen the spine of classical liberalism" by "standing up" for this meaning of liberty.

I fully agree that the word "liberty" is used differently by different people in different texts and contexts. It is not an ordinary word; it is a "key word" and a "contested concept" in our political vocabulary. For this reason, it has become popular to identify its various meanings in history and to describe how these have evolved over time.

Dan notes that Benjamin Constant, Isaiah Berlin and Raymond Aron all called attention to, and made use of, the multiple meanings of "liberty". I would add that more recently, scholars like Quentin Skinner and Annelien de Dijn, have done the same.[1] Such modern studies are part of a thriving field of conceptual history, much of it inspired by the seminal work of Reinhardt Koselleck.[2]

These studies on the meaning of "liberty" have shown us not only that there are many different such meanings, but that one kind of liberty can rarely exist alone. A certain type of "positive liberty" is needed to ensure a certain type of "negative liberty," for example. So, yes, I can certainly follow Dan when he writes that it can be challenging "to sort out the different meanings" of "liberty" and when he wonders if they aren't "interrelated." For indeed they are.

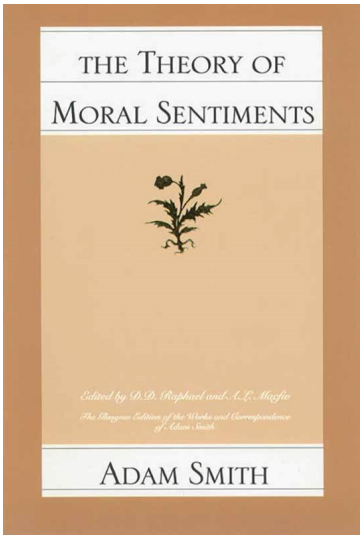
It is when Dan urges us to adopt his "classical liberal" definition of liberty that I no longer follow him. Dan's definition of liberty-- "others not messing with one's stuff"-- is an extremely narrow and materialistic definition, one that I have never encountered before. "Stuff" is a vague term, but generally describes possessions--and usually physical ones, i.e. materials. It also has somewhat of a derogatory meaning. It often refers to things of little value, ie. junk. Dan calls his "a classical liberal" definition, but I don't recall encountering any liberals who used the term in that way. Moreover, is he telling us that this should be our only definition of liberty? What is it replacing?

The following are a few meanings of liberty with which we have become familiar:

- liberty as political participation,
- liberty as self-realization
- liberty as the freedom from interference (or coercion)
- liberty as the freedom from domination (or dependence)

The first two are versions of "positive liberty"; the last two are versions of "negative liberty."

Dan's version is clearly a variety of "liberty as the absence of interference or coercion." He tells us that it comes from Adam Smith and provides a citation from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* for support. In that book, Smith speaks of the duty of "abstaining from what is another's." But it seems that this is actually a definition of commutative justice, not liberty, as Dan himself admits. Did Smith ever say that liberty and commutative justice were the same thing? The fact is that there are myriad references to liberty in the *Wealth of Nations* that have no connection with "not messing with" someone else's "stuff". For example, underlying all of Smith's thinking is the idea that all human beings have the freedom to make choices and that they should be free from servility, free from dependence. Not even freedom of markets, of exchanges, of countries or of contracts, in my reading, can be equated with others "not messing with our stuff." To turn Smith into a possessive individualist, as Dan seems to be doing, is most certainly wrong.



Dan also suggests that there are affinities between his own view of liberty and Constant's. But the quotation Dan provides from Constant does not support this contention. Constant's definition of modern liberty is much broader. Modern liberty, Constant declares:

> is the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is

> everyone's right to associate with other individuals, either to discuss their interests, or to profess the religion which they and their associates prefer, or even simply to occupy their days or hours in a way which is most compatible with their inclinations or whims.

Clearly, Constant's definition of liberty in the quotation provided by Dan cannot be summarized as "others not messing with one's stuff." This becomes even clearer when one reads the next sentence of the quotation, cut off by Dan:

> "Finally [modern liberty] is everyone's right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all or particular officials, or through representations, petitions, demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed."

In other words, Constant even includes political participation (in a representative form of government) as an aspect of "modern liberty."

