

entity encourages us not to try to use government activity to force through change, but rather to allow and enable it to occur, driven by those forces that bring it about naturally.

The heart of conservatism

Burke does not define conservatism, which has taken many forms in different historical periods. The core issue for conservatism is making change 'safe'. 'Good' change is 'growth' and 'natural' to a society, not imposed on it. It doesn't occur faster than people's ability to adjust to it. It doesn't destroy past institutions, but respects and builds on them. It is not brought about by people *trying* to create change.

The organic metaphor presents the origins and development of the structure of society as independent of human will. It evolves naturally, and reaches its own harmonies. This idea has been developed variously – that the development of society is guided by God, or the forces of history, or facts about biology and human psychology, or economic laws and the free market. However the idea is interpreted, the claim is always that going against these rules that govern the natural development of society will lead to social instability. The role of government is to uphold rules of conduct and protect the organic process of change from interference, not large-scale reform.

Freeden notes that these core ideas are *often* complemented by the following:

1. We cannot rely on rationality. It is arrogant, overly critical of tradition and authority, and often supports abstract, not practical, knowledge. The historical development of societies is always specific and particular; so we cannot discover historical 'laws' and predict what will happen in the future. Tradition embodies more wisdom than reason.
2. The order and stability of the community, the inherited traditions, are most important; individual self-development must always take place within this framework.
3. Human beings are not perfectible. To think otherwise is false pride, and flies in the face of history. There is not enough evidence to think that we can trust individual rationality (Mill) or that human beings only act as they do because they are 'alienated' from their nature that would be expressed by equality in community (Marx).
4. Power should be accountable, but the purpose of this is a harmonious political order, not the protection of individuals' freedom.
5. Liberty should be understood in terms of inherited liberties – the rights and duties developed within any particular society over time.

Objections

Does the state have an overarching, continuous identity, as the organic metaphor suggests? We can object that, in fact, at different times within a society there have been different traditions, cultures, or interpretations of political ideas. Moreover, some understandings of society and its history have presented a false or biased image. The conservative interpretation of organic growth itself may be an illusion.

Second, other political theories are not abstract and speculative, as conservatism suggests. They are more critical of present society and imagining alternative futures, but they are still focused on making a practical difference.

Third, the image of organic growth will not help us solve social conflicts. If both sides of a conflict appeal to tradition, for instance, then tradition won't solve the conflict. However, conservatives can argue that to attempt to solve the conflict by deliberating imposing a situation, rather than letting the forces that develop the social order naturally do their work, will only result in a worse situation. Understanding the state as an organic

colour and discriminating effect.’ (Para. 10) We would not praise a prisoner for achieving liberty by escaping prison. What matter is how liberty is achieved, and what kind of liberty it is. Circumstances are everything.

Liberty, to be good, needs to be combined with other good things, such as government, the army, tax revenue, morality, religion, property rights, peace, order and civility. For this, changes in society that lead to gains in liberty need to be *gradual* and a *natural development* of that society. The politics of a society depend on its values, customs, and therefore also on its *history*.

English liberty evolved from the Norman conquest in 1066, with its system of law and powerful government. The aristocracy realized that they could not achieve liberty (from the monarch) unless they involved popular support. This led to the Magna Carta in 1215. The balance between strong government and the force of liberty led to gradual, positive results. English liberties and rights are an inheritance, which in turn are passed on to the next generation. The French revolution, however, did not combine liberty with other values. The new constitution did not restrain the liberty of the people. The resulting government was weak, and this was made worse by the attempt to achieve economic equality, which led to both instability and unhappiness. To avoid the complete disintegration of social order, the revolution moved towards a tyranny and then to Napoleon’s monarchical rule.

The revolution failed, first, because it attempted change which is neither gradual nor natural to a society. Burke compares the state to a living plant and to a member of the family. Change in the state, when it is good, is like the growth of a plant or inheritance between generations of a family. It respects the past, and the authority, law, religion and customs that are traditions in society. Traditions embody accumulated wisdom, solutions to the puzzle of how to live well in society.

