

Juxtaposed: Power Curator's statement from Athmeya Jayaram

Today's power struggles look nothing like the battles that these writers sought to influence. The players, tactics and spoils of modern politics would be unrecognizable to Plato or to Hobbes. But, the values that they promoted, which Isaiah Berlin called "The Great Goods" of social life, remain the language of power. Few rulers, whether dictators or democrats, would pursue any significant policy without employing (or exploiting) the authority of liberty or equality or security. Even Idi Amin, who gave himself the title 'Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea,' felt the need to justify his brutality in the name of law and order.

The great conflicts of our time are no exception. The 'War on Terror', as the United States quickly found out, is as much a war of ideas as of arms. As Ayman al-Zawahiri has said in justifying jihad, "we have to realize the nature of this conflict: Our enemies do not agree with or approve of our rights." Islamists like Zawahiri routinely pit God's law, self-rule and economic rights against what they see as the unholy trinity of liberalism, capitalism and inequality. Meanwhile, America's response to the terrorist threat has revealed our own conflicting values. Former President Bush urged us to trade some of our freedoms for greater security; to concentrate power in the presidency to ensure a firm hand; and to kill and die to spread democracy. Whether or not the leaders on both sides invoke these values sincerely, we cannot doubt the power of ideals to raise and inspire an army. That alone makes these debates more than merely academic.

So, if we must address these conflicting ideals, how can we do it? What should we value most – freedom or security, merit or equality? And who should decide – the few or the many, individuals or groups, man or God? One way of answering these questions is to elevate one of The Great Goods above the others and to demonstrate its superiority, or at least the way in which it secures our other values: Elite rule, Plato argues, will secure our other values; Democracy, James Madison counters, is the only way to ensure liberty; Security, Hobbes insists, is the precondition for all other goods. The answers in this collection, along with the ideas that inspired them and those that followed, form the core of the major traditions of political thought: liberalism, communism, elitism, absolutism, democracy, theocracy and anarchy. There are, of course, many other ways to categorize our political ideals, and many other writers to represent them, but these volumes are as good a place to start as any.

Another way of responding to these questions, however, is not to insist on any one answer for all times and all people; to seek instead to understand the choices that societies make as human choices and worthy of our respect; to maintain what Berlin called an "uneasy equilibrium" between these ideals:

Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand...the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find these values unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realization of which men could be fulfilled...Of course social or political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimized by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium... otherwise, we are bound to lose our way.

About Athmeya Jayaram

Athmeya Jayaram specializes in analytical approaches to ethics and political philosophy, focusing particularly on democratic theory and global justice. Jayaram is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. He also received an M.A. from Berkeley and a B.A. in philosophy from Amherst College. Prior to coming to Berkeley, Jayaram worked in international development, both in the U.S. and in India.