"AT THE END OF HIS SPEECH, HE EVEN USES WORDS LIKE "DESTINY," "SACRED," "SPIRIT" AND "ENNOBLES" TO DESCRIBE POLITICAL LIBERTY."

By defining liberty as "others not messing with one's stuff" and not speaking of the need for other kinds of liberty, Klein economizes liberty in a way that truncates and distorts the thought of a "classical liberal thinker" like Constant, whom Dan professes to admire. As many recent scholars have now made clear, Constant's whole speech is meant to warn those liberals who economize liberty not to forget the importance of political liberty, which he calls "the most effective means of self-development that heaven has given us." At the end of his speech, he even uses words like "destiny," "sacred," "spirit" and "ennobles" to describe political liberty. These are hardly the words of someone who could agree with Dan's definition of liberty.

Conceptual historians begin with the premise that key concepts are used as tools or weapons in political discussions. This means that there is no value-neutral definition of a word like "liberty." Quentin Skinner expresses this point clearly:

> The belief that we can somehow step outside the stream of history and furnish a neutral definition of such words as libertas, freedom, autonomy and liberty is an illusion well worth giving up. With terms at once so deeply normative, so highly indeterminate, and so extensively implicated in such a long history of ideological debate, the project of understanding them can only be that of trying to grasp the different roles they have played in our history and our own place in the narrative…there is no neutral analysis of any such keywords to be given.[3]

This brings me back to a question I posed earlier. What might be the purpose of reducing our definition of liberty to concerns about the protection of our "stuff"? Dan has every right to have a personal definition, but why? For what purpose?

I'll finish with another question that is, in a way, the most perplexing to me. In the end, the main purpose of Dan Klein's piece is to convince "classical liberals" to embrace and defend a "classical liberal meaning of liberty." A "classical liberal" meaning of liberty "is the spine of classical liberalism," he writes. I'm confused by these statements. What makes "classical liberals" "classical liberals" if they don't already subscribe to a "classical liberal" meaning of liberty? Why do they need convincing?

References

1. Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History*, Harvard University Press, 2020; Quentin Skinner, Liberty before Liberalism, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

2. On "conceptual history," many helpful resources can be found here: http://www.concepta-net.org/links.

3. Quentin Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty", Isaiah Berlin Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 117, pp. 237-268, at 265.

RESPONSE TO DANIEL J. MAHONEY, CLASSICAL LIBERALISM, NEITHER ANTI-POLITICAL NOR MORALLY NEUTRAL

by Daniel B. Klein

I thank Daniel Mahoney and Helena Rosenblatt for their fine commentaries on the lead essay "Meanings of Liberty: Aron, Constant, Berlin," discussing the polysemy of "liberty." I've interacted with them and opt for first names. Here I reply to Dan and next time to Helena.

Reading Aron's essay on Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* which Dan assigned for a seminar prompted the lead essay. It is unsurprising that Dan and I disagree little. Dan's commentary, "Ennobling Liberal Liberties: True Freedom for Political Animals," brings out some important points. Here I riff on what Dan says, eager to know whether he approves.

Dan suggests that classical/conservative liberalism—CL, cheerfully equivocating on the "C"—inescapably contains an appeal to "the good life and the good society." He says, "Liberty can never simply be freedom from, with no positive articulation of the shared goods inherent in civilized life." I agree that the presumption of liberty, the spine of CL, is not self-justifying. Justification must lie in a higher ethical plane, in a justice beyond commutative justice. One such realm of justice will indeed involve the estimating of objects presented in a "positive articulation of the shared goods inherent in civilized life," as Dan put it.

Dan also cautions CL votaries against the fancy for "fundamentally depoliticizing human and social existence." Again, I concur. Human beings are fundamentally political animals. Dan's point about the political nature of human beings, and of CL, leads him to highlight Benjamin Constant's call to engagement in "public liberty," that is, political discourse, opinion, and civic affairs, including voting. Were Yoda to express Constant's call, he might say: Prevail more easily the greater evil does when people shirk support for the lesser evil.

A rub in urging engagement, however, is that someone heeding the urge may as a result transition from disengagement to supporting the greater evil. So long as one's readers tend to agree with one's ordering of evils, it makes sense to urge engagement.

