

Liberal Concepts Glossary and Toolkit

01

Abuse of Power

The exercise of any form of coercive power where the aim of the exercise of that power is other than to promote the greatest good of the greatest number.

See also sectarianism and governance safety.

02

Authoritarian

The property of a government or other institution capable of wielding coercive power of habitually exercising that power far beyond the limits of what can be justified by reason.

See also abuse of power and governance safety.

03

Censorship

The behavior or practice of using coercion to stifle the communication of fact, opinion, artistic expression or questioning. This is usually done to increase the power and/or wealth of the people doing the censoring (or their associates), at the expense of everyone else.

See also scrutiny suppression.

04

Collectivism

The attitude or practice of treating groups of different people as if the group was itself a person in its own right, and subordinating the interests of the individual members of that group to the supposed interests of the group itself.

This is distinct from individuals co-operating with each other, even when doing so involves compromises, to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. Collectivism is also not the same as altruism: collectivist ideas are often imposed selfishly by those seeking power to advance their ambitions at the expense of others.

It is the opposite of individualism.

See [On Individualism, Collectivism and Selfishness](#)



05

Convergent instrumental goal

The principle that any agent (including, but not limited to, a person), no matter what her/his/its terminal goals, will strongly tend to pursue certain instrumental goals, such as knowledge, safety for itself, self-improvement, freedom, power and resources (wealth), as those instrumental goals are, by their nature, instrumental to almost all terminal goals.

Some of these convergent instrumental goals (such as power) inherently conflict with other convergent instrumental goals (such as freedom) of others, which has important implications for the practical application of ethics.

See [Instrumental Convergence](#)



06

Critical thinking

The practice of thinking carefully about reasons before making any important decisions including decisions about what to believe or claim to be true.

This is a valuable skill that can be learned. It is especially helpful in detecting ethical deceit, tradeoff obfuscation, motivated reasoning, sectarianism and collectivism.



07

Delegated authoritarianism

The practice of powerful institutions, usually governments, coercing other organizations (e.g. businesses, online platforms or universities) into making sure that something happens that is not directly within their control (e.g. that people do not post what the state deems to be “harmful” content on the internet) without specifying how they should do this. The objective is often vaguely specified and its interpretation controlled by a government agency rather than the judiciary. The organizations thus coerced can face serious consequences (e.g. heavy fines or, sometimes, legal liability to third parties) if they fail to achieve that objective.

The almost inevitable (and often intended) result of this is the widespread adoption by organizations of highly illiberal practices (e.g. extreme censorship of online content) that often go far beyond what is reasonable to achieve the objective (even if the objective is worthwhile). However, the government or other body doing the coercing is not obviously directly responsible for the illiberal practices because it has not directly specified them and can (if people are not aware of this form of abuse) escape proper scrutiny for these practices. This is thus a form of tradeoff obfuscation.

See also tradeoff obfuscation, censorship, governance safety and abuse of power.



Diffuse coercion

Coercion indirectly applied to people, not by a central powerful authority, but by a large number of people acting independently or semi-independently. Often, each individual act is not sufficient to coerce on its own, but the multiplicity of acts is often effectively coercive.

Diffuse coercion may or may not be justified, as with any other form of coercion. As with any other form of coercion, the restraint of unjustified coercion is a paradigm justification for coercion.

See [A Short Introduction to Universal Liberalism](#)



Equality before the law

The practice or behavior of knowingly or recklessly making false claims about ethics or what counts as ethical behavior, or seeking to disrupt or stifle scrutiny as to whether ethical claims are true, usually in order to give some personal benefit to the deceiver (such as wealth or political or social power) at the expense of others.

See also scrutiny suppression.



Ethical deceit

The practice or behavior of knowingly or recklessly making false claims about ethics or what counts as ethical behavior, or seeking to disrupt or stifle scrutiny as to whether ethical claims are true, usually in order to give some personal benefit to the deceiver (such as wealth or political or social power) at the expense of others.

See also scrutiny suppression.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



Evidence denialism

The practice or behavior of denying that an empirical statement (that is, a statement about a contingent fact) requires evidence for there to be sufficient reason to believe it to be true.

Note that a claim which is based on deduction or inference from empirical propositions which the person to whom the claim is made agrees are true does not require further evidence providing that the specific conclusion of the claim is in fact logically entailed only by the uncontroversial premises without requiring any further (implicit) and not agreed premises to be true.

See also ethical deceit and scrutiny suppression.