The second reason the revolution failed was because it tried to use a few, supposedly abstract and universal principles to understand and change society. Burke argues that we cannot form clear or meaningful ideas of abstract political concepts. At best, we will have ideas based on past experiences which we have associated to them. Purely speculative thought about politics is both pointless and dangerous. Pointless because it can reach no firm conclusions, and dangerous because communities are based on particular associations and interpretations of these terms, so to try to get people to respond to the words in an alien way threatens the cohesion of the community. Politics and government must proceed not by appeals to abstract values (such as ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’, the motto of the French revolution), but through gradual reform that makes sense to the society, with its particular values and traditions.

In summary, Burke has an organic conception of society and its evolution over time. Change should be gradual and ‘natural’ to that society. Second, interpretations of political concepts, and so our rights and our liberties, are specific to a society, not universal. Third, tradition should be respected, and with it authority, law and religion, as embodying the wisdom of previous generations, which we then pass on to future generations. A fourth element, which we have not explicitly commented on, is Burke’s view that human beings are naturally unequal, a view embodied in many traditions.

member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.' (*On Liberty*, p. 68) This interprets liberty as a freedom from constraint that individuals can enjoy. Mill then connects the nature and value of liberty to the importance of personal attributes and differences, saying 'the only freedom that deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way'. (p. 72)

Mill also argues that liberty is necessary for progress in discovering truth and better ways of living. In this way, liberty contributes to individual and social utility. Mill's idea of utility is utility 'in the largest sense', appealing to the interests we have as human beings who can progress and develop as individuals. (p. 70) So, Freedman argues, Mill places *liberty*, *individualism*, and *progress* at the heart of his classical liberalism.

Around these three concepts, Mill places concepts which decontest them further. He emphasises both the *rational* and the *social* nature of human beings. 'Rationality' has meant many things to many thinkers: rightness (Plato, Kant), practical wisdom (Aristotle), obedience to the law of God (Aquinas), means-end decision-making (Hume), and autonomy (Kant again). Mill connects it to discerning and pursuing happiness and virtue, an essential part of self-development and human progress. Both rationality and sociability connect our personal happiness to social utility.

The tension between individualism and social utility leads to a concern with *state power*, where Mill's conception of the state as a neutral umpire emerges. Mill wants to prevent the state from interfering in people's lives. Individuals need to be free to discover how best to live; having other people's ideas imposed on one's life inhibits creativity and individuality. So Mill presents a number of arguments for tolerance that suggest that imposing one's conception of the good life on other people is wrong.

Someone's 'conception of the good life' is their view of how to live. If a society adopted some particular conception, then its laws would reflect and promote the way of life of that conception. For example, in a theocracy, laws are passed on the basis of being in accordance with the will and commands of God, as a particular religion represents these (as in Islam's sharia law). Mill's arguments suggest that society must be 'neutral' between conceptions of the good life.

So while Mill advocates *democracy*, he remains concerned by the prospect of the 'tyranny of the majority', the majority of people imposing their view on the minority. In this case, the state ceases to be a neutral umpire and begins to express just one point of view – that of the majority. So he advocates limiting the laws a democracy is allowed to pass by his 'one simple principle' that will protect individual liberty.

CONSERVATISM: THE STATE AS AN ORGANIC ENTITY

The image of the state as something 'living' or 'organic' comes from Edmund Burke, so we begin our discussion of conservatism with him.

Burke

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke identifies a core principle of his political thought when considering whether the French revolution should be praised for achieving 'liberty'. Liberty can't be considered 'in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances... give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM: THE STATE AS NEUTRAL UMPIRE

Liberalism holds that human beings are ‘naturally’ free, so any restraint on their liberty needs to be justified. The state, with its powers to pass and enforce laws that limit liberty, can be justified on two grounds. First, it is beneficial. It prevents us from harming one another and enforces punishment if we do. It encourages co-operation and trust. Second, we can retain liberty in a state that is organized in the right way. In a democracy, we help to make the laws that we live by, and we express our consent to obeying them. If the democracy recognizes the right to individual liberty, it is restricted from passing laws that undermine liberty.

This argument supports the idea of the state as a neutral umpire. We will look at these ideas further in the theories of two classic liberals – John Locke and John Stuart Mill.

