

**ALEXANDRE LEFEBVRE. *LIBERALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE*, PRINCETON AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024.**

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In his book *Liberalism as a Way of Life*, Canadian philosopher Alexandre Lefebvre has the ambitious goal of turning philosophical reflection into practice, i.e., to make philosophy concrete, with a double aim. On the one hand, he wants to argue for the thesis that the main contemporary political-philosophical doctrine, political liberalism, is in fact something broader: a worldview, a proper system that applies to all dimensions of our lives and must be recognised and embraced as such. On the other hand, he offers a guide to make people aware of this and to help them behave as proper liberals, or “liberals all the way down”. For this reason, the author addresses this book as a “book on self-help” rather than a more classic philosophical work: he does not aim at proposing a new political-philosophical theory or argument, but a novel way to find “meaning and fulfilment” in mainstream culture rather than elsewhere (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 13-14).

This purpose is also reflected by the fact that, throughout his book, Lefebvre has two main points of reference: John Rawls and Pierre Hadot. The former is what Lefebvre self-describes as the “hero” of the book, the figure to which he owes more, being the father of contemporary political liberalism. It is thanks to Rawls that liberalism has spread so much and has consequently become part of our everyday life, even though this was far from Rawls’s plan and interest. The latter is the “sidekick” of the story, whose thought is crucial for the author not in the content itself, but in the approach he proposes. Indeed, Lefebvre takes up Hadot’s invitation to reclaim a practical role for philosophy in our daily lives, instead of confining it to being a mere intellectual exercise. In other words, it is Hadot’s merit to have rediscovered the idea of “philosophy as a way of life” that was proper of the ancient world, and that Lefebvre applies to the more restricted realm of liberalism.

To reach this goal, the book's structure is organised into two main parts. The first, more theoretical, aims at showing how liberalism cannot be confined solely to the realm of politics, because its values characterise not only our “public (political) culture”, but also our “background culture”. The second, more practical, has the goal of showing the way to a proper liberal life through three “spiritual exercises”. This division reflects the argument that Lefebvre builds to defend his thesis. First, he develops the theoretical apparatus, which is formed by a descriptive and a normative soul: the former consists of demonstrating that liberalism is already part of our everyday lives even if we are not always aware of it; the latter intends to defend the idea that liberalism is good as a way of life. Granted, the second part of the argument embodies the practical task of showing which techniques one can follow to embrace liberalism as a way of life.

To do that, the necessary starting point is a clarification of what liberalism is, to which Lefebvre dedicates the second chapter of the book. In such an enterprise, of course, one cannot let John Rawls out of consideration: Lefebvre grounds his entire proposal on the Rawlsian understanding of liberalism as the “moral, psychological, and social and political doctrine” that derives from a conception of society as a “fair system of cooperation” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 27). In turn, this has three main implications on the way to interpret such a society: that the main reason of existence of a certain social order is the “mutual benefit of all its members”; that there is no consensus in society on an end or idea of the good; that reciprocity is at the core of the social dimension of our lives (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 29). According to Lefebvre, liberalism, intended as the doctrine derived from such an idea of society, is not a mere “conception of the good”, as it is generally intended in academic philosophy, i.e., “an ordered family of final ends and aims which specifies a person’s conception of what is of value in human life, or alternatively, of what is regarded as a fully worthwhile life”, as Rawls himself describes it (Rawls, 2001, p. 19). He maintains that the problem with this idea is that it is “too cerebral”: Lefebvre’s worry is that this interpretation would overlook the non-cognitive dimension that he assigns to liberalism. In his mind, liberalism is characterised also by “perceptions, sentiments, and practices.” Thus, differently from a mere conception of the good, “[a] liberal way of life is an intellectual, emotional, and embodied package deal” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 32).

In this sense, in chapter 3, Lefebvre reminds the reader how important it is to understand not only the conditions under which a certain ideal, in this case liberalism, was born, but also the reasons why it was developed. He maintains that liberalism arose

from a certain suspicion of democracy by early liberals in the Eighteenth century, who recognised some flaws in newborn democracies and proposed liberalism as a response to them. In other words, liberalism was born as a way to protect and preserve happiness, well-being, and self-realisation from the danger of individualism, materialism and conformity that democracy is thought to inherently bring with itself. According to Lefebvre, this would be a sign of the holistic role that liberalism should play in our lives: it is true that it has been introduced firstly in the political arena, but it has had a wider scope since its conception. It is in this sense that Lefebvre argues for the fact that liberalism “is the source of who we are”. And here lies the main mistake of contemporary liberals: by focusing only on the political realm, they take every person to be liberal (or illiberal) in addition to something else, whereas Lefebvre maintains that we can be “liberals, period”. In other words, his point is to change the way in which we approach liberalism: contemporary (political) liberals see people as embracing certain comprehensive doctrines that guide their lives when it comes to the philosophical, moral, or religious sphere, in addition to liberalism that is strictly confined to the political arena; Lefebvre, instead, maintains that there are reasons to be liberal that go beyond politics.

