



Political Philosophy

## The Concept of 'Metaphysical Liberalism': On the Philosophical Source of 'Liberal Democracy'

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**ABSTRACT:** There have been many discussions about 'Liberalism' in modern political philosophy. In this paper, I want to discuss the liberal principles of political philosophy *on the metaphysical level*. This includes the liberal mind, the liberal consciousness, and the liberal ethos, all of which are presupposed in our liberal behaviors, and in turn serve as fundamental principles in any multicultural society. I want to emphasize the liberal tendencies of self-criticism and of the critical way of thinking in European traditional metaphysics, such as Plato's dialectics or Kant's philosophy of criticism. The latter is also the logic of dialogue which produces an endless questioning of possible universal truths. I group these characteristics under the label 'Metaphysical Liberalism' and assess them from three standpoints: (1) critical agnosticism; (2) methodological falsificationism; and (3) pluralistic universalism. These three points enable us to remain self-conscious of the limitation of any kind of special theory or thought in order to prevent the emergence of any dogmatic belief-system. Such liberal attitudes that allow the realization of individual ideas and thoughts without any political coercion in turn sustain a democratic federalism that creates space for the expression of public opinion even while protecting such space. Such a situation, however, is possible only by educating ourselves in this metaphysical method.

### I. Liberalism, as Principle of 'open society'

Nowadays, we are forced to live in a world where there are no barriers, in which the global exchange of information and communications between people have already become a daily occurrence. On the other hand, we live in a multicultural society, where a lot of people ; who belong to different cultures, speak different languages and have different religions ; are living in *one* country or in *one* region. In these circumstances, it is not easy to answer the following question, even if we live in an idyllic society: "what are the universal standards of social justice which can regulate our different interests and values ? "

However in this context, we are able to illustrate at least the framework of a possible liberal "open society" and its source, against the logic of a 'closed society'.

Most of the arguments on Liberalism today are subject to actual human behavior, such as the standard of justice or equality of distribution. However, I would rather focus on the

philosophical source of our possible desire for liberal social condition, by looking into our mind, attitude and ethos, or by implementing a radical approach to explore the sphere of our self-consciousness or self-decision, instead of searching for the theoretical conditions of our social consensus. Originally, liberalism for 'open society' attempted to consider the dignity and the solidarity of individual by means of individually-based voluntary communications.

The individual's dignity lies in the supposition that every person can make any decision by himself, determining all his personal actions and thoughts. And this freedom of decision is based on the principle of self-control, which means our basic right that we are always ready to take responsibility for all our decisions and their consequences. Liberalism itself is, in this sense, never an arbitrary attitude of freedom, just as an expression often heard: "I can do anything, as long as it doesn't affect another person negatively".

Without referring to the saying of Sir Karl Popper, we can easily state that the basic condition which composes the open society, will be the one under which any kind of individual action, decision, and criticism against the society we belong to would be acceptable. That condition is also the one where mutual communication based on our free will may be highly appreciated, and solidarities among self-independent people can be established, without any restrictions by the present authorities.

Furthermore, we have to reject and check any demands which aim to integrate our mind by compulsion as a dogmatic force, because this mutual-communicative solidarity never demands for unity as such. In fact, the ideal type of liberal condition is to confront various obstacles and hinder its realization. On the level of individual consciousness, this ideal type is interfered with by a conservative personal tendency that derives from our weakness of mind, and that calls directly for permanent stability of mind, instead of instability. For example, there is a self-defensive attitude, in which one tries to maintain his own identity by leaving himself to a society, organization, or a group he belongs to, and by submitting to its authority. He is always obedient to the rules of the organization and tries to fill his social-ego there.

As a result, he becomes quite ignorant of the world view that someone out of his society has, or however well he knows it, he can only understand it just as if he saw a phenomenon in an external world out of the earth. This image is so strong that he can no longer communicate with other people living outside his society. They are now only something indifferent to him. He seems to make decisions rationally, but the truth is that he only wants to seek his own refuge from the fear of uneasiness in his mind.

