

Liberal Pluralism - The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice
William Galston

As you soar through billowing clouds of philosophy, five levels of abstraction above the earth without even an artificial horizon to guide you, it is comforting that Galston occasionally provides a peek through the mists to take a bearing from the world of reality. I was pleased to find that even as a non-philosopher I had a general notion of his whereabouts. I do wonder, however, if he couldn't have made his case using somewhat more accessible prose.

Galston's definition of liberalism is closer to the 18th century than today. It is the liberalism of toleration, based on "...two distinct principals, which I shall summarize under the headings of autonomy and diversity. By 'autonomy' I mean self-direction....By 'diversity' I mean, straightforwardly, legitimate differences among individuals and groups over such matters as the nature of the good life, sources of moral authority, reason vs. faith, and the like."

John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism is on the right track, but misguided because he assumes a "sumum bonum", the greatest good for the greatest number. Galston points out that the real world is more difficult. Your values are different than mine. If I have season tickets to the Redskins and you season tickets to the opera, the best of all worlds is not to swap 50:50. Our tastes are different.

There is room for a great deal of diversity in the public, or civic sphere of our lives. Different churches, different restaurants, different types of books. We should each be free to pursue our own interests with minimum interference. Government should intrude as little as possible. Let the market decide whether the town will support a Chinese restaurant, a drag strip or a go-go bar, with the caveat that government can be brought in when there are legitimate conflicts of interest... such as the noise and traffic a drag strip might generate.

Government, because it has the power of coercion, should confine its spheres of interest to the greatest extent possible. Galston lines up with the Supreme Court when it struck down an Oregon law prohibiting private schools and an Iowa law outlawing instruction in the German language. It should stay out of religion except in extreme cases, such as sects that practice human sacrifice, etc. He is more tolerant of religion generally than most contemporary "liberals." He as much as says that he doesn't buy into Christian beliefs but respects the fact that said beliefs form the cornerstone of lives that are examples of virtue and industry.

Education is perhaps the most interesting sphere of investigation because it involves the formation of a new person who belongs in degrees that vary with time to his parents (forgive the gender usage here), the state, and to himself. The state has an interest to see that parents do not deprive a child of education, but parents have an equal right to see that the state does not indoctrinate their children with beliefs (evolution, the virtue of homosexuality) with which the parents disagree. Galston firmly supports the right of parents to choose from a plurality of educational options, even within the public sphere.

The word "libertarian" does not appear in the book, likely because it is more of a political than a philosophical concept. While I doubt Galston would characterize himself as such, his philosophical reasoning appears to me to point in that direction. Looking for a maximum of "liberal pluralism" would appear to mean keeping the government out of as many spheres as possible, and encouraging government to act at the most local appropriate level. He out and says that a law that works in a homogeneous European country is likely not to work in America, with its abundance of minorities and diverse religious sects. The degree to which wealth is redistributed, medicine and socialized, religion is tolerated in the schools can and should vary among places and peoples.

Even democracy is only a value, not an absolute. It is a means to his proposed end, value pluralism, as a consensus rather than a revealed notion of the best type of arrangement that can be made for people to live in comity. Galston points out several aspects of our society (the jury system, Federal Reserve) that do not operate by strictly democratic principles.

I'll stop here. This is a lay interpretation of a book that really belongs to the philosophers. I wish one would review it. As a footnote, Galston worked in the Clinton White House from 1993 to 1995. That is to say, for the guy I voted for instead of for the lying hypocrite I came to wish Congress had the guts to throw out. "Liberal Pluralism" is consistent with the story Mr. Clinton was telling in 1992.