Final Paper - Matthew Harvill

In this paper I will attempt to contribute to the liberal conversation on anarchy because some of its implications have resounding effects on liberalism and politics more generally. Specifically, Wolff and Barber's conversation leans towards the illegitimacy of the state. This is significant because much of liberal political thought and practice is inextricably tied to the legitimacy of the state. With so much at stake, it seems irresponsible to push the conversation under the rug. Similarly, it seems defeatist to concede that the state is simply a practical necessity. Instead, I will attempt to make a case for the theoretical legitimacy of the state. I will make this case through a mathematical lens by viewing liberalism as an optimization problem. I admit that this approach is unorthodox. However, this unorthodoxy will allow us to look at the liberal anarchy conversation from a novel theoretical perspective. Furthermore, this framework can also enlighten our understanding of other prominent liberal conversations. Thus, I will devote a nontrivial portion of this paper to constructing it in detail.

To make my case for the theoretical legitimacy of the state, I must first describe my framework, which views liberalism as an optimization problem. In mathematics, an optimization problem involves maximizing or minimizing a function by choosing different input values. Since liberalism insists on the primacy of the individual, I will posit liberalism as an optimization problem that attempts to maximize individual liberty. In this framework we can think of the inputs to this 'individual liberty function' as a society's potential political systems (including the lack thereof - anarchy). By the same token, we can view the 'value' of this function as a society's total individual liberty.

Even being generous, this framework might seem like a bit of a stretch. For example, how do we measure individual liberty? How can we think about political systems as inputs? Does this framework attempt to quantify these concepts, and if so, isn't that problematic? I will attempt to address these questions starting with the last question. Under the optimization framework, I will not attempt to explicitly quantify individual liberty or the effectiveness of a particular political system. Instead, I will simply claim that different political systems can increase or decrease an individual's liberty. Although seemingly truistic, this claim is a powerful tool in our framework. If we can modify our political system(s) to modify individuals' liberty, then as long as we can measure society's individual liberty, we can maximize it. It might even be possible for this maximum to be infinite. But how exactly do we measure the resulting individual liberty of our society? I will save a detailed answer to this question for later since it is nontrivial. However, we can still contribute meaningfully to the liberal anarchy conversation for now by simply distinguishing between limited and unlimited individual liberty.

I believe that distinguishing between limited and unlimited individual liberty in the optimization framework is important because it leads us to recognize unlimited individual liberty

as unattainable. To show this, I will assume for the sake of contradiction that the political system(s) that maximize(s) individual liberty produce(s) unlimited individual liberty. Since we are assuming a political system, I will also assume we have more than one individual. As Friedman points out, individual liberty "has no meaning whatsoever to a Robinson Crusoe on an isolated island" (p. 12). Considering we have more than one human, I claim that at least one individual's liberty is limited under any political system. A trivial example of one such limitation is pregnancy, which is necessary for human survival and immobilizes at least one mother, limiting her individual choices. While there are many other limitations involved in an ideal society, we only need one example to show the impossibility of unlimited individual liberty. Thus, with this example, we have shown that any political system(s) that maximize(s) individual liberty still results in limited individual liberty.

My claim that individual liberty is inherently limited is significant because it weakens Wolff's premise for arguing the illegitimacy of the state. Wolff believes that any liberal state limits moral autonomy, even in an ideal society. (p. 127-8). Although this is true, we've shown that individual liberty (and thus moral autonomy) is limited in any society. Thus, the claim that a liberal state is necessarily illegitimate because it limits moral autonomy is unfounded. By the same token we could argue for anarchy's illegitimacy because it also limits moral autonomy. In light of my argument I can foresee one of Wolff's potential pushbacks. Wolff might argue that inherent limitations on individual liberty don't imply that a state won't introduce more limitations. In other words, Wolff might argue that anarchy is still the optimal solution to our optimization problem. I don't deny this possibility. However, we've shown that it's illogical to presuppose the illegitimacy of the liberal state based on inherent limitations on liberty. We might continue this logic to suppose that the potential for a legitimate liberal state stems from its ability to enable individuals just as it inherently limits them. Since we don't know the optimal solution to our optimization problem, I believe it is reasonable to consider this possibility. Therefore, I will return to this point later.

I've only touched on one aspect of the liberal anarchy conversation, the legitimacy of the state. However, another key discussion point is the liberal push towards anarchy. Both Wolff and Barber agree on this point, although for different reasons. Wolff supports this push because it forces us to recognize that we can coordinate our societal relations effectively without the coercion of a state (p. 132). On the other hand, Barber believes our 'thin' democracy has left us "cut off not only from the abuses of power but from one another" (p. 101). Thus, Wolff's faith in individuals' autonomy to enable societal transformations contrasts with Barber's belief that autonomy only benefits the "pioneers and philosophical heroes" (p. 98). Despite their opposing conclusions, both Barber and Wolff focus on individual autonomy. This is significant because it reinforces what Galston identified as the 'Enlightenment Project' - the emphasis on autonomy as the primary tenet of liberalism (p. 525). Although Wolff and Barber seem to accurately associate autonomy with the anarchist disposition, I believe in doing so they incorrectly limit liberalism.