This can be easily recognised if one looks at some concrete examples of everyday life, Lefebvre continues. Thus, in Chapter 5, he analyses six cases that he takes to be representative of how liberal values are spread throughout any dimension of our lives. In this way, by considering phenomena like swear words, the behaviour of modern tyrants, humour, pornography, TV series, and some practices common to our Western societies, he aims to show that “far from being confined to the public or political sphere, liberal values, ideals, sensibilities, and practices have taken over the background culture of contemporary liberal democratic societies” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 86), up to the point that liberalism is invisible to our eyes, due to its omnipresence.

Despite this, being truly liberal in this world is very difficult, Lefebvre argues in chapter 6. The problem is that we do not really live in actual liberal societies, but in what he calls “liberalism”. By mirroring Kierkegaard’s distinction between Christianity and Christendom, he defines liberalism as “a mixture of liberalism and other ideologies and systems, [...] liberalism is liberalism compromised in both senses of the word: a settlement between itself and other ideologies and a lowering of its standards” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 117). The crucial point is the obvious consideration that contemporary societies fail in being fair systems of cooperation and in respecting both the principle of fair equality and the difference principle. Hence, an important clarification: this book is not

aimed at redeeming liberalism, which is something that must be done, but requires a much harder and longer process than the scope of this book. Neither it is to convert people into being liberal. Rather, Lefebvre's goal is to offer a guide to those who are already liberals for being truly and fully liberal and still living well in liberaldom.

After laying the theoretical ground of his proposal, in the second part of the book Lefebvre focuses on the practical side of it, sketching three "spiritual exercises" to help adopt a liberal way of life. With this expression, that he borrows from Hadot, he refers to practices that have the aim of bringing about a comprehensive change in the life of individuals, and that must have four main features: they must be voluntary, personal, characterised by regular activities, and transformative. As we will see, Lefebvre's proposal is to borrow three typically Rawlsian concepts and reinterpret them as such spiritual exercises.

Before analysing them, however, it is necessary to clarify what the liberal way of life consists of concretely, and why someone should pursue this path: to this aim are dedicated chapters 8 and 9 of the book. In the former, the author identifies three main ideas at the core of a liberal way of life: reciprocity, freedom, and fairness. The first is the fundamental feature of liberalism in its political dimension and is the central value of liberal democracies: it consists of the citizens recognising each other their fair share of rights and goods, based on the idea that everyone matters and deserves respect, as well as a reasonable and fair treatment by other citizens and the institutions. It is easy to see how this can be expanded out of the sole political domain to a more general approach to life: when it comes to deliberating on something one should always be guided by the value of reciprocity. In this sense, a fundamental feature of liberalism as a way of life is that it does not give any specific answer to our questions, rather it equips us with a framework to guide reflection and deliberation. For, the liberal way of life allows those who embrace it to develop the two important virtues of freedom and fairness. On the one hand, freedom is intrinsic in liberalism as a "nonteleological ideology": this means that in liberal regimes every citizen has the right to pursue whatever ends they conceive of as "the good" in their own preferred way. What is more, not only liberalism "puts the right before the good", but for "liberals all the way down" freedom is itself the good (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 159-162). On the other hand, this strive for freedom must be reconciled with an attention to social welfare in order to create a truly good society, and this is precisely the role of fairness.

Nevertheless, when trying to apply the idea of liberalism in real-world conditions a problem emerges: a liberal way of life taken up individually is not sufficient to realise the conditions for a just society, i.e., to make society a fair system of cooperation. Rather, collective action is required by “real-world liberals” to make this change concrete. Moreover, given that we do not live in a truly liberal world but in liberaldom, if it is true that being reasonable (and, hence, liberal) is rational only within the context of an already just society, as Rawls himself noticed, why should someone be liberal in such conditions? To answer this question, it is fundamental to remember that the goal of the book is non-ideal: Lefebvre does not aim to propose an ideal theory of how to realise a liberal society, yet he wants to outline the path for liberals to live a good life in the actual non-ideal conditions of liberaldom. Therefore, he lists no less than 17 advantages, or “existential perks”, that a liberal way of life brings with itself when brought about consistently, despite living in liberaldom. In particular, such advantages can be divided into three groups, each of which is the result of one of the three “spiritual exercises” that lead to liberalism. As anticipated, Lefebvre borrows these exercises from Rawls, or, more precisely, he borrows three fundamental Rawlsian concepts and transforms them into spiritual exercises. These are: the original position thought experiment, the concept of reflective equilibrium, and the ideal of public reason.

