In Defense of Liberal Limits and a Limited Liberalism

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There is much to praise in *Freedom from Fear*, including Kahan's compelling case that liberalism must be studied in relation to the concrete conditions which shaped liberal fears and hopes; his fair-minded exploration of liberalism's complex relationships with democracy, religion, imperialism, feminism, and economic transformation; and his recovery of important, oft-neglected figures. But, as Kahan reminds us, liberalism valorizes conflict. Accordingly, I dwell on my disagreement or doubts concerning Kahan's definition of liberalism, his depiction of liberalism's "third wave," and his suggestions for liberalism's response to populism.

Kahan defines liberalism as the "search for a society in which no one need be afraid" (1). Does this really distinguish liberalism from other political perspectives? Non-liberals may share the project of eradicating fears—and be even more ardently committed to it. What differentiates them from liberals? One answer is that liberals seek freedom-from-fear for everyone; non-liberals wish to leave some groups terrified. Kahan's account refutes this response, demonstrating that numerous liberals disregarded or defended sources of fear for women, workers, non-whites, Catholics, and/or Jews. Non-liberals might claim that they, too, wish to spare everyone from fear, but add that we simply need a final wave of terror— the expropriation of the expropriators or conversion of heretics—to reach a utopia from which fear is banished. If liberalism has any unifying distinctiveness, it seems more plausible to identify it in the means liberals embrace for protecting against fear. Non-liberals grant untrammeled power to some agent (sovereign, people, state, commune, soviet, etc.), on the assumption that it will not inflict fear (or inflict only justified fear). What seems characteristically liberal is the conviction that the best way to diminish fear is to constrain all agents through the erection of barriers to power; and the hope that people will master the anxiety, ambition, and impatience that drive them to override such limits.[1]

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[1]For accounts emphasizing liberalism's insistence on limits, see Michael Walzer, "Liberalism and the Art of Separation," *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 315–30;

For Kahan, liberalism typically rests on "three pillars"—political, economic, and moral/religious. Liberalism is strongest when it embraces all three, weakened when it neglects one or more. He identifies the political pillar with civil liberties, "fragmented, legally constrained forms of power," and "moderate democracy" (420) and the economic pillar with free markets. The moral pillar is less well-defined. As Kahan notes, liberals have embraced both utilitarianism and moral perfectionism (he under-emphasizes deontology, despite his inclusion of Kant, Rawls, and Nozick). Capaciousness about the content of the moral pillar is historically accurate, but weakens Kahan's criticism of recent liberals for eschewing moral perfectionism.

Kahan's charge that post-World War II liberalism "ignore[d], hollow [ed] out, or greatly narrow[ed]" the moral pillar, contributing "greatly to liberal weakness, undermining support for free political institutions as well as for free markets" (445), is flawed, for two broad reasons. First, it seems to assert claims about historical influence without offering a convincingly documented account of causal connections between liberalism's current crises, and developments in liberal theory decades earlier. This may partially stem from Kahan's elegant, but sometimes overly tidy structuring of liberalism's history in terms of "three waves," which leads him to lump inter-war and post-war liberals together with later, systematic ideal-theorists (Rawls and Nozick), and "neoliberals" (who, as Kahan shows, deviated silently but significantly from their "anti-totalitarian" predecessors).

Second, Kahan's assertion that for "Isaiah Berlin and many of his successors, liberalism had and ought to have no moral pillar, and liberals ought to hold no 'particular positive doctrines about how people are to conduct their lives or what personal choices they are to make'" (14) exaggerates post-war liberals' moral skepticism and negativity. In the larger passage from which Kahan quotes here,[2] Judith Shklar asserts not that liberals should eschew positive moral commitments, but that liberalism is defined not by any particular moral *theory*, but the project of erecting political defenses for individual freedom. This claim comports with Kahan's own picture of liberals as "pluralists … about how people ought to live their lives," united in championing freedom from fear (16). Shklar also stressed that liberalism enjoins an "ethic of character,"[3] even a "heroism" of "moral fortitude,"[4] as "the appropriate behavior" to engage in "if we want to promote political

