

Should the Liberal State Promote Certain Values?

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The following debate may be of interest as a discussion-starter, for example in a class or a seminar in political philosophy. It is framed as an interaction between a 'proponent' of a thesis and an 'opponent' to it. Their positions may be described as a paraliberal one and an ortholiberal one, respectively.

The present text is a mildly edited record of an actual e-mail exchange. Besides being formatted as the present article in 'Liberal Kommentar', it also appears in the 'Debate' section of the paraliberal website, at <https://www.argumentochfakta.se/paralib/ie/para-debate-promo/>.

The Opponent:

In your book, you introduce the concept of "society-founding values", and it seems to play an important role there. You also argue that the state should define and promote these values. This sounds strange to me; could you please explain what you mean here.

The Proponent:

Many liberals argue that a person's moral stance and his/her choice of values is a private matter, just like one's choice of religion, and that the state shall not intervene in such matters.

This is fine, but in my book I add a practical consideration according to which, in a secular state, there is a need for a consensus about a certain body of society-founding values in order for the state and the society to function well. This does not come by itself, and one can not trust that each citizen is capable of defining these values in isolation. Therefore I propose that the state has a right and a duty to define (after consensus) and to promote these society-founding values. It must not do this by coercion, but by 'soft power', and by encouraging a 'value culture' where values and moral issues are a topic of discussion, both in public media and in small 'value communities'. The state would be likely to fail if it just stood back from touching these issues – it needs to be proactive.

There may be several arguments for the importance of a 'value culture', both for the individual and for the state. In particular, a discussion about values is

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necessary for the evolution of values, so that a community can revise its values in a responsible way, and according to new insights or new circumstances.

The Opponent:

I appreciate your underlying concern here, but I respectfully disagree because of two stronger concerns of mine: On the one hand, I worry about who is the "one" who cannot be trusted to be capable? The state is not a neutral agent who can be trusted with "a right and duty to define (after consensus) and promote society-founding values." The state is not a human person who can think, feel, and/or act. It is a shell, an empty vessel, which carries the political will of the human actors who act in its name. The question is therefore who is acting in the name of the state in defining and promoting society-founding values?

On the other hand, the reference to "after consensus" is too vague to act as an effective safeguard because there is no safe way of determining whether consensus has been established in favor of which formulation of "society-founding values." In my experience, "consensus" is often claimed by people in support of their point of view. In any case, the scope of alleged consensus is unlikely to include marginalized persons or groups, (like the Same in Sweden).

You also speak of "not by coercion but by soft power..." Besides emphasizing that it is *never* the state as such which acts in any way, soft or hard, but people who act in the name of the state. Another problematic concept here is reference to "value communities", and I wonder who are these and by which criteria are they determined?

With all due respect, your suggestions indicate to me how "totalitarian" regimes begin and thrive.

The Proponent:

Many thanks for your thoughtful objections to my thesis. I have heard arguments similar to yours from other persons that I have talked to about these matters, and I have also grappled with these complicated issues myself. Given that our viewpoints are different, I feel that I should explain my point of view more clearly, rather than leaving it at this point. In particular, I do not want to leave you with the impression that I am on a slippery road towards authoritarianism.

I certainly agree with you about the danger of the "slippery slope" if a government wishes to manipulate the public opinion. However, there is also another danger that is just as ominous, namely, the possibility that destructive forces of various kinds (populistic, commercial, and others) shall change the public opinion significantly in its own selfish interests, and by the various means that are more and more becoming available.

A democratic government – a government by the people and for the people – must deal with both those dangers in a balanced way. In the case of the slippery slope, it can do so by organizing itself properly (e.g. by the separation of powers), and by safeguarding that public officials respect society-founding values. Widespread adherence to society-founding values among the citizens is the best safeguard against the second danger.

As a part of this argument, I must also disagree with you about the character of the state: I do think that a state *is in fact* able to act – any state, because otherwise it would merely be a forum for talking. Its actions are of course decided and executed by actual people, in cooperation usually, but the concept that a state is an actor seems like a very natural abstraction. If one accepts this abstraction, it is also natural to ask how 'it' determines what actions to take, for example according to a set of laws that 'it' subscribes to, or a set of values or goals that 'it' has adopted autonomously.