I like the metaphor of higher/lower for the objects of a person's life, call him Jim. By "higher" I mean higher in Jim's moral sentiments, which might be rather stunted. The chimney of a short building is not high compared to the chimneys of other buildings but it is the highest part of that building. Jim's higher objects are the ideas, beliefs, sentiments, affections, personal relationships, practices, customs, aims, plans that are central in Jim's selfhood, identity, and lived experience, and in that sense sacred to Jim. Lower objects are not so sacred, such as what kind of car Jim drives or food he eats. I think Dan agrees that the person's political sensibilities tend to sit in the person's higher space and hence to be sacralized.

Alexis de Tocqueville

Moreover, I think Dan would agree that, irrespective of what one's political sensibilities happen to be, they cannot be entirely neutral about other people's higher things. If

a libertarian or classical liberal thinks that her politics are neutral in the matter of favoring or disfavoring what others make sacred, she is kidding herself. Her politics oppose the sacralizing of the governmentalization of social affairs—one of the major quasi-religion of our times, warned of by Tocqueville. CL is not entirely neutral in the higher-things space. Rather, it tries to cordon off, as morally unworthy, certain areas of that space.

CL urges Jim away from the anti-CL space. What Dan and I might disagree on is the posture of CL regarding the rest of Jim's higher-things space. Like Dan, I affirm moral duty in everything, everywhere. But what are Jim's duties? That is a conversation most suitable to trusted familiars of Jim, including Jim himself.

Dan might think me too pluralist in the higher-things space, as he does Isaiah Berlin. In one sense, I am perhaps more pluralist than Dan. In another sense, however, I am monistic. I follow Adam Smith in thinking of the whole of justice as a matter of what a supreme benevolent super-knowledgeable beholder finds beautiful. In a sense, every consideration on every matter for every human being is but a part of that single whole. Given how little access we have to that whole it is no surprise how much we disagree in all those considerations. In fact, appreciation of that inaccessibility is a principal consideration, a principal point of virtue. Liberalism is, in spirit, about learning to expect, live with, even enjoy the disagreement. Death, taxes, inflation, the nation-state, and higher-things disagreement are five things we must get used to and work to make less bad than they otherwise would be.

RESPONSE TO HELENA ROSENBLATT, LIBERALISM IS THE CHILD OF JURISPRUDENCE

by Daniel B. Klein

I am grateful to my friend Helena Rosenblatt for her bold comment on my essay. Helena and I have debated the semantic history of liberalism. I say the first political meaning of "liberal" emerged in Britain in the 1770s, whereas Helena says it was only later and on the Continent that "liberal" first acquired a political meaning, which the Continent then exported to Britain.

> "I DID NOT MEAN TO SUGGEST THAT ARON, CONSTANT, BERLIN, OR SMITH USED THE EXPRESSION "NOT MESSING WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S STUFF.""

Helena has issues with "not messing with other people's stuff" as a formulation of what Smith calls commutative justice. I did not mean to suggest that Aron, Constant, Berlin, or Smith used the expression "not messing with other people's stuff." That expression is of my own devising.

The old verbalism "abstaining from what is another's," with slight variation, is found in (translations of) Grotius, Pufendorf, Thomasius, and others, and then Hume and Smith. The correspondence of that verbalism to "not messing with other people's stuff" works as follows:

Abstaining from	Not messing with
what	stuff
is another's	other people's

"Not messing with other people's stuff" works better than the old verbalism. It enables removal of "not" to focus on "messing with"—what counts as messing with? It gives us a word ("stuff") for all thing covered by commutative justice (the three staples being person, property, and promises due). And "other people's" neatly prompts: "How was her ownership/right established?" My formulation corresponds exactly to the arc that passed through Grotius, Smith, and Constant.

Hugo Grotius (early 17th century)

J.G.A. Pocock (1983, 249) says, "the child of jurisprudence is liberalism." Helena's book *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Rosenblatt 2018) mentions Grotius and Hutcheson each but once, briefly (p. 19, 25), and never jurisprudence nor writers in the natural jurisprudence tradition such as Pufendorf, Thomasius, Burlamaqui, Barbeyrac, Carmichael, and Hume. Had the book been written after learning the wisdom of Pocock's words, it would have been a different book.