Another strict tendency is that of an energetic scientist who is escalating his naïve desire to obtain more reliable knowledge. He holds *one single theory or doctrine* so strongly that he tries to explain and base all human actions with it, without noticing his own dogmatic attitude. He only devotes himself to forced persuasion so that all people might agree with his own theory.

Both these tendencies are identical on the point that the actor excludes all kinds of self-criticism, has no preparation for taking responsibility for the effect caused by himself, and that he ignores the being of others who are living in a different circumstance. There is no doubt we can often find these attitudes in our daily life. However, for the liberalists who aim to realize 'the open society' and have no suspicion of communicating with strangers, both closed attitudes are very difficult to accept without consideration. The problem is that these closed attitudes become so ordinary that a quasi-social environment is soon built up, in which no one suspects its own distorted closeness. There, original opinions of individuals are strongly oppressed, any estimation of their abilities depends on the degrees of their contribution toward the organization, or of their loyalty to its common rules. In a

group, forced to keep fixed rules and attitudes, if someone tries to act individually in accordance with the ideal type of liberalism, he/she needs a great deal of courage and energy, just as if betting all his/her money.

## **II. The Standpoint of ‘Metaphysical Liberalism’**

If we make the realization of liberal attitude, which demands a possible open society, or if we try to refuse the condition to be a faithful member of a closed society, we need by all means a methodological framework. My opinion differs from that of many other political philosophers. Namely I think this framework of liberalism is provided by the most traditional European philosophy, i.e. metaphysics. The characteristics of metaphysics, which I mention here, never lies in an unreal system composed of the abstract conceptions, which are applied unreasonably to the real world.

On the contrary, metaphysics has developed by the methodology of ‘Logos’, which is the logic of critical dialogue between two individuals, derived from endless questioning and answering. As in case of Plato’s way of dialectic, or Descartes’ method of doubt, this dialogue to seek only one truth will not accomplished so easily, because it is quite impossible to reach the final point of thinking where we can see the substance of the single absolute truth. This critical way of metaphysics values the seek for the only truth as such, instead of the possession of the absolute truth. This is also tradition of philosophical way of criticism, revealed especially by the radical thoughts of Socrates, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, etc. On the other hand, another philosophical tradition survived, I know of course, in the thoughts of Aristotle, Thomas, Hobbes, Hegel and other German Idealists, or modern positivists, that aim to complete the system of ideas.

Karl Popper took the latter as the enemy of open society, and Hannah Arendt analyzed it as the origin of totalitarianism, however, I would like to defend the former sense of metaphysics, that is the critical way of thinking, for this suggests the significance of the individual freedom, which also makes the possibility of creating our new personalities and ideas. This critical principle of metaphysics holds consistently ‘anti-systematic attitude’, that rejects all kinds of tendency to fix our mind in one-sided point of view. As far as an individual is aware of this freedom and assimilate its critical attitude, he/she will not be able to adapt himself to the wrong belief system of political or religious ideology. Equally, it will not happen that he/she would be content with blind obedience to the present authority or social norms.

I sum up these liberal conditions here and call them ‘metaphysical liberalism’. This liberalism enables us to be the basic condition of John Rawls’ conception of our ‘overlapping consensus’ between people from different cultures, but both standpoints are of course not identical. Nor is metaphysical liberalism one version of an idealized ‘comprehensive worldview’ which Rawls criticized. Metaphysical liberalism is no other thing than the layout of philosophical way of thinking or attitude that anyone may have and should have, so far as we respect the possibility of our own independent living without being controlled by any force of authorities. The layout will be drawn mainly as three basic standpoints:

(1) critical Agnosticism; (2) methodological Falsificationism; (3) pluralistic Universalism.

