

Preface

Over the last forty years, a deeply disturbing and pernicious understanding of liberty has become popular among many Americans, one that has reshaped how many Americans understand our government and its politics and our place in the world. At the core of this understanding is the contention that our liberty primarily means protection of our individual rights and properties, which are themselves thought to be self-evident and natural and to exist prior to government. Through the frame of this understanding, those who hold this view protest the size of our government and the interference of government in our lives, and they dismiss the moral claims that they and their government have duties to others, including the less fortunate both within and beyond the confines of their own United States.

This understanding of liberty is not really new at all, but it is one that has gained in popularity and achieved a kind of mythological status and religious dogma among its adherents in the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, though not all those who espouse this view have thought deeply about its history, its philosophical foundations, or its moral consequences. The view of liberty I am talking about has come to dominate the politics of the Right and libertarians in the post-Vietnam period, as America has found itself in a more complex world in which globalization and economic changes have undermined the certainty of America's dominance and moral leadership and challenged some of the basic assumptions by which Americans frame their self-understanding. I call the view of liberty that they espouse the

“liberty-first” position, since it puts the weight on liberty before all other competing human values.

This book critiques that view of liberty and offers a progressive alternative. Liberty, defined as “life, liberty, and property” or “the pursuit of happiness” in the American idiom, is a concept that is key to both modernity and American identity. But what liberty means and who gets to define it are questions that are up for grabs in a liberal state.

This book argues that the understanding of liberty that currently dominates is wrong in many ways: in its oversimplification of liberty’s history, in its failure to understand liberty’s philosophical foundations, and ultimately, in its impoverished view of human beings and the moral responsibilities they have as members of the species and as members of society. What matters most, and what inspired me to write this book, are the destructive consequences this one-sided view of liberty has for our nation, the environment and planet, our moral self-worth, our children, and what religious or spiritually oriented people would call our souls.

I will not try to rehearse my argument in detail here; it is spelled out carefully in the many pages that follow. But the thrust of my argument is that the other human values that have been expunged from the concept of liberty must be taken into account when we consider what it means to live in liberal societies. These other values include but are not limited to responsibility, debt, sacrifice, compassion, and care, and are in my view part and parcel of what liberty was always intended to mean, even if it was not always so understood. What is put forward here amounts to a progressive or liberal account of liberty that sacrifices neither liberty nor compassion in the quest to understand our duties and responsibilities as human beings and as modern selves.

In offering a progressive theory of liberty, I am also trying to counter what seems to have been the liberal abandonment of the liberty concept to those on the political Right and to libertarians. Since the nineteen seventies, there has been an increasingly strong inclination in conservative politics to grab hold of and monopolize the concept of liberty and use that concept as a banner or flag under which to marshal many other arguments about the nature of rights and government, the correct approach to

taxes and the economy, health care, war, marriage, abortion, and a host of other topics. Liberty and protection of rights have often been the master concepts, if you will, under which the positions of the Right and libertarians were justified. In giving away the liberty concept and not fighting back, liberals have weakened their own position because they seemingly lost an anchor for their own positions in the assumptions about liberty in the American founding and in the rich modern tradition of liberty itself. Instead, they have allowed the Right to back them into a corner with the label “socialist” and to argue that the Right is the true inheritor of the American founders Jefferson, Adams, Washington, and Monroe, as well as the great English political philosopher John Locke, who likely inspired Jefferson and the other founders.

This view of liberty and history, however, is distorted, and progressives should not acquiesce to the Right’s monopoly on the concept of liberty. What follows, therefore, is both a sustained attack on the understanding of liberty among both the Right and libertarians and an articulation of an alternative progressive understanding of liberty. What emerges in the liberal view of liberty put forward here is a view of the human being who is an individual whose labor is not entirely his or her own. Instead, as individuals we stand on the shoulders of those who preceded us and thus have obligations and debts to them, our ancestors, and to our contemporaries, who are their heirs. From that debt arises obligations to others and to the societies we are born to and create. This is the centerpiece and fulcrum for the rethinking of key concepts in the liberty tradition: the idea of what liberty means and implies as well as its central concept of property. From here we reason to an alternative vision of government that sees its role as more than simply protecting our rights and property and that has responsibilities beyond its own constituents to the species as a whole.

In developing this progressive position, I go back to and engage with the classic expositors of liberty and rights in the modern period, as well as those philosophers who arguably created the very language that our American founders Jefferson, Adams, James Wilson, and others inherited in thinking about liberty. My interlocutor is the philosophical thinking that emerged in a different time and place. It was a century that began in

the English-speaking world with an absolute monarch in place but ended with a revolution that redefined the relationship of government and the people. In between, this same century produced civil war and regicide, followed by a failed commonwealth and then a restored monarchy. It was the same century that early on produced the thinking of Thomas Hobbes and at the end provided fertile ground for the thinking of John Locke.

The century I am speaking about is the seventeenth century, one that for Americans seems impossibly far away, both in time and in relevance, though it was the one that produced the language and historical frame of reference by which America's founders came to understand themselves. There is a deep irony in all this. Americans today think of themselves through the defining events of the American Revolution and our own Civil War. But for the definition of liberty among the American founders, the key defining references were in fact the historical events and philosophical reflections produced in the seventeenth century. Americans learn little about these events in understanding themselves, but these events were key in defining the thinking that emerged from the period and ultimately that entered into America's founding.