In her comment, Helena quotes Constant, as I did, saying that modern liberty:

> is the right of everyone **to express** their opinion, **choose** a profession and **practice** it, **to dispose** of property, and even **to abuse** it; **to come** and **go** without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone's right **to associate** with other individuals, either **to discuss** their interests, or **to profess** the religion which they and their associates prefer, or even simply **to occupy** their days or hours in a way which is most compatible with their inclinations or whims. (Constant 1819, boldface added)

"Clearly," Helena then says, "Constant's definition of liberty…cannot be summarized as 'others not messing with one's stuff.'"

Oh, but it can. It *must* be summarized in some such way. I have put the verbs in boldface. How would government deny such liberty? By telling the individual: "If you do those verbs in ways that we have forbidden, even though you do not mess with anyone else's stuff, we will mess with your stuff (notably, your person and property)."

Natural jurisprudence worked out the components of an operating system such that if your neighbor tried that—saying to you: "If you express an opinion I don't approve of, I will lock you in prison"—your neighbor would be considered an initiator of coercion. The operating system was about *suum*, the complex of one's own, and the precept against messing with it. I'm not making this up. Please read Stephen Buckle's book on Grotius, Pufendorf, Locke, Hutcheson, and Hume (Buckle 1991). Buckle's overarching point is that Hume flows directly out of that tradition. Hume flowed directly into Smith and "the liberal plan." Or read Knud Haakonssen (1981, 1996).

Liberal theorists said: If not messing is so important in equal-equal jural relationships, maybe it should be a presumption in superior-inferior jural relationships. If an act is the initiation of coercion in equal-equal, then it is in superior-inferior. There should be a presumption of liberty.

A marvelous idea!

Here is how Smith explains the system of natural liberty: "Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way." What does "left perfectly free" mean other than not under a threat of having his stuff messed with?

That is how restrictions on individual liberty are enforced, by threatening to mess with the restrictee's stuff.

Helena writes: "Did Smith ever say that liberty and commutative justice were the same thing?"

I explained that liberty is the flipside of commutative justice. Smith indicates it clearly, for example when he speaks of two interventions and says: "Both laws were evident violations of natural liberty, *and therefore unjust*" (italics added)—meaning commutatively unjust. Helena errs when she says: "The fact is that there are myriad references to liberty in the *Wealth of Nations* that have no connection with 'not messing with' someone else's 'stuff'." Virtually every *liberty* in WN refers to some such concept. What else could Smith mean by liberty?

And when Constant says that numerous institutions "in the ancient republics hindered individual liberty" (321), or when he says, "Individual liberty, I repeat, is the true modern liberty" (323), what does he means by "individual liberty"? Constant plainly means governmental powers not doing things that it would be criminal for a neighbor to do, that is to mess with the individual's stuff. With a grasp of the jurisprudence tradition, one cannot misunderstand what Smith means by liberty and what Constant means by individual liberty, and that Constant's liberalism flowed directly from the "liberal" policy talk that got started in the 1770s in Britain.

Helena notes that, after I quoted the main part of Constant's characterization of modern liberty (and quoted above), I did not include the trailing sentence, "Finally, it is everyone's right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government…" (311). I omitted the sentence because for modern liberty, Constant explains, political participation, though very important and a sacred duty, is nonetheless secondary. In modern times, Constant explains, the political-participation element wanes towards insignificance because: (1) polities are so much larger, so the individual citizen has only a slight chance of affecting a political outcome; (2) citizens have so much else to do in modern commercial society, novels to read, plays to attend, that they –alas—opt not to spend much time with civic affairs; (3) commerce itself never sleeps (unlike the crops in ancient days growing in the fields); (4) citizens today don't have slaves to do the work while they are off attending political deliberations. To Constant, government not messing with one's stuff is the essence of modern liberty. Again: "Individual liberty, I repeat, is the true modern liberty" (323).

My essay is about the polysemy of *liberty*. Helena wonders whether it is a campaign to make *liberty* monosemous. My essay aims to raise the profile of the classical-liberal meaning. It would be silly to suggest an aim of making *liberty* monosemous.