Just like individuals, the state also needs guidelines for how it shall exercise its ability to act. Serving the best interests of its citizens must be a major guideline. Finding a the balance between being too dominant or too lenient with respect to society-founding values among the citizens is another requirement. In my recent book, *Values, Liberalism, and Islam*, I propose policies whereby a government can implement such a balance.

One must also add that the state should act to protect itself whenever necessary, and in particular to take measures for defending itself against forces inside itself, or coming from other states, that have an interest in replacing its style of governance by another one. One such alternative is to adopt an imperial stance, where the 'strength' and the territorial expansion of the state are considered as paramount, and where its citizens at the current point in time are expendable means to achieve its 'destiny'.

In summary, a liberal and democratic state is not entirely robust; it is fragile to a certain extent, and it must worry about its own stability. (By the way, this temporal perspective is one of the reasons why a state should be considered as an agent in its own right, and not merely as a set of individuals at a particular moment). One of the conditions for having a liberal democracy that works, seems to be that its citizens are open-minded, prepared to listen to the arguments and the points of view of others, and to change their minds if they find that there are sufficient reasons for doing so. This condition is particularly important in situations where major changes occur, for example due to technological development, or due to migration, since such changing conditions may require people to revise their points of view: both their view of the world, and their own values.

This kind of openness is natural from a liberal point of view, but it is contradicted by authoritarian ideologies, such as the imperial point of view that I mentioned, as well as by integralist currents both in Christianity, in Islam, and in

other religions.

An adult person does not easily change his or her mindset in this respect, neither by the influence of others, nor by his/her own insights. For a liberal state it is therefore important that its next generation – children and adolescents – adopt this open mindset from the start. This training begins in the child's early years and in its family, but this is not sufficient: it is well known that older children obtain their attitudes and values from their peers, as much as or more than from their parents. Therefore, in a modern society, the school system is of great importance for making sure that liberal and democratic values persist there.

This is just one concrete case where the state has (arguably) a legitimate interest in influencing the values of a portion of its population. The promotion of solidarity is another example; the promotion of compromise and win-win attitudes over dominance-seeking behavior is one more.

These examples may be generalized to other aspects of individual autonomy, open-mindedness being just one aspect of the autonomous stance that is proposed by liberalism. (Solidarity is a less obvious case wrt liberalism). They can also be generalized to other age-groups, for example for how a liberal and democratic state relates to arriving immigrants that have grown up in an authoritarian society.

One chapter in my book contains a list of proposed society-founding values that are intended as one possible input to discussions in what I call 'value communities', including the ones that have been described here. I imagine a situation where discussions about values such as these can occur in many parts of the civil society, and that they can result in a document that qualifies as a consensus. This would not of course force everyone to accept all of them; everyone has a right to her/his own opinions, and to proceed according to them. But such a document could be useful in many ways, for example as a recommendation for schools.

I mentioned the concept of soft power, which is best exercised by convincing people through the use of good arguments. However, our society also defines some restrictions on free speech that are motivated by the public interest and by widely accepted values, such as restrictions against hate speech and against obscene materials. In the same vein, I could imagine restrictions against the appearance, in public fora or in social media, of preachers whose teachings are grossly incompatible with the agreed society-founding values.

At the same time, persons who disagree with those society-founding values should not be ostracized. They are valuable resources in the process where the society deliberates about its own values, as a way of sometimes abandoning some of them, or (more common) where it adjusts their interpretation a bit. This kind of value critique can best be done in academic environments and in other places where there is a guarantee that conflicting and contrasting opinions can meet and be compared. Environments where only one opinion can be heard are clearly not suitable for value critique. Contemporary social media may be one example of

such lopsided environments.

Finally, with respect to your comment about how totalitarian regimes begin and thrive. I quite agree that state agency that favors certain attitudes and values can be used, and is being used by such regimes, extensively in fact. But this can not be an argument against the use of some value-promoting actions by a liberal state, as long as its actions do not violate the liberal principles that the state is founded on. After all, the fact that some types of food are detrimental to your health is not a reason for not eating any food at all.