Their narrow focus within liberalism leads me to make one final addition to my proposed optimization framework.

I believe that we can better understand liberalism if we view it as a multiobjective optimization problem. A multiobjective problem has multiple functions that are maximized/minimized simultaneously. Instead of viewing liberalism as the direct maximization of individual liberty, it might make more sense to view it as the maximization of multiple aspects of individual liberty. Why might this be useful? This addition to our framework is useful for three main reasons. The first reason is that many political philosophers implicitly support it. For example, Barber, Galston, Kymlicka, and Young all posit liberal visions more nuanced than the simple removal of barriers. The second reason is that it provides a possible explanation for the successes and failures of many liberal strategies. This ties into the final reason, which is that this framework implies a promising strategy for maximizing individual liberty.

Many liberal philosophers have pointed out issues with the notion that we can maximize individual liberty by simply removing restrictions. Barber revealed how 'emancipation' leaves individuals "unable to act as morally autonomous agents" (p. 98). Galston recognized the drawbacks of promoting autonomy at the cost of diversity. Kymlicka highlighted the inability to even have individual liberty without a societal culture. Young pointed out the importance of identity in one's freedom. In addition to these liberal thinkers, there are even more who emphasize marginalized aspects of liberalism. In fact, I believe most liberal philosophers contribute to the liberal tradition in this way. Fortunately, this also aligns with our multiobjective optimization framework. One of the challenges of multiobjective optimization is that there is rarely a solution that simultaneously maximizes each subgoal. Thus, as some of the objectives are maximized, others are often reduced. We see this with marginalized features of liberalism.

In addition to explaining liberalism's multifaceted nature, the multiobjective framework can aid our understanding of when liberal approaches succeed and when they fail. If we agree that individual liberty has multiple potentially conflicting components, it makes sense that blindly maximizing a single component might not be the best strategy for maximizing individual liberty as a whole. I believe this concept also aligns with much of the liberal tradition. Just as Galston highlights the potential conflicts between autonomy and diversity, he also uses this conflict as evidence for placing importance on both tenets instead of just one. Similarly, Barber cites the apparent failure of extreme individual autonomy when outlining his more balanced approach, 'strong democracy.' These realizations also tie back into the conversation on the theoretical vs practical legitimacy of the state.

According to the liberal tradition, many aspects of individual liberty appear strongest under a liberal state. For example, Barber believes in a strong democratic state, Galston backs a state that respects subcommunities' diversity, and Kymlicka desires a state that promotes marginalized societal cultures. All three of these thinkers support the idea that the liberal state

can promote aspects of individual liberty. Thus, from the multiobjective perspective, the state isn't just a practical necessity. Instead, it can be a positive force that balances the complexity of competing liberal tenets, maximizing overall liberty more effectively. Remember that earlier our framework only allowed us to argue against the delegitimization of the liberal state. However, this multiobjective framework additionally supports the theoretical potential of a legitimate state. Now that we've explored the powerful potential of this framework, I would like to address the unresolved question of how we measure individual liberty.

Prior to introducing the multiobjective lens, the optimization framework appeared relatively effective without attempting to quantify individual liberty. However, through the multiobjective lens I have suggested that the optimal liberal strategy(s) might balance multiple aspects of liberty. This possibility rests on our ability to evaluate a given political system's effectiveness across competing liberal objectives and our ability to weigh the importance of the competing objectives themselves. Therefore, to justify our framework we must provide answers to two questions - how do we measure individual liberty, and can we do so without quantifying it or its subparts? These are challenging questions so I won't attempt to answer them on my own. Instead, I will inform my answer with help from Honig and Barber.

Individual liberty is complicated. It has many layers, and they don't always reveal themselves until we peel away the layers before them. Due to these challenges, it seems almost impossible to quantify or objectify liberty. This might well be the case, but I don't think this dooms the optimization framework. Instead, I think this suggests that measuring individual liberty might require a different approach. I believe Barber with his concept of 'strong democracy' and Honig with her support for agonism can lead us to effective approaches for measuring liberty. For example, to solve the challenge of measuring something as complicated as liberty we might need the cooperation of many different minds. Similarly, to solve the challenges associated with constantly peeling back new layers of individual liberty we might need an adaptable mindset that doesn't attempt to define it once and for all. Fortunately, stronger democracy carries the potential to solve both of these problems.

In this paper I intended to accomplish three main goals. My first goal was to argue for the legitimacy of the state, since so much of the liberal tradition presupposes it. My second goal was to investigate the supposed inevitability of the liberal push towards anarchy. My final goal was to propose a novel framework that could improve our understanding of the liberal anarchy conversation. Finding the framework fitting, I concluded by using it to explain some of the liberal tradition more broadly.