Helena ended her commentary by asking why I feel a need to urge classical liberals to stand up for the classical-liberal meaning of liberty. It is because people who tend to favor liberalization in public policy (or the degovernmentalization of social affairs)—that is, classical liberals—do not always have a clear idea of liberty and a clear sense of what kinds of claims to make for it. Also, they might be inhibited, since standing up for the classical-liberal meaning might be stigmatized. But the presumption of liberty is the spine of classical liberalism. Classical liberals fortify that spine by standing up for the classical-liberal meaning of *liberty*.

New References

Buckle, Stephen. 1991. *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Haakonssen, Knud. 1981. *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haakonssen, Knud. 1996. *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pocock, J.G.A. 1983. Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations between the Civic Humanist and the Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-century Social Thought. In *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, I. Hont and M. Ignatieff (eds.), 235-52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenblatt, Helena. 2018. *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-first Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

FINAL RESPONSE, THE MORAL PREREQUISITES OF THE LIBERAL ORDER: A RESTATEMENT

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Many thanks to Daniel Klein for his thoughtful and generous response to my reflections on the moral prerequisites of the free society. Dan and I do indeed share much common ground, including the recognition that liberty worthy of the name presupposes a decent political order and not simply a conglomeration of individuals who need not share any conception of the good life and the good society. I would add, more emphatically, that friends of liberty need to stop identifying active political life as first and foremost an invitation to collectivism and to the evisceration of individual rights. That is the path of despotism, not free politics.

As Alexis de Tocqueville persuasively argued in the closing chapters of *Democracy in America*, reducing human life to the twin poles of the individual and the state is an invitation to both debilitating passivity and apathetic withdrawal from civic affairs, on the one hand, and to a tutelary despotism that reduces passive men and women to helpless subjects of an ostensibly paternalistic state, one the other. Political liberty, rightly understood, tied to a robust art of (voluntary) association, active participation in local and municipal affairs, and to participation in choosing one's representatives and leaders at the national level, are essential aspects of liberty which enlarge the spirit and play a crucial role in keeping political and administrative despotism at bay. And as pressures grow to establish a "world governing authority" to "globally" regulate everything from the economy and the environment to the enforcement of human rights, some newly discovered, even invented, the self-governing nation-state itself increasingly reveals itself to be an indispensable framework for the exercise of liberty in the late modern world. It should not be confused with pathological forms of nationalism.

Dan is a classical liberal in the most capacious sense of the term. He never forgets the ethical dimensions of liberty or the crucial moral arguments for the free society. Nor does he confuse individual liberty with moral subjectivism or facile relativism. But in his discussion of the higher and lower objects of a person's life he tends to identify "higher objects" with "the ideas, beliefs, sentiments, affections, personal relationships, practices, customs, aims, plans" that are "central" in a particular individuals "selfhood, identity, and lived experience." There is, of course, much truth to this. But in my view, Dan excessively subjectivizes the higher objects of a person's life by identifying them with what a particular person, Dan calls him Jim, holds dear, and then with the "sacred" itself. But if the "higher" or "sacred" has any intrinsic meaning it must refer in some sense to something real or "objective." Moral judgments are not merely arbitrary. Conscience, our intrinsic sense of right and wrong (what Adam Smith in his own idiom called "the impartial spectator") should never be confused with mere self-regard or self-will. And while there are a wide variety of paths in life that are worthy of human pursuit, there are clearly some that so degrade the soul and

undermine the well-being of civil society, that they ought to be rejected by decent human beings.

Today, too many theorists confuse legitimate respect for pluralism with moral indifference or a refusal to reasonably evaluate some life-choices as unworthy of human beings. To recognize these essential distinctions between higher and lower ways of life does not mean that political authorities should criminalize most expressions of moral vice and thus aim at an implausible and undesirable moral and political perfectionism. But a choice for limited government need not entail the societal inculcation of moral relativism or radical subjectivism as so many think today. As Dan himself acknowledges, the moral philosophy of Adam Smith points in a very different and much more salutary direction. As I said in my original contribution to this debate, "moral nihilism is as much a threat to the liberal order," as is "the urge to collectivize human and political life." And I added, that in our age "they tend to reinforce each other." For all these reasons, I unequivocally endorse Raymond Aron's warning never to confuse the noble liberal "ideal of permitting each person the freedom to choose his path" in life with the wholly untenable, even nihilistic, view that every individual has the right to choose his own "conception of good and evil." Neither law, nor liberty, nor the responsible exercise of individuality could survive such a reckless subversion of our moral inheritance.

