

## Defending liberty – The core task a government must strive to accomplish

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Reviewed book: *Norms of Liberty. A Perfectionist Basis for Non-perfectionist Politics*

Author: Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl,

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For long have political regimes tried to shape society according to what they have deemed as the most appropriate values their citizens (or, rather, subjects, if we embrace the Tocqueville-ian distinction) should embrace. This meant that society was not necessarily directed towards the goals citizens had in mind, but rather towards those envisioned for them by the state – and we need not think of extreme examples as the “new man” communists and fascists alike had tried shaping, but simply of strikingly obvious ones, from practically every collectivist society (Rand, 1967, 202-220).

Rasmussen and den Uyl support more appropriate an alternative. Instead of endorsing a specific view and promoting a single set of virtues recognized as paramount by the government, it should simply promote freedom, of which every actor in society will do his/her very best to the advancement of his/her goals.

The key concept at the groundwork of the authors’ demonstration is the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (Greek, “happiness”, “well-being” – Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003; also translatable as “human flourishing” – the acceptation used by Rasmussen and Den Uyl). Following Aristotle’s argumentation, the authors agree human flourishing cannot be achieved merely by possession of goods or undertaking a specific action, but has to result from factors within one’s control and from his/her acts of will (p. 86). Consequently, for one to flourish, it is imperative that he/she is a free person.

Moreover, since “[o]ne must be active, not passive, to discover the goods and virtues of human flourishing as well as to achieve and implement them” (p. 87), it would be impossible for one’s real happiness to stem from someone else’s will imposed unto him/her. Though supporters of collectivism may claim that it would be possible for the state to devise the best conditions for one’s flourishing, actually this would be nothing more than a surrogate which only persons not accustomed to living in freedom would content with.

Conversely, the authors argue, one's life is best lead according to one's (and nobody else's) thought, "practical reason [being] the intelligent management of one's life so that all the necessary goods and virtues are coherently achieved, maintained and enjoyed in a manner that is appropriate for the individual human being" (p. 147). Therefore, one may choose utterly different priorities for his/her life than any other person, precisely because humans are different and perceive things in different manners. This, in turn, leads them to the establishment of different convictions.

Thus, a government willing to serve its constituents best should refrain itself from imposing a certain version of human flourishing upon them. Contrarily, acknowledging that everyone is his/her best "policy planner" for his/her future, the government must do its best (or, actually, to do is its least, by refraining itself from overextended action, in a *laissez-faire* manner), not to infringe one's liberties.

Moreover, the authors argue (pp. 158-160), human flourishing is agent-neutral, in the acceptance that it would be preposterous to "think of human flourishing as providing the basis for a unified race, with a single standard"; there is no single panacea, but simply versions of human flourishing. Basically, we could say that accepting the existence of diversity and securing liberty go hand-in-glove.

Accepting the aforementioned statements leads us to the conclusion that – once more contrary to what collectivists claim – the best for a liberal (or, at least, liberty-friendly) regime, is to promote non-perfectionist politics (p. 284), meaning assigning the first priority to freedom, while not submitting the citizens to any other line of conduct deemed as paramount.

Therefore, argue the authors, who obviously defend the liberal approach, governments ought not overextend themselves and overregulate every aspect of society, but should rather stick to a metanormative approach (pp. 286-288). This supposes simply devising the general rules, principles everybody should follow, establishing the legal and constitutional framework and not interfering anymore in the most mundane aspects of everyday's life, as champions of "big government" would like.

By not actually guiding the individual in any way, but by offering his/her the best possibly framework for him/her to use his/her creative potential to its fullest extent, it becomes possible for citizens to improve their lives materially, while simultaneously making them aware it is their decision and not anyone else's that matters most for their lives.

Therefore, we may conclude the authors have supported their case convincingly, successfully defending the reasons liberty constitutes a key virtue in any democracy's existence and, at the same time, pleading for a government as warrant of freedom, practically the best one for its constituents.

Though the argumentation line is obviously inspired from the liberal doctrine, the tone is definitely not biased, the text being appealing not only to staunch liberals, but practically to everyone who accepts liberty as a key-value in his/her life.

## REFERENCES

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