

*Some Thoughts on Liberalism**

The first principle of liberalism is that human beings are and ought to be free; that they all have a right to freedom; and that the proper business of government is to secure their right and to promote their freedom.

The first principle of democratic liberalism is that human beings are and ought to be equally free; that they all have a right to equal freedom; and that the proper business of government is to secure their right and to promote their equal freedom.

The history of liberalism, including democratic liberalism, has been determined, above all, by two fundamental changes: (1) an expanding understanding of *the right to freedom*—from including solely the right to political freedom and a share in government to including the right to all basic requirements of human security and development necessary to personal dignity and equal opportunity; and (2) an expanding understanding of *the scope of democracy*—from including only white, propertied, and male adults as citizens to including all adults as citizens regardless of race, property, and gender.

The democratic liberal principle of equal freedom, and so also equal respect, requires a system of rights, which protect the citizens' freedom to pursue their own lives as much as possible as they themselves see fit. Such rights can be fundamental or nonfundamental, matters of principle or matters of policy. A fundamental right that is a matter of principle (also called a "human right," or an "inalienable" right) is justified either because it is necessary out of the basic respect due to any human being or because it is constitutive of any political system that accords such basic respect. A nonfundamental right, on the other hand, is a matter of policy and is justified as a means to a worthwhile social goal.

But, then, a necessary condition of there being fundamental (human, or inalienable) rights is that there be a distinction between what the government (in a democracy, the majority) believes to be so and what really is so. Consequently, a necessary condition for citizens to *believe* that they have

fundamental rights is that they also believe that there is a difference between what the majority believes and what is really the case.

On the other hand, believing in any particular theory of fundamental rights, such as the theory of the American founders that there are inalienable rights because there are rights that are natural and God-given, is *not* a necessary condition of believing that one has fundamental rights. All that is necessary in order to believe that is to believe that the proposition, "Every person has fundamental rights that she or he cannot lose," is among the propositions that are somehow objectively true, whatever anyone may or may not believe, including whatever any government or majority may or may not believe.

(*After studying Paul Starr, *Freedom's Power*, and Michael Lynch, *True to Life*)

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