I have largely sidestepped the vigorous debate between Dan Klein and Helena Rosenblatt about the role of "others not messing with one's stuff" in any conception of classical liberalism rightly understood. While Dan may too unilaterally identify the preservation and protection of property with the "spine of classical liberalism," Helena seems far too eager to relegate the political and juridical protection of "one's stuff" to a lower "economistic" realm, unworthy of an elevated understanding of liberty. I think that is a mistake. In *On Duties*, his greatest and most accessible moral treatise, which defended a vigorous understanding of moral and political obligation, Cicero gave pride of place to the inviolability of property in any truly lawful society. Edmund Burke, a thinker and statesman at the cusp of classical liberalism and classical conservatism, saw the Jacobin assault on the traditional property of France as a hallmark of what we would later call totalitarianism. How right he was! One need only reflect on all the evils committed in the name of the abolition or "socialization" of private property in the twentieth century, including the Soviet collectivization of agriculture and Mao's murderous Great Leap Forward. Closer to home, James Madison, our constitutional founder par excellence, wrote a beautiful and succinct essay "On Property" in 1792, pointing to the vital links between personal property and the integrity of individual conscience understood in a morally elevated way. The conclusion is clear: the defense of property is a proper task of high moral and political philosophy and should not be considered too base or "economistic" for those who care about a political and social order dedicated to the sustenance of liberty and human dignity.

A final word. I completely concur with Helena that liberty is incapable of a value-neutral definition. But that does not mean, à la Quentin Skinner, that we are obliged to identify it simply as a "tool" or "weapon" utilized by political partisans and ideologues. There is a vast middle realm between ideological self-assertion and moral neutrality. That middle realm is precisely the realm that the three of us have been navigating in this most pleasant, amicable, and I hope instructive exchange. Many thanks to Liberty Matters and my two esteemed colleagues.

SECOND RESPONSE TO DANIEL J. MAHONEY, CHIMNEYS ON SHORT AND CROOKED HOUSES

by Daniel B. Klein

I thank Dan Mahoney for his profound and friendly engagement. He writes: "Dan excessively subjectivizes the higher objects of a person's life by identifying them with what a particular person, Dan calls him Jim, holds dear, and then with the 'sacred' itself."

"SO MY RELUCTANCE TO CALLING JIM A NIHILIST IS NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF: "BUT WE DO NOT HEAR JIM ESPOUSING NIHILISM.""

Suppose that Jim spends hours on end, on a daily basis, with MSNBC, *The Financial Times*, and *Vox*. Suppose that Dan and I are dining privately at a restaurant, and converse about Jim. Does it make sense for us to speak of what Jim holds dear as "higher" and "sacred"? I think it does. We mean higher to Jim, sacred to Jim.

I regard "nihilism" as an awfully strong word. In its entry on Nihilism, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says: "'Nihilism' comes from the Latin *nihil*, or nothing, which means not anything, that which does not exist. It appears in the verb 'annihilate,' meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely."

I am prepared to theorize about Jim in terms that Jim would not accept or avouch. So my reluctance to calling Jim a nihilist is not simply a matter of: "But we do not hear Jim espousing nihilism."

Dan notes that Adam Smith used the expression "impartial spectator" in speaking of Jim's conscience. Most of the times where Smith does so in Ed. 6 of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he qualifies with the word "supposed"—which coauthors and I read as the three-syllable "sup-po-sed" (rather than the two-syllable "sup-pos'd"). Smith writes of the conscience as "the supposed impartial spectator."

In Ed. 6 Smith introduced an unmistakable and undeniable distinction between the conscience ("the man within the breast") and a higher sense of "impartial spectator," writing:

> …the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation **of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator**, the man within the breast. (boldface added)

Jim's conscience is a representative of the higher impartial spectator. But that representative is not necessarily a good representative. Sacred to Jim might not correspond to sacred to Adam Smith or to the supreme impartial spectator. Along the lines of the notion that everything that rises must converge, we might say that Jim's house may be short and crooked.

Still, there is a chimney on top. Smith taught that there is a sympathy involved in every moral sentiment that Jim experiences. That teaching would seem to suggest that we ought not regard Jim a nihilist. Smith taught us how to talk to Jim about what he makes sacred.

