



מרכז אדמונד י' ספרא לאתיקה  
The Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics



Visiting  
Professor

# Liberalism Beyond Institutions

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Elga Cegla Conference Room (021)

The Buchmann Faculty of Law

**Prof. Joshua L. Cherniss**

Georgetown University



Joshua Cherniss (DPhil Oxford, PhD Harvard) is Associate Professor, Associate Chair and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Government, Georgetown University. He is the author of *A Mind and its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (2013) and *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (2021), and co-editor (with Steven B. Smith) of *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (2018). His work centers on the history of liberalism, political thought in the twentieth century, and political ethics.

From the projects of liberal constitution-making in the early nineteenth century to John Rawls's declaration that justice is the "first virtue of institutions," liberalism is often associated with institutions, broadly construed. The full picture is more complicated: as recent historians of liberalism such as Helena Rosenblatt and Edmund Fawcett have reminded us, liberal thinkers have long been concerned with matters that go beyond institutions—matters of personal conduct and character, and public culture. This offers a rejoinder to critics who see liberalism as too narrow, formalistic, and morally and motivationally impoverished. Yet it also raises challenging questions. If liberalism is characterized by fear of an overly constrained conception of how individuals should live, and of attempts to impose, or even encourage, such a conception of how to live through political action, it may be safer and more consistent for liberalism to confine itself to articulating a just, protective institutional framework within which individuals can pursue their own affairs in their own way. Both restricting liberalism to institutional prescriptions, and going beyond such prescriptions to engage in "soulcraft," may be fraught with dangers.

In this paper I show how and why some liberal thinkers believed it necessary to go beyond institutions, to define liberalism by, and promote it through, non-institutional, "personal" means. I also show how they sought to craft such "personal" versions of liberalism in a way that would avert the problems of coercion and uniformity—and, indeed, might do so more effectively than a purely institutional approach. Through this necessarily brief, selective, and incomplete reconstruction, I hope to suggest that there are good reasons for liberals to go beyond institutions, and good ways to do so within a liberal framework.

\* Professor Cherniss's talk is presented with cooperation by the TAU Lab on Liberalism

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