Locke

Locke (*Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. 2-5) argues that human beings are naturally equal and free. Equality means no one has the right to hold power over anyone else. Our natural liberty is not freedom to do whatever we want, as it falls under what Locke calls the Law of Nature. This says that no person may subordinate another, harm his life, health, liberty or possessions (except in self-defence), and furthermore, that we should help each other when this does not harm ourselves.

This Law of Nature comes from God, and it is because we are created by God that we have the duty to preserve and not to harm life. However, if we do not want to appeal to God, Locke also argues that the Law of Nature is discoverable by reason.

To discover the purpose of a state, Locke imagines what life would be like without a state, or in a ‘state of nature’. Without a state, if the population is not too large, people will live peacefully, each cultivating their own land. However, they may break the Law of Nature, and so it needs to be enforced. But we have no state, no police, and we are all equal, with no one having more authority than anyone else. But for exactly this reason, says Locke, we *all* have the right to punish those who break the Law of Nature. (*Second Treatise*, §12)

But is this enough? First, we may disagree on whether someone has broken the Law, causing tension. Second, when we punish, we are likely to be biased rather than objective, confusing punishment with revenge and being too severe. (*Second Treatise*, Ch. 9, §§ 124-7) Third, we will often lack the ability to administer the punishment – so there will be no incentive for people not to break it. If we punish someone who robs us of our crops, that person may band together with other thieves, and return for revenge. The only way that punishment becomes effective is if someone is so powerful that it is impossible, or at least pointless, to resist them. But this would be the end of the state of nature and the beginning of the state.

On this view, the primary benefit of living in a state is that there is a single, common interpretation of the law, that it is administered fairly, and that it is enforced. The state operates as a neutral umpire when we come into conflict with one another.

Mill

Mill develops and defends the idea of the state as a ‘neutral umpire’ by starting from ‘one simple principle’ which he then defends. This is the Harm, or Liberty, Principle, which says that ‘The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any

Human nature and political organisation: liberalism and conservatism

COMPETING VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE AND OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STATE

On ideology

Political ideologies, such as ‘liberalism’, ‘conservatism’, ‘Marxism’ and ‘anarchism’ can be studied and classified, mostly along the left-right spectrum, as providing plans of action for the creation of public political institutions, of seeking to justify various political arrangements, and as binding individuals to society. And for this reason, they are inevitably associated with power. Ideologies tend to be attached to social groups (but not necessarily classes). They provide a picture of society, one that simplifies the complexities of social reality, but this is necessary in order to provide guidance in making political decisions. Michael Freeden (*Ideologies and Political Theory*) argues that ideologies are different organizations of political concepts that give them particular meanings.

Political concepts have, through historical usage, become complex. Each has a number of components, e.g. ‘liberty’ includes ideas of absence of coercion, freedom from interference, opportunity, autonomy, rational choice, self-determination, and so on. Different societies have understood and used of the concept of liberty in these different ways. There isn’t one ‘right’ interpretation of the concept of liberty, or even of each component. Philosophers and politicians will emphasize those aspects of liberty they feel are important.

This is part of the idea of ‘essential contestability’. Political concepts are essentially (not accidentally) ones that people disagree over for two reasons. First, because political concepts (e.g. equality, liberty, democracy, justice) are evaluative concepts, and people disagree over values. Second, because of the component structure. Each component has different possible descriptions, and people also disagree over which components the concept ‘ought’ to have.

Ideologies, then, are groups of such concepts, organized and understood in such a way as to make the interpretation of each concept support the others. Different ideologies make different political concepts central, e.g. liberalism starts from liberty, socialism from community. Each ideology ‘decontests’ concepts, which provides them with more specific meanings, which allows them to be used in guiding political decisions. It is difficult to know what to do on the basis that liberty is absence of constraint; but if you understand the type of constraint that should be absent as physical coercion by others rather than, say, individual addictions, this provides more guidance on the type of policies to pursue.

Ideologies often use theories of human nature to decontest political concepts. The particular interpretation of liberty or rights appeals to aspects of what it is to be human – which of our faculties and what aspects of our situation are important. What these arguments are and how they work is best seen through the examples we turn to now.