A conversation about the polysemy of "liberty" has led us to the polysemy of "sacred" and "impartial spectator." Good conversations—good to Dan, anyway—often do!

FINAL RESPONSE

by Helena Rosenblatt

Once again, I'd like to say that it's a pleasure to take part in this discussion with colleagues from whom I have learned so much over the years. We don't do enough of this in the academic world and that's a shame. So thank you also to Liberty Fund for hosting this conversation.

The two Dans' essays and responses to my own have helped me to clarify my ideas. Circling around the topic for a second time, I find myself agreeing quite a bit with Dan Mahoney in particular.

For example, I completely agree with Dan Mahoney that "there are vital links between personal property and the integrity of individual conscience understood in a morally elevated way." I also agree that personal property is crucial to a "political and social order dedicated to the sustenance of liberty and human dignity." I never wished to imply the contrary. What I *don't* agree with is reducing our common notion of "liberty" to the protection of a person's "stuff." This would be to downgrade what I regard as a very noble ideal. Certainly, Benjamin Constant would never have defined liberty that way.

Napoleon and Benjamin Constant

Constant (and I) would also agree with Dan Mahoney that "[e]very articulation of the liberty appropriate for free men and women in the modern world inescapably contains an appeal to both negative and positive liberty, of the good life and the good society that maintains an ample space for personal and intellectual inquiry, religious liberty, and moral self-development."

There is a lot packed into that sentence that simply cannot be captured by the word "stuff."

Am I hung up on a word? You might think so, but, really, it's not just about semantics. Words have rhetorical force. Confusion and disagreement over their meaning leads to messy thinking and inconclusive debates. This was one of the points I tried to make in my recent book, *The Lost History of Liberalism from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*.

So I stand by what I said in my response to Dan Klein about his use of the word "stuff." The first definition that comes up in the Oxford Dictionary is "matter, material, articles" and then "a person's belongings, equipment, or baggage." Informally, the dictionary also tells us that "stuff" means "worthless or foolish ideas, speech, or writing; rubbish." Surely, we can agree, then, that "stuff" commonly has a materialist, economic ring to it and a derogatory one to boot. And surely, the liberty we all believe in and advocate is not about protecting "stuff."

In any case, I don't think that that's what Dan Klein actually means to promote, because he also tells us that he considers persons to be "souls." To me, that means that he does not see people only as possessive individualists. People have higher goals and aspirations. Studies in psychology show that people are happier when they give to others. It is in our natures to be generous. Nobody aspires to be trapped in poverty and focused on paying rent or on protecting their stuff. Poverty is soul-crushing and coercive; how is protecting a person's baggage and rubbish protecting his or her soul?

Today we need a more generous, capacious and high-minded definition of liberty, one that encompasses moral imperatives like the recognition that all souls should be able to live in dignity. We need a definition of liberty that is inspiring and elevating and that recognizes the fact that everyone deserves a chance to morally and intellectually improve themselves. This is what many if not most thinkers in the liberal tradition believed. It's an idea intrinsic to "classical liberalism"--the very thinkers that inspire Dan Klein but that he misinterprets, in my opinion.

Dan Mahoney speaks eloquently about how any concept of liberty "appropriate for free men and women in the modern world inescapably contains an appeal to … the good life and the good society." I guess where we disagree is about how this appeal to the good life and the good society should be *actualized*--and how much government should be involved in it. Dan Klein implies

by his words that government should be minimally involved; he wants to convince liberals that "liberty" means "others not messing with one's stuff *[and] particularly the government not messing with your stuff* [my emphasis.]"

Personally, I believe that the government of the richest and most powerful nation on earth needs to intervene more than it is doing today to "[a] allow everyone ample space for personal and economic freedom." An "appeal" without action is just empty words. This is also what early nineteenth century liberals said. Let's not play "word games," they said. What is "personal freedom" for people trapped in poverty? (For more examples, see my book.)

When income inequality has risen to obscene levels in the United States and it has been proven that a rising tide does not lift all boats, it is a dangerous error to dwell on the need to protect people's stuff and keeping the government out of the economy. Moreover, speaking incessantly about the "right to property" and protecting one's "stuff" encourages the notion that liberalism is a hoax and cover for capitalist exploitation. It contributes to the rising skepticism about the very viability of liberal democracy.

