

Welcome back to our series on the values of liberalism.

In the last article, we covered the topics of tolerance and pluralism.

One of our conclusion there has been that there will always be disagreement in the open and free society. And these disagreements will not only be about small and minor details; but about the big things, the things that mean somethings, things that matter, such as morality, justice, politics, what the elements of a good life are, and of course spirituality and religion.

We also proposed that liberals do not only tolerate those differences, but embrace them. In this article, we will now talk about peace.

“Peace?” you might wonder. We just talked about differences and disagreement that does not sound very peaceful, right? But, hear me out. Before we dive in (and this is a disclaimer): what we have in mind here when we talk about peace is not the stuff that you see on television. This article will not be about wars and international affairs. Liberals also have much to say about this but for liberals “peace” as an idea is much broader. It is a fundamental value that applies to all elements of social life.

Let’s start with an interesting puzzle: When we think about “peace”, we probably think about a dove with an olive branch or some Utopian rosy picture of the world. “Peace Dove & Olive Branch” The world we imagine there does not only sound very romantic and maybe naive; but also not very dynamic.

Peace is often associated as an end goal, a state of affairs that we cannot improve where there is no conflict, no disagreement, only harmony. But that is not how liberal think about peace. They think that peace is a process of social change.

Wait?

What?

This does not seem to fit our ordinary conception of what we think of peace and harmony. But just remember what we talked about in the last article about tolerance: there will always be disagreement in the Open Society. Thinking about a society of full harmony makes no sense in the liberal framework. So, how can liberals claim that peace is one of their core values? This seems like a contradiction, right? Well, let us explain. Peace for liberals is based on the agency of the individual.

Remember, the article on “Individualism”? Liberals respect individual choices. And nobody should use force or coercion to interfere with those choices that do not harm anyone. Because interfering with those choices show fundamental disrespect for the agency of another human being. However, sometimes we disagree with certain choices. Like when your best friend chooses a movie you do not like for movie night. What do we do then? Should we just stand by? Of course not. Should we force our friend to return the movie and go with our choice instead? Of course, an argument is not a gun. It has no bullets. It is just an idea.

But in a free society, we do not influence people’s behavior by guns but through ideas. We persuade and convince instead of force and coerce. Because only this ensures that we respect each other’s agency and dignity. That we see each other as equals who are able to make choices for themselves. And of course, this can be hard. Because often we do not succeed in convincing others. They might

not see the point in our argument. And that can be frustrating, especially if the issue is deep to our heart.

Well, that does not sound good. This would not promote tolerance and the respect for other ways of life. But more importantly: It would not feel genuine. Changing one's mind is only meaningful if it comes about voluntarily by one's own reflection and through discussing and conversing with others. And that's why discourse and dialogue are at the very heart of democracy and liberalism. When speaking with each other becomes the core of political life. And not pushing each other around. Before reading this article, you might not have thought of liberalism as the ideology of peace. But now, you hopefully see that the principles of voluntariness, nonviolence, and persuasion which make up the liberal conception of "peace" are actually a product of our commitment to individual agency and dignity and our respect for the meaningful differences between people.

And that's what liberals try to do. In fact, this is what we try to do here. We know that this takes a lot of effort and communication. It sometimes takes time. But we also believe that voluntary change, to be persuaded by the better argument is the only sustainable way of social change. By the way, you might now understand why liberals LOVE to talk about their ideas. Why we LOVE to point to the great liberal thinkers and philosophers. It's our way of social change. If you want to change the world through ideas, you focus on developing those ideas. And you want others to hear and read about them. So forgive us for our focus on intellectual focus. We just cannot do differently. In the next article, we will see that voluntariness plays a vital role in liberal thinking.

It does not only ground our commitment to peace but also shape our understanding of responsibility. And this is what we will cover in the next article.