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Freedom above the Law

A straightforward way of testing whether an argument about empirical claim (that is, a claim about a contingent fact) is valid by checking whether, if applied to the question of whether the earth orbits the sun (or any other demonstrably and uncontroversially true but not intuitively obvious fact), it reliably produces the correct result.



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Governance safety

The principle that any form of concentrated coercive power (of which the nation state is the paradigm but not the only example) is inherently dangerous and that stringent limits (and effective means to prevent any circumvention or removal of these limits) on the extent to which coercive power can be concentrated in the hands of any person or set of people is necessary to avoid harmful abuses of power.

See also abuse of power, the principal-agent problem, regulatory capture and information asymmetry.

See [A Short Introduction to Universal Liberalism](#)



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Heliocentricity test

A straightforward way of testing whether an argument about empirical claim (that is, a claim about a contingent fact) is valid by checking whether, if applied to the question of whether the earth orbits the sun (or any other demonstrably and uncontroversially true but not intuitively obvious fact), it reliably produces the correct result.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Illiberalism

Illiberalism refers to any political ideology or practice that emphasizes authority and the primacy of the state (or other form of social control) over individual rights.

In an illiberal system, governments or other powerful bodies often restrict civil liberties, suppress dissent and discriminate against certain groups.



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Individualism

The principle that only individuals have goals and thus that whether something is ethical or unethical can only be determined by looking at the consequences of that thing on individuals, not groups as such.

That it is very often worthwhile for individuals to co-operate closely in groups and societies and compromise their own immediate interests in doing so for ultimate long-term benefit does not conflict with this principle. Individualism does not entail that people do not seek help from others or seek to help others, that people isolate themselves from others, nor that people be selfish.

It is the opposite of collectivism.

See [On Individualism, Collectivism and Selfishness](#)



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Information asymmetry

A state of affairs in which, in a relationship between two or more people or sets of people, one of those people or sets of people has more information about important things relating to that relationship than others.

Information asymmetry can significantly exacerbate the principal-agent problem, especially in the context of the state, and can create significant imbalances of power. In a democratic state, voters can only effectively hold governments to account if they have access to sufficient information. Censorship can be and often is used by governments deliberately to create or maintain information asymmetry.

See also censorship, abuse of power, the principal-agent problem, governance safety.

See [Information Asymmetry](#).



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Instrumental goal

A goal that is only a goal insofar as it helps to achieve a terminal goal. For example, if a gene's terminal goal is to reproduce, its instrumental goal might be to code for a reproductive organ. If a person's terminal goal is to be happy, her/his instrumental goal might be to listen to some music that that person enjoys.

An instrumental goal may be a good or a bad instrumental goal depending on how well that it serves its terminal goal.

See also terminal goal, convergent instrumental goal.

See [Intelligence and Stupidity: The Orthogonality Thesis](#)



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Justice

The principle that there is an ethical way of dealing with unethical behavior by others, and the practical (and usually systematic) application of that principle to individual cases, normally in the form of a judicial system.

See also the ruthlessness paradox, the rule of law and reason based ethics.



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Kafka trap

The behavior or practice of claiming that a denial of a claim is, in itself, evidence that the claim is true.

See also ethical deceit.

See [How to Play Games with Words: Three More Tactics Critical Social Justice Advocates Use to Win Arguments](#)



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Liberalism

A political and economic philosophy that prioritizes individual freedom, equality and protecting individual rights and liberties. It emphasizes the importance of the rule of law, free markets and limited government intervention in the economy and society.

The term “liberalism” has come to refer to a wide range of different strands of liberalism, varying principally on the extent to which it is appropriate and safe to permit governments to control economic resources.

See also illiberalism.

See [Liberalism & A Short Introduction to Universal Liberalism](#)



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Local maximum

A state of affairs in which a person cannot make her or his situation any better without first making it significantly worse (e.g. as in addiction).

That people often fail to recognize and overcome local maxima is the proximate cause of a high proportion of unethical behavior.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Motivated reasoning

The state of affairs in which a person's motives for wanting another person to believe that a claim that that person makes is true differs from the reason(s) that that person gives for the other person to accept it to be true. The undisclosed motive (e.g. wishing to obtain personal power or wealth) is usually not a valid reason for the person to whom the claim is made to accept the claim, which is the motive for giving the purported reason.

Motivated reasoning can normally be inferred when a person making a claim responds to scrutiny of that claim with behaviors intended to stifle that scrutiny, or persists in insisting that the claim is true and that others ought to accept it despite being unable to answer a counter-argument to an argument made against that claim.

