



Fear, liberalism of in Judith Shklar (1928–1992)

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Judith N. Shklar's concept of the "liberalism of fear" offers a distinctive outlook on liberal theory which stands in contrast to contemporary Rawlsian approaches. Shklar upholds the normative core of liberal theory, i.e. the normative primacy of individual liberty. However, rather than conceptualizing an ideal "*summum bonum*", Shklar argues for a "negative" approach; consequently, the liberalism of fear starts from a "*summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself." (29). For Shklar, the possibility of cruelty results from the necessary asymmetry of power which arises in any political setting, and the potential of abuse that it entails. Cruelty can only be restrained in a liberal state under the rule of law. In contrast to contemporary liberal theories, the liberalism of fear also emphasizes the interdependence of history and political theorizing. With its focus on political power and historical context, the liberalism of fear is often interpreted as a "realist" version of liberalism (Williams 2005, Sleat 2013). Fear, for Shklar, is an anthropological category, which results from the physical and emotional vulnerability of human beings. The focus on vulnerability stands in stark contrast to the typical liberal idealization of the cognitive capacities of political agents, from Locke's "rights claiming citizens" (26) to Rawls' ideally rational subjects in the original position, and reflects the negative approach.

While Shklar admits that the avoidance of the *summum malum* is only "a first principle" (30), a starting point for liberalism, she argues that her brand of liberalism with its focus on the protection of the individual from certain kinds of mistreatment preserves the original, emancipatory thrust of liberalism and thus can serve as starting point for remedying injustice.

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