The first spiritual exercise is that of the “original position”. In the Rawlsian framework, this thought experiment is fundamental to justify the adoption of the two principles of justice: the right to equal liberty, and the guarantee of fairness and reciprocity. However, Lefebvre argues that it is more than a mere thought experiment, as it satisfies all the criteria given by Hadot to be considered a proper spiritual exercise. As such, it must be put into practice every day, and this will make us better liberals. By imagining being under the “veil of ignorance” when making choices, we are forced to be impartial and autonomous, which are the first and second existential perks. And these, in turn, bring several other advantages, like diminishing one’s sense of pride and snobbery, fostering a light, ironic, fun, and playful character, bringing up stalwartness and self-restraint, lessening frustration and rage at society, as well as increasing one’s sense of gratitude (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 187-194).

The second spiritual exercise that should guide a liberal life is reflective equilibrium. In the Rawlsian framework, this expression hints at the result of reflection aimed at balancing and aligning the components of one’s own moral life, to become a more consistent and coherent person. As a spiritual exercise, it is shaped as a dialogue,

either with other people or an inner one, that should bring us to be more balanced persons and to find the conception of justice that best fits with our considered judgments. Differently from the original position, however, “there is nothing intrinsically liberal about reflective equilibrium, [...] [r]eflective equilibrium is formal” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 208): through this practice, a person can become more self-coherent, avoid hypocrisy, foster humility, unify the self, and be more graceful, and these are all desirable features but none of them is necessarily strictly liberal (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 209-214).

Finally, the third spiritual exercise is public reason. In modern liberal democracies, it is fundamental that citizens speak to each other, in order to mutually justify their decisions. And this interaction must be one where reasons prevail and are shared reasonably: in Rawlsian terms, public reason must be the ultimate justification of political power in a democratic context. However, whereas Rawls intended it as a strictly political phenomenon, according to Lefebvre, public reason permeates the everyday life of liberal citizens, and, as such, we make recourse to it naturally. The spiritual exercise, therefore, does not consist of learning to use public reason when arguing with someone, but in turning it into an attitude of both arguing and listening. This will help us understand others’ stances and realise that they can be as reasonable as ours. Consequently, according to their reaction to such unfamiliar viewpoints, liberals can gain several advantages: a feeling of delight in others, if they come to agree, a live-and-let-live attitude of tolerance, in case of bewilderment, or the ability to keep civil and cool, had they to disagree; in addition, they will also become more cheerful (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 227-234).

In sum, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* claims that, in a world full of liberal values that are not really respected nor put into practice, noticing the omnipresence of said values and embracing them is the most straightforward way “to redeem everyday life” (Lefebvre, 2024, p. 236). We need not look far from our own everyday life to reach this goal: it would be enough to keep faith in the liberal motto of conceiving society as a fair system of cooperation.

Granted, Lefebvre describes his as an “intrinsic” argument in favour of liberalism as a way of life, whereas I am not sure this stands. For sure, he presents some powerful and effective points to support the idea that liberalism is all one needs to make one’s life meaningful, i.e., that there is no need to necessarily look at something alien and very far from our own culture, let alone to escape from it, in order to reappropriate the sense of our lives. Still, it seems to me that, with his argument, he is defending the idea that the true value of liberalism as something more than a mere political-philosophical doctrine is

that it allows us to gain some “existential perks” that make our lives better. In other words, this seems to me to be more of an instrumental, rather than an intrinsic, argument in favour of a liberal way of life: its ultimate conclusion is not that liberalism is valuable *per se*, but in virtue of its capacity to enrich our lives.

That said, with this book, Lefebvre offers us a very promising and substantial attempt to undertake the most difficult task for a philosopher: making philosophy concrete. What is more, with *Liberalism as a Way of Life*, the author seems not only to have found a viable path to apply philosophy to our everyday life to make it better but also to have argued that it is possible to do that by simply appreciating those values that already shape our modern liberal society, with no need to go too far away.

## REFERENCES

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