Note that a person having a motive for a person to accept a claim to be true other than a valid reason for another to accept it to be true does not necessarily make the claim false or the person dishonest: an innocent person accused of a crime, for example, has a motive to deny the crime to avoid punishment, but also has a valid reason for doing so (i.e., that he or she is innocent).

See also scrutiny suppression and ethical deceit.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Political market segmentation

The practice among those seeking political office for themselves to do so by seeking to appeal to some particular, defined segment of the electorate whom they believe are likely to vote for them if encouraged to do so by proposing or instituting policies which confer benefits on that defined segment at the expense of everyone else, and are usually harmful to the public interest generally.

This is sometimes termed "identity politics". See also sectarianism and pork-barrel politics.



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Pork-barrel politics

The practice or behavior of a politician directing that public money (i.e., money collected from others in taxation by coercion) be used in a way intended, not to maximize the public good, but to maximize the chance of the particular politician being re-elected, for example, by investing in a hugely expensive project that will mainly benefit swing voters in a marginal constituency, where the money would actually produce much more public benefit if spent elsewhere.

See also sectarianism, abuse of power, governance safety, the principal-agent problem.



Prejudice

The attitude, practice or behavior of making firm judgments or drawing conclusions about people or things based on superficial characteristics and/or group memberships that do not, in fact, provide sufficient reason to make those judgments or draw those conclusions to that level of confidence.

See also racism and collectivism.



Principal-agent problem

The problem that people (including politicians) who have a duty to act in the interests of others and are given power over others in order to discharge that duty have a strong incentive to misuse that power for their own personal gain and can easily do so unless specifically and effectively restrained.

The greater the degree of power that the agent has, the more principals that the agent has, and the less information about things relevant to its exercise that the principals have, the more serious the potential for abuse, and the more stringent that the measures to prevent that abuse need to be in order to be effective.

See also abuse of power, governance safety, information asymmetry.

See [Principal-Agent Problem](#)



Problem hijacking

The behavior or practice of proposing or instituting a purported solution to a real problem in order surreptitiously to take advantages of the side-effects of the solution, which are usually harmful to most people.

Sometimes the hijacked “solution” solves the problem, but goes far beyond what is necessary to do so in order to create the surreptitiously desired side-effects. Sometimes, the hijacked “solution” intentionally fails to solve the problem so as to create a purported justification for never-ending intervention and thus the perpetuation of the side-effects.

Very often, problem hijackers falsely claim that any criticism of the hijacked solution amounts to a denial of the problem.

See also second order problem hijacking, regulatory capture.



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Racism

The attitude, practice or behavior of attaching social significance to racial categories, as in colonial era slavery, segregation or some modern forms of what is sometimes termed “identity politics” or “critical social justice”.

See also sectarianism, collectivism and prejudice.

See [How to be Not-Racist](#)



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Reason based ethics

The principle that what is and is not ethical can only meaningfully be determined by the rigorous application reason and evidence. This term can also refer to the ethical principles and conclusions that can be derived from that application.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Reason denialism

The practice or behavior of denying reason, its universality or its applicability to a particular claim or issue in order to stifle scrutiny of whether the claim is true or rigorous inquiry into the nature of the issue.

See also ethical deceit and scrutiny suppression.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Regulatory capture

A state of affairs in which a coercive authority (usually an emanation of the state) has been co-opted to serve the interests of a subset of the population, rather than seeking to advance the common good.

Regulatory capture often occurs when an executive agency created by the government to control a particular type of activity is co-opted by the most powerful or influential people or organizations who engage in that type of activity to stifle legitimate commercial competition by imposing unjustified barriers to entry, or otherwise increase those people’s personal power and wealth at the expense of everyone else.

See also sectarianism, the principal-agent problem, governance safety, abuse of power, problem hijacking.

See [Regulatory Capture](#)



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Rent-seeking

The principle that what is and is not ethical can only meaningfully be The practice or behavior of people seeking to increase their own wealth, often by coercive or harmful means, without creating new wealth.

Rent-seeking is a common way in which political sectarianism manifests itself.

See also sectarianism, abuse of power.

See [Rent-seeking](#)



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Rule of law

The principles that:

1. the coercive authority of the state (or similar) must be mediated through precise published rules of general application interpreted and applied by an independent judiciary, rather than the direct application of arbitrary coercive power by the executive;
2. the state and the individuals who hold power in the state must be equally subject to those rules as everybody else; and
3. that those rules must be effectively and universally enforced.