Time Magazine recently reported some profoundly disturbing statistics, which I cite directly here. According to a report by the Rand Corporation, $50 trillion has lately been transferred from the bottom 90% of the population to the top 1%. According to the conservative think tank American Compass, in 1985, the median male worker needed 30 weeks of income to pay for housing, healthcare, transportation, and education for his family. By 2018, that had increased to 53 weeks (more weeks than in an actual year). Two-income families are now working twice the hours to maintain a shrinking share of the pie, while struggling to pay housing, healthcare, education, childcare, and transportations costs that have grown at two to three times the rate of inflation. 40 percent of American households do not have $400 saved for emergency expenses. Half of Americans over age 55 have no retirement savings. 28 million Americans have no health insurance, and many Americans can't afford the deductibles or copays to use the insurance they have. Is this a "good society"? Do such Americans enjoy "the good life"; do they have adequate opportunity to engage in "moral self-development"? Can the liberal democracy we all believe in survive under such conditions?

I believe that it would be a great shame if any person calling themselves "liberal" adopted such a narrow and materialistic definition of liberty. In today's climate particularly, we need to draw on other resources within the liberal tradition to articulate and defend a more generous articulation.

We must not forget or downplay what was most essential to the thought of the founders of liberalism--their belief and hope that the world should be a better place for everyone and that liberals should work towards that goal. If policies weren't working, as the economy evolved, then they should be changed. Nineteenth century liberals believed that society should, if managed correctly, evolve toward a more egalitarian and "good" society. They were cognizant of capitalism's excesses and cruelties. And most liberals have always believed that the flaws in markets and capitalism could be corrected though legislation. What we need today is more (intelligent and pointed) regulation and transfers of private wealth to the poor and suffering.

Many nineteenth century liberals argued that precisely because human beings have souls and are moral beings with a higher purpose, they need the conditions to understand and pursue this higher purpose. They cannot if they are sunk in poverty. Yes, they would agree, as I do, that breaking into someone's house to steal their property is wrong; but when a democratically elected assembly intervenes to redistribute wealth, I would not call that

theft. And to call it "coercion" is to use a derogatory term for something that is good and enables liberty.

"Governmentalization" is also a derogatory term. I can't imagine anyone who is for "governmentalization". A robust social safety net, yes, but "governmentalization" no. The word sounds expressly designed to scare people. It is akin to the word "socialism" today bandied about by certain conservatives to mislead people.

Likewise, Dan Mahoney's evocation of "collectivism" and "totalitarianism" is, in my opinion, far off the mark. References to Soviet collectivization of agriculture and Mao's murderous Great Leap Forward are truly over-the-top. I know of no "friends of liberty" who identify political life as "first and foremost an invitation to collectivism and to the evisceration of individual rights." I don't believe there is any threat of totalitarianism today. What many call "neoliberalism" is more of a threat than "collectivism" and "governmentalization."

Germaine de Staël

Let me end with the inspiring words of Madame de Staël, a founder of liberalism if there ever was one. In her *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (1818), one of the first histories of the French Revolution, rightly regarded as a liberal manifesto, she wrote:

> Liberty!... all that we love, all that we honor is included in it. Only liberty can move the soul into rapport with the social order… The assemblies of men would be nothing but associations for commerce or agriculture if the life of patriotism did not excite individuals to sacrifice themselves for their fellows.

Why do liberals no longer utter such beautiful words?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel B. Klein is professor of economics and JIN Chair at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, where he leads a program in Adam Smith. He is chief editor of *Econ Journal Watch* and author of *Knowledge and Coordination: A Liberal Interpretation*.

Helena Rosenblatt is professor of history and French at the CUNY Grad Center, as well as a recent recipient of a prestigious Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. She teaches in the PhD Programs in History, French, and Politicial Science, and the MA Program in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center. She is also a faculty member of the M.A. Program in Biography and Memoir.

Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption University and is a Senior Writer at *Law & Liberty*. His latest books are *The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker* (St. Augustine's Press, 2014) and *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity* (Encounter Books, 2018). He is working on a book called *The Statesman as Thinker: Ten Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation*, which is under contract with Encounter Books.