

## Enlightenment and the Enlightenment

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I have been asked - despite the fact that I am not even an amateur political philosopher, to speak about politics and right livelihood. Instead I want to talk about the role of politics in making possible the right livelihood of the populace - in short, how best to think about the role of government in leading a populace to virtue, and to ensuring happiness for its citizens.

"Enlightenment" means one thing in Western intellectual history and quite another in a Buddhist context. When we talk about the enlightenment in the West we refer to a flourishing of political freedom, artistic innovation, scientific development and philosophical progress that began roughly in the mid-Seventeenth Century and ends, depending on your intellectual politics either with the publication of *Twilight of the Idols*, the First World War, the Second, or the explosion of post-modern thought in the late Twentieth Century. The Western enlightenment is an expression of optimism, with a promise of continuous intellectual, artistic, scientific, moral and political progress. But, most importantly, for present purposes, this progress is *secular*, and is the fruit of emancipation *from* religion. The darkness from which the European enlightenment is an awakening is a darkness imposed by the stagnant religious dogma of the Catholic church for that period often - albeit misleadingly - known as the "dark ages." On the view of enlightenment thinkers, it is precisely religious dogma that stifled intellectual and political progress in Europe, and hence that stood between human beings and true happiness. The Enlightenment is resolutely pluralist in ideology, encouraging a multiplicity of views and a vigorous interchange in a broad public sphere. Release from suffering, according to this picture, requires release from religion.

From a Buddhist perspective, of course, this sounds insane. True happiness cannot be found through mundane activities alone. Only the noble path to enlightenment is a path from suffering; enlightenment in this sense is not a mere liberation from the

oppression of a particular ideology, but a liberation from cyclic existence; finally, from the standpoint of Buddhism, religion is not an *obstacle* to enlightenment; but is instead the *only vehicle* to enlightenment.

However differently Buddhists and secular Westerners understand the term, they agree that "enlightenment" denotes a good - something liberating and towards which it makes sense to strive. Now Buddhist literature, reflecting in part the view that enlightenment is a fundamentally private matter ("be lamps to yourselves, and resolutely seek your own enlightenment", were, after all, Lord Buddha's final words before his *mahāparinirvāṇa*) is strikingly thin in political philosophy. But there is one text that takes political philosophy as a central concern, and that is Ācārya Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī*. There we find is an admonition to the king regarding the obligations of the state and a clear account of the relation between state policies and the welfare of the citizenry. What we find is an admonition to pursue policies informed by a doctrine of the good, which policies are aimed at shaping the lives and livelihoods of the citizenry so as to encourage them towards achieving and realizing the good.

Not surprisingly, when we turn to Western Enlightenment political philosophy, we find something very different. Instead of an endorsement of a particular doctrine of the good we find a doctrine of the right - in particular of the rights of citizens to define for themselves their own good, and an admonition of the state to be, within broad bounds, tolerant of a wide range of theories of the good, and to be at least relatively neutral among them. These are two very different visions of the responsibilities of the state to its citizens and of the role of the state in defining their lives. They cannot both be correct.

If Nāgārjuna's treatment of statecraft in *Ratnāvalī* represents a clear exposition of at least a plausible Buddhist account of the role of the enlightened state. When we turn to the West for a clear account of the state of the enlightenment we can do better than Kant's classic essay "What is Enlightenment?" It is these texts I will

juxtapose in order to explore the question, "What is the proper role of the state in the furtherance of the Buddhist goal of the elimination of suffering?"

I will begin with a brief exposition of Nāgārjuna's account of social good and of the role of the state in furthering that good. I will then turn to Kānt's account of human maturity and of the responsibility of the state to foster and to recognize that maturity. I will argue that we have roughly diametrically opposed views here of the proper role of the state vis-à-vis its populace on these matters. I will then defend Kānt's account of statecraft on empirical grounds, but will also defend the values Nāgārjuna suggests as those that measure the success of a government. I will conclude with some reflections on how we can reconcile these positions - on how we can encourage enlightenment through the enlightenment.

### 1. Nāgārjuna on the good and on the role of the state

If we turn to *Ratnāvalī*, we find a clear articulation of a set of basic human values Nāgārjuna takes to it to be the responsibility of the state to further. These include prominently an endorsement of the value of learning and education. Nāgārjuna is clearly convinced that public education is an important good, and that the state should underwrite it:

238.   As a way to increase wisdom  
           Wherever there is a school  
           Provide for the livelihood of teachers  
           And bestow estates upon them.

Nāgārjuna also takes the provision for the welfare of the unfortunate as a good, and as the responsibility of the state. He endorses a generous public health programme:

239.   In order to root out the suffering  
           Of sentient beings, the old, young and infirm,  
           You should establish through your influence  
           Barbers and doctors in your kingdom.
243.   Always care compassionately for  
           The sick, the unprotected, those stricken

With suffering, the lowly and the poor  
 And take special care to nourish them.