The rule of law is not all or nothing: it can obtain to a greater or lesser extent in different times and places.



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Ruthlessness paradox

The principle that, unless good people are prepared to act ruthlessly against those (and only those) who themselves (demonstrably) act ruthlessly, the world will be dominated by ruthless people, causing extreme harm to most people.

From this, it follows that the only way to minimize the amount of ruthlessness in the world is for good people to be prepared to be ruthless in some cases, but for the cases where this be done to be subject to rigorous scrutiny (e.g. as in a justice system).

This is related to the paradox of tolerance.

See also justice and reason based ethics.



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Scrutiny suppression

Behaviors and practices, often coercive in nature, aimed at stifling the scrutiny of claims made, usually with the dishonest intention of causing people to believe falsehood or not know the truth, thereby harming them.

This is normally done by people who know that the claims that they make cannot withstand scrutiny because there is no or no sufficient basis for them.

See also [ethical deceit](#) and [motivated reasoning](#).



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Second order problem hijacking

The behavior or practice of claiming that a bad or hijacked solution to a real problem is a reason not to attempt to solve the problem at all, or is a reason to deny the existence of that problem.



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Sectarianism

The attitude or practice of prioritizing the interests of a particular arbitrary subgroup of humanity over humanity generally.

It is the opposite of universality.

See [On Sectarianism and Universality](#).



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Self-application test

A straightforward way of testing whether an epistemic claim (that is, a claim about what it means or what it takes to know something to be true) makes any sense/should be taken seriously, by applying the claim to itself.

See [On Reason and Deceit in Political and Ethical Discourse](#)



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Standpoint epistemology

In its more extreme form, the behavior or practice of claiming that whether a claim (or a particular type of claim) is true inherently depends on who is thinking about whether it is true or who is claiming it to be true.

This form of standpoint epistemology fails the self-application test, since a claim that whether it is true that whether something is true depends on who is thinking about whether it is true or who is claiming it to be true entails infinite recursion and is therefore incoherent.

This is not the same as the contingent claim that somebody with personal knowledge of a thing may know more about that thing than somebody else; but that claim may or may not be true, depending on the circumstances, and whether it is true in the circumstances can be subject to rigorous scrutiny.

There are more nuanced versions of standpoint epistemology that do not make the claim set out above, but rather make the more modest claim that a person's experiences in life can affect that person's perspectives and ideas.

See [Standpoint Epistemology](#).

Terminal goal

The ultimate goal of any agent. In order to be an agent/optimizer, it is necessary to have a terminal goal: that is, a goal which is not a goal because it is instrumental to some other goal. For example, the terminal goal of genes is to reproduce. The terminal goal of human minds is probably their own pleasure or happiness (although this has not been properly studied).

It is not possible for any given agent to have multiple terminal goals. It is possible for an agent to have a terminal goal which is a computable function of multiple factors. It is not meaningful to think of a terminal goal as being a good or a bad goal.

See also instrumental goal, convergent instrumental goal.

See [Intelligence and Stupidity: The Orthogonality Thesis](#)

Tradeoff obfuscation

The practice or behavior of giving a false impression about whether a particular thing (such as an act of social coercion by a government or other institution) is justified by obscuring the disadvantages of that thing.

This can either be direct (e.g. by making arguments in favor of it that deliberately ignore the adverse consequences; see also under ethical deceit, problem hijacking and scrutiny suppression), or indirect (e.g. by creating a system, usually through coercion, that makes it difficult for people to relate the tradeoffs/harmful consequences to the thing in question, e.g. as in delegated authoritarianism).



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Universal liberalism

The principle that coercion is justified when and only when it is demonstrably productive of the greatest good for the greatest number, and that all unjustified coercion is inherently harmful.

This applies equally to all forms of coercion. A paradigm example of justified coercion is coercion to restrain unjustified coercion.

See also liberalism and illiberalism.

See [A Short Introduction to Universal Liberalism](#)



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Universality

The ethical principle that, when determining how to address conflict among different people, the ultimate consideration is the greatest good for the greatest number. It is the opposite of sectarianism.

The epistemic principle that reason is inherently universal and thus applies equally to everyone and everything.

See [On Sectarianism and Universality](#).



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Wing politics

The practice or attitude of seeking to advance any policy that is, in whatever political fashions are current, associated with either the “left-” or “right-” wing of politics, irrespective of the underlying merits of the policy in question, and of claiming that any scrutiny or criticism of such policies, or any contrary policy, is associated with the opposing wing, whether or not this claim is true.