### **a. Critical Agnosticism**

If one criticizes the metaphysics as if it claims the comprehensive monism, which leads us to a fearful totalitarianism, he indicates the systematic philosophy of Thomism and Hegelism. All ideological belief-systems, that Popper regarded as a version of holism, such as Marxism, fascism, technocracism, religious fatalism, eschatology, etc., are objected by

our liberal and critical thinking. On the contrary, metaphysical liberalism supports the following principles: "Every kind of knowledge is not absolute and eventual."; " We can never grasp all meanings of our world, history, and human nature as such." Every theory and system of knowledge has its own limitation and the possibility of falsification in itself.

True liberalism requests people of self-critical and communicative attitudes to conceive the following: (1) we should clear our own limit of knowledge, theory, opinions, and systems. (2) we should be always ready for accepting any criticism. (3) we should recognize the existence of our 'outside world' or 'transcendence', which our worldview can never reach, and respect its value or originality by listening to them. Hence, the critical attitude of liberalism cannot help support the philosophical agnosticism as self-criticism or the critical dualism, instead of adopting the monistic unification of subject and object in our mind-reflection. The philosophers of self-criticism just as Kant, Max Weber, Wittgenstein, could keep this principle of agnosticism, by evaluating the limit of their own method or system of knowledge for themselves.

### **b. Methodological Falsificationism**

Regardless of the genre of science, all theories and methods which cannot accept any falsifications at all, are rejected by liberalism, as 'dogma' itself. Hegelism, Darwinism, modern positivism, structuralism, system-theory, cybernetics, or psychoanalysis of Freud school, are good examples containing the dogmatic attitude. Furthermore, liberals ought to deny all attempts to reduce any phenomena or facts in relation to a single principle or method, just as the transcendental phenomenology by Husserl.

For, behind the theory which aim to possess the perfect validity, there must be an endless trust and attachment to the perfection of the theory. Theoretical Verificationists are subject to exclude 'another' standpoint as a trivial exception, without utilizing it as an objection or an alternative, which may be a good means to reflect themselves and admit that they made a mistake or faced the limit of the theory. Thus, they no longer ask themselves whether their own theory is only one of the various choices or not.

This lack of self-critical attitude is, for the liberals, to be mostly avoided as the snobbish one found in our daily life. Practically, the attitude of falsificationism is much more valid than that of verificationism. For instance, when we submit a plan for business, we had better *not* solely complete the perfect plan based on verificationism and say: "We have to constantly take care for fear that we might make a mistake." *But*, we had better go on the imperfect plan with trial and error, and say: "We should consider how to deal best with mistakes". The latter is also an assurance of liberalism, under which the individual thoughts are always open to the possibility of creation.

### **c. Pluralistic Universalism**

However, the standpoint of critical agnosticism or, in other words, anti-holism does not admit the relativism of values at a time, in which you often say "Anything goes ". As long as the metaphysical way of thinking aims at the final truth, it is indispensable to bind different values and truths, making much effort to realize the comprehensive consensus between people. This is because the perfect relativism proposed by post-modernism, that every kind of standpoint is recognized and there is no struggle among them, is unreal both theoretically and practically. That is to say, unless the imperialism of thoughts, that forces upon the compulsory and dogmatic truth, would vanish, and we would not expect the co-existence of all standpoints. Even if there is no such idealistic situation, it rarely happens that in a common realm where we live together we cannot do without dispute about the justification of each different idea.

Here the metaphysical liberalism based on the critical way of thinking, does not give up holding the intention of aiming at the comprehensive truth, respecting the originality of individual thoughts and values at the same time, by comparing and examining their truthfulness. There, we must not give any advantage over some special viewpoints, but we have to prefer a tolerant attitude that we should listen to another one's truth and take account of it. Therefore we are demanded the truth built not by a pyramid-type of hierarchy system but by a flat type of networks or discussions, in which many different kinds of truths communicate with each other and seek the consensus points voluntarily. Then all standpoints and claims that contain no such tolerant attitude must be criticized as anti-liberal. Without this presupposition, the true multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism is impossible. This intention to the universal truth from recognition of various truths will be an indispensable condition to maintain our liberal living space.

