# Making a Common Muddle

Recently, political philosopher Kevin Vallier published an essay entitled “[Making Common Cause](https://www.discoursemagazine.com/ideas/2021/11/19/making-common-cause/)”, in which he argues that, “If they ever want to counter the left’s excesses, neo-nationalists on the right need to ally with classical liberals and embrace the neutral state.”

Vallier contends that both “‘woke’ progressives and classical liberal defenders of limited government… oppose national conservatism’s goal of deploying a muscular state to advance cultural and religious objectives… Their reasons, however, are very different: Classical liberals disagree with the means national conservatives deploy because they believe that the state must remain neutral among competing ends. Progressive liberals, on the other hand, disagree only with the ends that these conservatives seek…”

However, Vallier’s contention that the state *must*, indeed that the state *can*, remain “neutral among competing ends” is not a serious policy proposal or proposition in political philosophy: it is a piece of propaganda, under the cover of which “classical liberalism” conceals the fact that it advances classical liberal ends. In fact, nationalist conservatives, classical liberals, and progressives all hope to steer the state towards promoting what they see as a good society: the only difference is that classical liberals attempt to hide their agenda behind a veil of neutrality.

“How so?” you may ask. Well, let us start off with some simple examples, and work our way forward from there. Firstly, let us imagine a serial killer who insists that, if classical liberalism is as good as its word, it ought to be neutral among his end of killing as much as possible and his victims desire to not be killed. What is the classic liberal state doing sending its armed minions after him? There’s no neutrality in that! Well, at least we post-liberals can answer “Of course the state is not neutral between evil ends and good ends: the state will promote the good ends and surpress the evil ones.” But Vallier has closed himself off from that response… instead, he must resort to a vague concept of “reasonable ends”… and it turns out that classical liberals will consider ends to be reasonable so long as they do not challenge classical liberalism.

The above example may appear absurd: “Of course, *everyone* objects to serial killing!” Well, almost everyone: not serial killers. But it does begin to blow off the fog of “neutrality,” under the cover of which liberals advance liberal ends.

However, let’s move on to a less outlandish example: we will imagine an anarcho-communist confronting the classical liberal state. He contends, along with Proudhon, that “property is theft.” He believes that your seaside villa, my house in the country, Madison Square Garden, and the Louvre are all the common property of mankind: he (and everyone else) ought to be able to spend the weekend at your villa, farm my land, wander onto the court during a Knicks game, or borrow the Mona Lisa for a few days when he wishes. The classical liberal state is certainly not neutral between his end of everyone sharing all goods in common, and the classical liberal insistence upon the sanctity of property rights.

In response here, we are likely to encounter either some sort of Lockean argument as to how property rights are just, or perhaps a utilitarian case for why they make us all wealthier in the long run. But at this point, we are being asked to embrace the classical liberal state either on the basis of Locke’s self-contradictory arguments (where at one point God owns us all, but a bit later we all own ourselves), or because it achieves the not-at-all neutral aim of maximizing the citizens’ wealth. (One of the refreshing things about Ludwig von Mises’s advocacy of liberalism is that he is up front in saying, “People like to have more stuff rather than less, so they should be liberals.”)

Even if one dismisses anarcho-communists as beyond the pale… but at that point, the veil of “neutrality” is starting to look rather threadbare… then let us go on to consider Christians who believe the Sabbath should be a day of rest. That was an idea so widely accepted in the “classical liberal” United States of the 19th-century that blue laws legislating strict limits as to what commerce could be conducted on a Sunday were ubiquitous. But, in the name of “neutrality,” such laws have been almost entirely abolished. The outcome of that process has not been “neutral”: instead, it has compelled many businesses to remain open on Sundays, or lose out to their competitors that did so, as well as making it extremely difficult to be employed in certain professions if one will not work on Sundays. (Max Weber described this as the “iron cage” in which liberalism trapped individuals: as he noted, “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so.”)

Finally, let us consider a devout Muslim resident of a classical liberal state. She believes that conformance with God’s immutable divine law (Sharia) is an ultimate requirement for a truly just state. She may be willing to deal with a classical liberal state as a temporary expedient that tolerates Muslims, but her real end must always be the adoption of Sharia law as the only truly just form of governance. The classical liberal state is certainly not “neutral” in regards to her ends, as liberal constitutions typically explicitly forbid such a regime.

Thus we see that, far from being “neutral among competing ends,” the classical liberal state is neutral among competing classical liberal ends, but will quite definitely surpress any non-liberal ends. Once we have seen through its lair’s camouflage, the “neutral state” is flushed from its den and out into the light of day, where we clearly recognize it as one among many partisan advocates of what form of life the state should promote.

If one attends to political history, this exposure will hardly be surprising. Most stable polities have organized a society based upon a particular view of human life, and how that life relates to the cosmos as a whole. As the political philosopher Eric Voegelin put it, polities are “cosmions,” little shelters, that express for their inhabitants how they are connected to, and take part in, through their polity, the broader cosmos which they find themselves, willy-nilly, inhabiting.

But there is another possibility: a polity can be held together, despite its failing to be representative in the existential sense, through force. Thus, for instance, after the collapse of the pagan Roman worldview, the Roman Empire was sustained for several centuries by military means. Nevertheless, the Roman emperors were savvy enough to know that finding an existential, representational role for the emperor was desirable, and thus they experimented with solutions like the cult of Sol Invictus, and thus Constantine’s ultimate choice of Christianity as the “integral” force uniting the empire.

Oddly enough, Vallier mentions the contention that no state can possibly be neutral… and then, rather than responding to it, instead contends that nationalist conservatives, if only they were honest, would admit that they are really liberals at heart. His case begins by pointing out the fact that, within nationalist conservatism, there are adherents of a number of different religions, and that they all appear willing to tolerate such diversity in their movement. Since nationalist conservatives do not demand complete doctrinal uniformity, Vallier goes on to argue that:

“Hence the logic of neutrality and toleration unfolds of its own accord. By accepting neutrality with respect to religion, they must gradually extend it to morality. And then, by doing so, they have walked right into classical liberalism’s trap.”

Here I find myself in complete agreement with Vallier: classical liberalism is, indeed, a trap. Disguised as “neutral governance,” it lures its victims into Weber’s iron cage.

But what is this “logic” that “unfolds of its own accord”? What Vallier appears to be saying is, “Look, nationalist conservatives, you’ve already accepted… well, *Jews* into your coalition. Certainly logic now demands that you also accept, amongst your brethren, Satanists and polyamourists, right?”

I’m sorry, but this is absurd: simply because one’s tolerance extends as far as point X, there is no “logic” that compels one to extend extend it even further to point Y. Just because I can get along with someone who foolishly thinks the Rolling Stones were better than the Beatles does not mean I must also make friends with someone who favors racial apartheid. Presumably Vallier himself has limits to his tolerance: would he enter into a coalition with white supremacists because they agree with him on interpreting the First Amendment?

In fact, if Vallier’s “logic” were sound, well, then why shouldn’t nationalist conservatives, rather than extending their tolerance to classical liberals, extend it instead to progressives? The two groups could join together to dispel the myth of liberal neutrality, which both agree is nonsense!

Since the myth of the “neutral state” is exactly what has led us to the condition that post-liberals deplore, it is ridiculous to ask post-liberals to accept that myth in order to combat progressives. In fact, post-liberals should recognize that progressives, while mistaken in seeking utopian ends, are, in fact, allies in exposing the distinctly non-neutral character of the classical liberal state.