Walzer, *The Struggle for a Decent Politics: On "Liberal" as an Adjective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023); Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[2]Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

[3]Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 232

[4]Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 234.

freedom."[5] Berlin did not counsel "terrified exhaustion" (360); indeed he lamented disillusionment, dullness, and excessive sobriety in post-WWII culture,[6] insisting that "men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible;" and from "intense preoccupation" with such ultimate values arise "the best moments … in the lives of individuals and peoples.[7] As I have argued elsewhere, Berlin's liberalism was defined by both horrified indignation at cruelty, conformist groveling, and callous dogmatism, and a quasi-Kantian insistence on human beings' claims to dignity (a liberal ideal under-stressed by Kahan) as choice-making agents.[8] While Berlin (and Raymond Aron) asserted the impossibility of demonstrating the superiority of a single culture or scale of values, they defended some values as universally valid and binding, based on the fundamental demands of human nature. Indeed, the "shock" and "widespread sense of horror which the excesses of totalitarianism have caused" revealed that "there does exist" an objective "scale of values": "Because these rules were flouted, we have been forced to become conscious of them."[9] Aron's endorsement of the "end of ideology" was more ambivalent and fleeting than Kahan allows; he subsequently wrote that "skepticism is perhaps for the addict [of ideologies] an indispensable phase of withdrawal," not a cure; "[t]en years ago, I thought it necessary to fight ideological fanaticism. Tomorrow it will perhaps be indifference which seems to me to be feared. The fanatic, animated by hate, seems to me terrifying. A self-satisfied mankind fills me with horror."[10] He accordingly celebrated "the revolt of conscience"[11] and hailed the Hungarian revolution of 1956 as representing "a return to the heroism of 1848."[12] Post-war liberals articulated a liberalism of not only fear or tolerance, but resistance. Subsequent decades of theoretical abstraction, academic cloistering, and hailing the "end of history" obscured, rather than fulfilling, these tendencies.

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[5]Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear," 33–34.

[6]Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64–66.

[7]Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" (1950), in *Liberty* ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), 93.

[8]Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, chapters 4, 5, 8.

[9]Isaiah Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 215.

[10]Aron, "Foreword" (trans. Lucile H. Brockway), *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: Norton, 1962), xv–xvi.

[11]Raymond Aron, "The Future of Secular Religions," in *The Dawn of Universal History*, ed. Yair Reiner, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 201.

[12]Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), xvii.

That liberalism must offer a utopian vision of human flourishing to be widely compelling is a psychological hypothesis, lacking conclusive proof. Some will need promises of progress or perfection to sustain faith in liberalism; fear of fear and hatred of oppression will be sufficient to inspire others. The latter may often be liberalism's trustiest defenders. Kahan is, however, crucially right that "[t]he populist rejection of liberalism is a moral rejection—liberals and liberalism are seen as morally corrupt" (439); and that a "liberalism that excludes perfectionism excludes them [the populists]" (440). But can reaffirmation of liberal perfectionism establish "a broad *moral legitimacy*" that includes populists (433, emphasis original)? A truly liberal perfectionism, extolling autonomy, moral equality, and tolerance, would alienate populists who embrace monistic conceptions of "the people," veneration of oppressive traditions, a brutal, misogynist masculinity, an ethos of angry impatience. Liberals want a world free from fear; populists want a world where others fear them. As Kahan asserts, liberalism cannot "concede to the illiberal the power to make others afraid" (443). But how, then, can liberals overcome populists' sense of alienation and contempt without abandoning liberalism's essence?

Freedom from Fear left me enlightened on hitherto unknown facets of liberalism's history, impressed by Kahan's wide learning, deep insights, and freedom from both fear and partisan rancor, and heartened by his reminders of liberalism's historical achievements and capacity for change. But I was not convinced by Kahan's claims concerning the sources of, or by his suggestions for a response to, liberalism's current crises. One can only hope that Kahan's account of liberalism's past riches will contribute to a reaffirmation of liberalism—before we must once again experience the enlightening horror that follows when liberalism falls.