Among the key English thinkers in this century were English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who witnessed the English Civil War, and John Locke, whose work justified and explained the Revolution of 1688, which ousted King James II of England, led to the Bill of Rights of 1689, and marked the end of absolute rule of the monarch in England. The great English philosophers who witnessed these events and reflected on them were influenced as well by continental philosophers Hugo Grotius in the Netherlands, who set the terms of the discussion about rights for the seventeenth century, and Samuel von Pufendorf in Germany, who synthesized the work of his Dutch and English predecessors, and whose work both Locke and Jefferson read.

The ideas of these thinkers transformed how moderns thought about liberty, government, and property, though these ideas also had their roots in classical Greek philosophy and the Renaissance. The idiom and language they developed for thinking about liberty, rights, and government still frames how we speak about these topics today. These ideas, moreover,

were at the core of the American Revolution and the conceptions of government that were being developed in the American founding. The American founders were engaged with the thinking and writing of these seventeenth-century political philosophers, and the American colonies not only lived through and witnessed the English Civil Wars and Revolution, but understood those events as part of their own history, for they saw themselves for the most part as British colonists until shortly before they declared their own independence. George Washington had a copy of Grotius's book in his library, as one example.¹ And Jefferson read Locke, Pufendorf, and Hume, among many others. The list could go on. These seventeenth-century English events were mythic events through which the American founders filtered their own experiences and came to their own conclusions about what America should be.

There are many ways that one can approach the rethinking of liberty that is at the heart of this book. My approach is only one possible way. There are others. I was and am troubled by the superficial platitudes that one often finds under the banner of liberty in the popular discourse that continues to dominate American political language. I am trying to chart a difficult course between the popular discussion of liberty and the deep and rich academic tradition in political philosophy. As an academic by training, I find the academic research in history and political philosophy to be important and insightful. And though I am fascinated by academic discussions and some of the complicated academic debates on critical philosophical and historical problems, I am also aware of how arcane those discussions can become to the average person, with the result that deep insights from both history and political philosophy often get lost in academic discourse and never find a way to touch more popular opinion.

My goal has been to chart a course between these extremes and to try to bring some of the rich academic insight into engagement with more popular discourses. Whether I succeeded in doing so my readers can themselves judge. This, then, has been my method: Where I have found fascinating and important discussions in the academic secondary literature, I have tried to allude to these in notes but not burden the reader with all the ins and outs of academic discussions. At the same

time, the discussions of liberty in popular political discussions often seem to gloss over and ignore incredibly important questions and perspectives in both history and political philosophy. This popular discourse at times is so devoid of any interesting insights that it has become sheer platitude and dogma. With such important questions about how we should run our lives, what obligations we have to one another, and what we should expect from our government, it seems incumbent upon us, as individuals, as a country, and simply as human beings, to reflect more deeply on these critical questions that may ultimately determine our fate as a nation and perhaps also as a species.

Like many writers and artists, I felt called to write this book. My journey to its creation began over ten years ago when personal circumstances led me to leave an academic career as a professor of religious studies at Stanford University and begin afresh working in a software company in Silicon Valley during the beginning of the Internet transformation. The two contexts were worlds apart, and moving from one to the other had a profound effect on me. Though I ultimately thrived in many ways in the high-tech Internet boom that has redefined all our lives, the nagging concerns with morality and justice led me to wonder whether business and the economy had to be the way they were. My own experiences in leading marketing and sales, and in helping to run the business of a public company, coupled with a much broader political debate going on in our society over the proper and respective roles of government and business, crystalized this question for me and ultimately set me off on a decade-long journey that culminated in two books and a number of essays.²

I believe and hope I have said something important in the chapters that follow. In putting forward a progressive view of liberty, I am going against the grain of contemporary trends in several ways. First, I am doing so by arguing that progressives do have an intelligible view of liberty that fits meaningfully into a legitimate understanding of modernity and of America's founding. Progressives don't have to be embarrassed in speaking about liberty anymore. Second, my writing attempts to chart a course between the banalities of popular discourse and the interesting but obscure minutiae and language that often define academic discourse.

Third, I believe that my way of putting together some of these discussions is unique, though I have leaned on and read hundreds of other philosophical and historical works on my way to my own perspective.³ I acknowledge a debt to others before me but hope and believe that I have added to and enriched what has been said before.

Whether what I say is unique or not, however, is not ultimately what is important for me. I was reminded in writing this book that even Thomas Jefferson thought he had said nothing new in writing the Declaration of Independence.⁴ And he was correct, for the ideas there contained nothing new that had not been said before a hundred times, as some of his most articulate interpreters and critics have said. But sometimes the same ideas have to be said multiple times for their meaning to be heard. I think of books and literature as being a lot like music in this regard, in the sense that multiple different approaches to the same theme can be interesting, illuminating, and moving, even if the ideas are not totally unique. There is no single musical rendition or work of art that exhausts the truth. Many artists and musicians contribute to our insight. So too with knowledge. It is my hope that this book says something useful to those who are concerned about the dominant language of liberty and the way our nation has taken a stance on what are our responsibilities toward our own citizens and human beings in general.