### **III. Practical application of the Metaphysical Liberalism**

I have so far drawn the layout of the Metaphysical Liberalism. This concept can be also realized in all the situations of our daily life or society we are concerned with. It has been mainly described as an attitude which supports individualism against organized administration by an authority. In addition, it supports self-criticism against overestimation of a single theory or ideology, as well as an attitude which defends tolerance and sincerity of our own knowledge, against our desire for intellectual monopoly and domination. Thus, the Metaphysical Liberalism can be a economic principle, which protects a market society, permitting perfect free competition among us, because it is a standpoint that rejects every organized compulsion upon an individual's free actions. Unjust interference in a free-market by a government or big companies, ought to be mostly avoided for the sake of respecting an individual's voluntary actions. Every sanction to restrict these actions should be dealt with independently, that is by consensus between actors.

Hence, the Metaphysical Liberalism requests the abolition of all customs and every kind of censorship, which can distort the individual freedom of press and speech. It also claims to leave every border of the country open. It cannot admit every type of organized control to a group in a factory or office, nor accept the common-property labor system of communism, or authorized bureaucracism of labor. In these instances, an individual is unable to enjoy the opportunity to participate in his/her own creative activities, hobbies and pleasures, for these are all his/her belongings and no other can prohibit them intentionally, without any agreement. Therefore, in the liberal economic situation, the rights to free actions of ordinary consumers, individual producers and shop-keepers who have no power to control market must be first of all considered and protected.

This liberal attitude will be showed more clearly in our own political actions. Politically, all kinds of pressures upon an individual's action by an authorized power, should be mostly avoided, and politics built by public consensus must be respected and valid. It insists that the basic law should be established to preserve an individual's human rights from any plots, which aim to interfere in personal voluntary actions, just as in the participation of political engagements, political demonstrations, or publications of political magazines, etc. Liberalism appreciates democracy, as far as it includes the 'spiritual aristocracy', that means the approval of the difference of personal ability, natural talent and characteristics.

Liberalism also claims that the principle of pluralistic universalism should apply to societies of any level, from schools or club activities to political parties or parliaments, so that multicultural politics may be realized, by which people from different environments cooperate to live in peace together. This is equal to the principle of 'federal republicanism' on the level of governmental politics, which is a system of solidarity that each free and independent state is connected with each other, as in the European Union, providing a realm for communication, instead of building up an empire of ideological community based

on a kind of nationalism. Whereas, in the sphere of inner-politics, party-dominated governments should be firstly avoided, as they restrict on individual's freedom of opinion and opportunity to take part in political affairs.

As long as the state itself is also an organized group, I believe, it may become a menace to individual freedom, which ignores the originality of each member's ideas and thoughts. That leads to a 'closed society', and in fact, it is already realized in many big companies and some bureaucratic governments in the world. So, as to escape from this political totalitarianism, tolerance has to dominate every person's opinion and idea, so that they will be accepted into a group without any discriminations, and therefore, everyone will be able to actualize them within his/her own will and action. However, for this actualization, each member has to have the self-critical attitude in mind, which makes the organized interfere in the liberality of individuals impossible.

To prevent the latter interfering, systematically speaking, it is valid to establish an impartial observance group in every organization, and to hold a deliberative organ there, in which all members can participate directly and make divided open discussions to solve inner problems caused in each section. But taking root in the tolerant and self-critical attitude of liberalism, is not solely possible by systematic improvement. I say again, this is only possible by the Kant's words: 'Revolution of thinking', on the level of an individual's consciousness, which means 'Paideia' of philosophy, namely the education of liberal way of thinking in metaphysics. This philosophical education is not an ideal, but the indispensable task we are confronting with today. So I would like to emphasize that the completion of this task will make one of the universal frameworks to realize an impartial society.