245.   At the sites of the water-vessels  
           Place shoes, umbrellas, water-filters,  
           Tweezers for removing thorns,  
           Needles, thread and fans.

Indeed it is worth remarking that the public health system he envisions is substantially more generous than any of which I am aware today. How many countries provide shoes and fans as part of the basic health package?

Nāgārjuna is an economic egalitarian - a proponent of a strong redistributive social welfare system in which the economic welfare of the poor is a good to be given high priority by the state.

251.   Provide extensive care  
           For the persecuted and for victims,  
           The stricken and the diseased,  
           And for ordinary people in conquered areas.

Moreover, unlike many current social welfare economists, Nāgārjuna is a tax-cutter:

252.   Provide stricken farmers  
           With seeds and sustenance,  
           Eliminate high taxes  
           By reducing their rate.
253.   Protect the poor from want;  
           Set up no new tolls and reduce tolls;  
           Free people from the suffering  
           Of the tax collector at the door.

He never makes it quite clear just how we are to pay for this extensive social welfare programme while cutting taxes, but that puts him in the same boat with most contemporary politicians. Perhaps he approves of structural deficits. Nāgārjuna is indeed hard to locate on a contemporary political landscape. Like today's taxation

conservatives, Nāgārjuna is tough on crime. But like social welfare advocates, he endorses price controls.

254. Eliminate thieves and robbers  
In your own and other's countries.  
Please set prices fairly  
And keep profits fair.

Finally, Nāgārjuna is an advocate of extensive public works that will conduce to the happiness of the citizenry and even of the animals in the realm. Once again, the ambitious scope of his welfare policy is noteworthy and would worry any serious fiscal conservative:

241. Please act with good wisdom and provide  
Hostels, amusement centres, dikes,  
Ponds, rest houses, water vessels,  
Beds, food, hay and wood.
242. Please establish rest houses  
In all temples, towns and cities  
And provide water vessels  
On all arid roadways.
249. At the openings of ant hills  
Please have trustworthy men  
Always put food and water,  
Sugar and piles of grain.

While some of this may seem obvious, it is worth drawing a few themes together, for what we have here is a clear, if implicit, catalogue of social values to be respected and advanced by the state: the good society is to be economically egalitarian; the welfare of the least advantaged is the primary responsibility of the state; basic human goods, such as education, shelter, food, health care and even a reasonable amount of leisure, are public, not private goods, and are to be provided by the state. This is not an uncontroversial doctrine of course, and many liberal societies, as well as many totalitarian societies, regard a great many of these goods either as private matters, or as matters so far down the social priority list that they can

readily be sacrificed in favour, say, of the rights of corporations to enrich themselves, or in favour of military policy.

But Nāgārjuna was not primarily a secular theorist, of course, and the agenda of *Ratnāvalī* is not primarily secular. Let us now examine the role of religion in the state Nāgārjuna envisions. Nāgārjuna explicitly endorses the state establishment of and support of religious institutions:

231. With respect and without stint you should construct  
Images of the Buddha, reliquaries and temples  
And provide abundant riches,  
Such things as foods and other necessities.
232. You should sustain with all endeavour  
The excellent Dharma and the assembly  
Of monks and decorate reliquaries  
With gold and jeweled friezes.
240. You should make donations of the word  
Of the transcendental lord and of the treatises  
He presented, as well as pages and books, along  
With their prerequisites, the pens and ink.
310. Create Dharma centres,  
Abodes of the three jewels of  
Fame and Glory that lowly kings  
Have not even conceived in their minds.
321. Provide all types of support even  
For practitioners who do not seek it  
And for those living  
In the realms of other kings.

And the reason Nāgārjuna advances for this is important: Dharma, and indeed state support for Dharma is essential for the successful establishment of the state.

327. If your kingdom exists for the Dharma,  
And not for fame or desire,  
Then it will be extremely fruitful;  
If not, its fruit will be misfortune.

This may be a bit tendentious, but we can surmise, given the set of values Nāgārjuna articulates as central to the project of the state, that this amounts to the impossibility of advancing these values absent strong state-sponsored religious institutions. Moreover, the fact that the values that Nāgārjuna recommends to the state are paradigmatically Mahāyāna Buddhist values confirms this surmise: Nāgārjuna is advocating the establishment, maintenance and propagation of particular religion by the state as the vehicle for the advancement of humanitarian values. In sum, for Nāgārjuna, not only can we identify a core set of egalitarian and humanitarian values that any morally acceptable state ought to respect, but *it is the role of the state* to advance these values, and to do so by advancing a particular religious tradition and set of institutions supportive of those values and likely to encourage their realisation in the state.

## 2. Kant on Enlightenment, human maturity and the growth of the state

While Kant and Nāgārjuna may agree about the importance of enlightenment, they agree about nothing else; and in particular, their respective visions of the nature of enlightenment are worlds apart. Here is Kant's definition of "enlightenment":

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. ... "Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!" That is the motto of the enlightenment. [35]*

Kant's enlightenment is centrally bound up with *autonomy*, with the assumption of responsibility for one's own thought, conduct and values. Kant links this tightly with the idea of *maturity*, and hence embraces an explicitly teleological conception of the value of autonomy. The autonomous state is valourised in part because it represents the fully developed state of a human being - the state towards which we are aimed. While this strong emphasis on individual autonomy as the telos of human life is utterly foreign to a Buddhist framework, the teleology itself is of course quite familiar. If Buddhism is about anything, it is about buddhahood: the end and

the excellence towards which a Buddhist's life is aimed is the enlightenment of a Buddha. Whereas the Buddhist telos is a conception of the good, however, Kant's is a conception of the right: a conception of a life that is empty of specific values, but specified only in structural terms.

For Kant this enlightenment is specified explicitly in terms of liberation not from cyclic existence, but from the authority of ideology and of the organs of the dissemination of ideology:

If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me. The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the greatest part of them regard taking the first step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult. Having first made their domestic livestock dumb, and having carefully made sure that these docile creatures will not take a single step without the cart to which they are harnessed, these guardians then show them the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. [35]

Kant argues that the greatest threat to our enlightenment, to our development into our highest and best selves is precisely from those who would instruct us in the best way to live. He claims *not* that there is *no* wisdom in texts; *not* that religious leaders are generally in error; *not* that doctors are incompetent. *Even if we grant* the wisdom of the texts, the veracity of the pastor, the competence of the doctor, he urges, the very fact that we entrust even the most benevolent, intelligent, morally upright and insightful leaders with our lives and our values is already the gravest self-betrayal. For the content of enlightenment for Kant is not any particular way of life, view or other good, but rather the freedom and willingness to choose some way of life, view or good *for oneself*.

This view of enlightenment is intimately bound up with the distinctively Kantian separation of the private and public spheres.

For Kant, the private sphere - the life of home, religion and self-regarding action - is the domain in which the good is sought and found. It is a domain of choice; a domain of taste; a domain that might vary enormously in character from one individual to the next. It is a domain of privilege into which the public may not intrude and in which self-expression is possible and in which values may be cultivated and realized. The inviolability of the private sphere is the basis of the plurality of a liberal post-enlightenment culture as well as the locus of the fundamental rights that limit the reach of the liberal democratic state over the lives of its citizens.

But the private sphere only makes sense in the context of a public sphere. Not only are these spheres of action interdefined and mutually limiting, but each of these two spheres of action gains its point from the existence of the other: The point of the private sphere is in part the proliferation of a plurality of models of human flourishing and a plurality of creative ideas and cultural forms. This plurality enlivens and supplies the public sphere with the points of view, ideas and material products that make collective life possible, and so brings enormous benefits to us all. Invasion of the private impoverishes it, and results in a diminished public space as well.

The public sphere is not self-justifying either. What is the point in creating a public space for dialogue and for cultural formation if not to provide individual citizens with the goods - material, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual - they seek in their lives? These are the very things that enrich their own private lives and which gain their value for citizens specifically because of the values arising from private consideration. Diminution of the public sphere does not *increase* privacy, but diminishes it as well. The realization that these two spheres of human life are so interdependent, and that the health of each demands the health of the other is central to Kant's vision of an enlightened society. Its key, however, is to be found in public:

Nothing is required for this enlightenment, however, except *freedom*; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of

all, namely, the freedom to use reason *publicly* in all matters. [36-37]

The reason that public freedom is so crucial to enlightenment is not because of any primacy of importance of the public over the private sphere, but because of the role of public discourse in limiting the greatest threat to enlightenment, namely authority. It is authority - whether that of state or of church - that juvenilizes persons in society, restricting public discourse through censorship, limiting the scope of the private through the imposition of a vision of the good or through outright intrusion. And public authority cannot be fought in private. Freedom to challenge authority - to reason - in public is hence the *necessary and sufficient condition* of enlightenment.

But then what of the role of religion? There is an inevitable tension in liberal post-enlightenment societies regarding religion, represented dramatically in the perennial dialectic between the two religious freedom clauses of the Constitution of the United States - the free exercise clause, which gives individuals the right to exercise religious freedom without interference, and the disestablishment clause, which forbids the government to establish, support or promote any religion. When an individual's free exercise occurs in a public space, is the government to stand back, thus abetting religious expression, or is the government to step in, thereby tramelling free exercise? This is a common conundrum in American constitutional law, and enriches many a civil liberties lawyer. In India we encounter similar tensions when discussions arise concerning community civil law.

The issue is vexing precisely because religious practice is an arena in which the public and private sectors intersect. Religious belief is a paradigm of the kind of private good the liberal state wishes to make available, optional, and plural. But religious belief often mandates public acts, or stances regarding public policy. In these cases religion intrudes upon the public sphere, advancing certain goods on religious authority and demanding the force of civil authority in order to advance them. Kant is adamant that this pressure be resisted at all cost: