



Neutrality and Its Discontents: An Essay on the Ethics of Librarianship

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abstract: This essay analyzes the debate about neutrality in the library literature and identifies a fundamental moral dilemma that generates debate. It then advances an argument in favor of library neutrality based on Wayne Bivens-Tatum's intellectual history of library values in *Libraries and the Enlightenment* and the ideal of liberal neutrality developed by such political philosophers as Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Martha Nussbaum. In conclusion, the essay responds to potential objections to its pro-neutrality thesis by liberal and radical authors.

Questioning Library Neutrality

The ordinary individual, by exercising critical judgment, will select the good and reject the bad. We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe.¹

American Library Association

In the last 10 years or so, and especially since the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, "neutrality" has become a dirty word for many librarians committed to social justice. In 2008, Library Juice Press published *Questioning Library Neutrality*, a collection of articles from the *Progressive Librarian* that critiqued the idea of library neutrality from various perspectives.² Since then, articles and presentations rejecting the

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concept of neutrality as a fundamental flaw in the traditional ethos of librarianship have become increasingly common in the mainstream discourse of the profession. A few examples illustrate the trend:

- The American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in 2015 included the presentation “‘But We’re Neutral!’ and Other Librarian Fictions Confronted by #critlib.”³
- In 2017, *American Libraries* published an editorial titled “Never Neutral: Critical Librarianship and Technology.”⁴
- In 2018, the president’s program at the ALA Midwinter Meeting asked: “Are libraries neutral? Have they ever been? Should they be?”⁵

The critique of neutrality includes three strands. First, critics argue that maintaining a professional stance of impartiality undermines the ability of librarians to advocate for social justice through their work. Neutrality encourages moral cowardliness—conscious or not—by allowing librarians to hide behind false claims of evenhandedness as they capitulate to an unjust status quo. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu summarized this argument when he observed: “If you are in a situation where an elephant is sitting on the tail of a mouse and you say, ‘Oh no, no, no, I am neutral,’ the mouse is not going to appreciate your neutrality.”⁶ For critics, library neutrality means supporting the strong against the weak, the oppressors against the oppressed, and the majority against the marginalized.

The second strand of the critique argues that neutrality is a myth. In *Social Justice and Library Work*, Stephen Bales asserts that “library neutrality is a myth hiding a bias . . . all positions are political positions (some practitioners are just more honest in their admission of this).”⁷ According to this argument, those who assert that libraries ought to be neutral ignore deeper structural forces that shape our social world. False claims of neutrality legitimize the prerogatives of privileged social groups by making their advantages appear natural and inevitable. The concept of “white privilege” illustrates the argument. It is hard for white people to acknowledge that biased social institutions tend to give them more wealth and power because such an admission undermines meritocratic justifications of the existing distribution of social advantage based on the assumption that people basically get what they deserve through hard work.⁸ For critics, anyone who believes in the myth of neutrality fails to see how current institutions might be changed to improve social justice.

The third strand of the critique argues that neutrality diminishes the importance of librarianship by reducing librarians to mere technicians. According to librarian Joseph Good:

Neutral responses to the vital issues of gay marriage, African-American reparations, and affirmative action continually jeopardize the library’s relevance in contemporary society. If the librarian cannot be motivated to take a stand on pressing social issues out of a sense of moral duty, certainly the librarian should break his or her neutrality in the name of self-interest.⁹

If librarians merely process, manage, and distribute information without evaluating it, Good believes that they have minimal social importance. Good’s anxiety that neutrality



neuters librarianship resonates with broader anxieties about the value of librarianship in the digital age. At a time when librarians wonder if the Internet will render the profession superfluous, machines seem more likely to replace librarians who simply process data than those who are politically engaged.

Defending Library Neutrality

Somewhat surprisingly, the critique of neutrality has encountered little resistance in the literature of librarianship so far. In 2014, a library director blogging about the “Myth of Library Neutrality” observed:

I recently attempted to find information supporting the idea of library neutrality, but had a hard time finding anything other than opinion pieces by those questioning the concept. It looks like what we have ended up with is outdated discourse that does not reflect what the library profession is doing and how they actually feel about it.¹⁰

In his 2015 book, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship*, Stephen Bales points to what he sees as a

dearth of recent scholarly publications in favor of nonpartisan librarianship. Other than opinion pieces and listserv disputes, calls for neutrality, it seems, are beginning to be relegated to the official statements of professional associations, boilerplate lectures in college classrooms, and textbooks, all of which often benefit by avoiding openly stated political positions.¹¹

If belief in library neutrality is as pervasive as the critique supposes, one wonders why persistent criticism has not met with more opposition in the literature. Perhaps, as Bales suggests, the critique has been so successful that it is no longer possible to offer a rational defense of neutrality. Perhaps, in contrast, the virtues of neutrality are so obvious to most librarians that they see no need for theoretical justification. Perhaps the pro and con debate about neutrality at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in 2018 reflects a growing awareness of the critique and will lead to increasing scholarly debate.

For now, the most vigorous defense of library neutrality can still be found in a 1975 book by David Berninghausen, *The Flight from Reason: Essays on Intellectual Freedom in the Academy, the Press, and the Library*.¹² The central essay of the book, “Social Responsibility vs. the Library Bill of Rights,” was published in *Library Journal* in 1972 as part of an intense debate about the ethics of librarianship that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to the widespread social protests of that era.

Berninghausen was director of the School of Library Science at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and had been a strong advocate of intellectual freedom throughout his career. He chaired the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) of the ALA for several years and supported intellectual freedom as a member of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he sought to make intellectual freedom a fundamental ethical mandate of the library profession. He fought against efforts to force librarians to sign loyalty oaths during the McCarthy era, when there were widespread accusations of suspected Communist activities, often with little evidence.¹³ He also strove to make the ALA more effective in supporting librarians who



had been disciplined for resisting attempts to censor library collections.¹⁴

Berninghausen's 1972 essay was prompted by debate within the ALA about whether the social responsibilities of librarians should go beyond protecting intellectual freedom as defined by the Library Bill of Rights. In the ALA, as in many other organizations in the 1970s, the consensus New Deal liberalism of the post-World War II era was being challenged by radicals opposed to racial segregation and the Vietnam War. A growing number of Americans believed that there were fundamental flaws in American society that could be resolved only by radical change. ALA members committed to these ideas formed the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) and argued that librarians ought to take a clear stand in favor of progressive social movements. They proposed a broader definition of "social responsibility" that contrasted with the ideal of intellectual freedom that Berninghausen had championed throughout his career. In 1970, the SRRT issued a report that framed their understanding of the social role of the library as an alternative to the more limited political agenda that Berninghausen had defended as chair of the IFC:

There are two conflicting definitions of Social Responsibility held by members of the ALA at present. The first is traditional, conservative and variously phrased. "The function of a library is to have factual material on both sides of the question. The library is a reservoir for information and our business is to conserve it and wait till our users require its contents. The library is a source of ideas, not a promoter of them."

The second definition of "social responsibility" is considered radical, new, activist. It can best be summed up by a definition put forth by ALA's Committee on Organization (COO): "Social responsibilities can be defined as the relationships that librarians and libraries have to non-library problems that relate to the social welfare of our society."¹⁵

Although the report embraces intellectual freedom, it asserts that defending intellectual freedom represents an overly narrow political agenda. In a period of intense social conflict, the SRRT wanted librarians to take a stand on broader questions of social justice.

Berninghausen maintained that adopting the SRRT's radical definition of social responsibility would destroy rather than expand the ALA's political effectiveness. In his eyes, taking an activist position on "non-library problems" meant abandoning effective commitment to intellectual freedom. He argued that a library could be an "advocacy" library or a "Library Bill of Rights" library, but not both. By promoting specific positions on questions of ongoing social debate, libraries undermined their role as impartial advocates in favor of open-minded democratic discourse: "America's librarians cannot afford to be neutral about their commitment to preserve the freedom to read for everyone. At the same time, as professionals, they must remain neutral about the issues of the day regardless of what they may do as private citizens."¹⁶ Although Berninghausen acknowledged that the country faced many social problems and that librarians had an obligation to contribute to the solution of these problems as citizens, he argued that librarians' commitment to the professional ideal of intellectual freedom had to take priority over personal political commitments while working in the library.

The question is why Berninghausen believed that advocacy was incompatible with intellectual freedom. Why is fighting racism, economic inequality, or nuclear proliferation incompatible with defending patrons' right to read whatever they want? The conflict is

not immediately obvious. In fact, the AAUP takes the opposite position for its members. For university professors, having intellectual freedom means having the right to *express* their political opinions without fear of institutional retribution. All that the AAUP requires is a commitment to scholarly accuracy and the willingness to “show respect to the opinions of others” in intellectual debate.¹⁷ In the academy, defending intellectual freedom means creating an environment that promotes open-minded discussion of ideas where everyone is encouraged to articulate, defend, and justify their values. So, why would Berninghausen believe that intellectual freedom in the library requires that librarians *suppress* their opinions in their professional activities?

In hindsight, I think that Berninghausen’s attempt to answer this question was marred by his intense engagement with the ongoing political struggles within the ALA. As the chair of the IFC, he saw the SRRT’s rejection of the “traditional, conservative” interpretation of social responsibility as a direct attack against himself, his committee, and the ideals that he had championed throughout his career. Moreover, he was dismayed by the apparent embrace of the SRRT’s position by the library press. His book includes extensive complaints about *Library Journal*’s abandonment of objective journalism, in part stemming from his belief that he had been unfairly criticized by the magazine.

The inflammatory title of Berninghausen’s book reflects his unwillingness—in the heat of an ongoing political fight—to grant a fair hearing to his opponents. For Berninghausen, advocacy was incompatible with intellectual freedom because activist librarians had taken a “flight from reason” to embrace irrational dogmatism. For example, he argued that librarians who thought that libraries should endorse the environmental politics of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* prioritized “gut feelings” over rational debate. They “feel that they are right *because* they are sincere in their beliefs and *because* they hold strong convictions.”¹⁸ There was no middle ground in Berninghausen’s analysis that would allow a librarian to endorse a radical political position without becoming a “rigid,” “intransigent” extremist who sincerely believed “that anyone who does not view the world precisely as they do should be forced to conform or cease to exist.”¹⁹ Berninghausen believed that adopting the SRRT’s vision of librarianship was equivalent to adopting left-wing political dogmatism just as damaging to democratic values as the right-wing McCarthyism that Berninghausen had fought against in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, due to the inherent right-leaning political tendencies of the nation, Berninghausen argued that the activism of left-wing extremists almost always contributed to the ultimate triumph of right-wing extremism in American politics by undermining democratic traditions that hold all forms of authoritarianism at bay.

Berninghausen’s intransigence prevented him from acknowledging that political activism is not inherently inconsistent with fair and open-minded debate. A librarian can be completely committed to the arguments of *Silent Spring* without closing her mind to alternative perspectives. Antinuclear activists can try to convince other citizens of the accuracy of their views without seeking to impose their conclusions on others through force or censorship. Most of the librarians who responded to Berninghausen’s original article in *Library Journal* disagreed with

... political activism is not inherently inconsistent with fair and open-minded debate.



him on these grounds.²⁰ They argued that the irrational library ideologues that Berninghausen admonished in his essay existed only in his imagination. They failed to see themselves in Berninghausen's account and did not agree that advocating for a broader interpretation of a librarian's social responsibility meant abandoning their commitment to intellectual freedom.

A Deeper Moral Dilemma

Although Berninghausen's attacks against his critics weakened his argument, I still believe that his description of a stark contrast between "social responsibility" and "intellectual freedom" points to a troubling moral dilemma at the heart of librarianship in a liberal democratic society. The dilemma results from two powerful moral intuitions that pull librarians in opposite directions whenever their own moral values differ significantly from the moral values of their patrons. I will call these intuitions Proposition A (activist) and Proposition N (neutrality).

Proposition A asserts that we ought to do everything in our power to prevent injustice regardless of whether we started it. A witness who fails to prevent a crime when she has the power to do so is almost as culpable as the person who commits the crime, in the eyes of most. And the more power someone has, the more responsibility she has. A trained, gun-carrying policeman has greater responsibility to stop a mugging than does a frail, elderly citizen. Bosses have more responsibility to limit injustice in their organizations than do their subordinates. This intuitive sense of responsibility to fight injustice initiated by others—or by society at large—is at the heart of discontent with library neutrality. According to the critics, librarians who fail to use the influence conferred on them by their education and their social status to reduce ongoing social injustice are as culpable as witnesses who do nothing to stop ongoing crimes.

Proposition N asserts that it is wrong for someone in a position of authority to impose her moral values on others. Most citizens in liberal democratic societies believe in the fundamental moral autonomy of their fellow citizens. Government officials should not censor political ideas that they disagree with. Bosses should not impose their beliefs on employees. The desire to respect the moral autonomy of all citizens is at the heart of the ideal of library neutrality. When the Freedom to Read Statement of the ALA says that librarians "do not foster education by imposing as mentors the patterns of their own thought," it asks librarians to respect the intellectual autonomy of their patrons.²¹ Instead of serving as moral educators, librarians provide information that allows patrons to make up their own minds.

When the overall moral worldview of a librarian is largely in harmony with the worldview of her patrons, propositions A and N usually are compatible with each other. The dilemma comes when librarians encounter patrons whose moral ends are fundamentally at odds with their own. Then, it often seems that the best way for librarians to use their authority to prevent injustice is to use their influence to impose the "patterns of their own thought" on the patron. Thus, the only way to accomplish proposition A is to violate proposition N, or vice versa. A few thought experiments illustrate the dilemma.



Scenario A

As a history major in college, librarian A developed the conviction that socialism is a delusionary ideal that leads to social evil. After studying several socialist revolutions that resulted in authoritarian societies, he became convinced that the quixotic dreams of socialism are based on a false understanding of human nature that always leads to tragedy.

Patron A is a doorman at a luxury hotel who comes to the library with a conviction—based on his experience with employers who have exploited him and his daily observation of the extremes of wealth and poverty in front of his hotel—that our social order is deeply immoral. In the reference interview, patron A expresses a desire to read *Das Kapital* and similar types of socialist literature to better understand what is wrong with our society.

During the interview, librarian A struggles with a dilemma. By helping patron A access the writings of Marxist theorists, the librarian would contribute to his miseducation. The librarian knows that the material is flawed but will be seductive to the patron in his current frame of mind. What if patron A—enticed by the fantasies of socialism—inspires his friends to engage in protests that lead to unnecessary pain and suffering? But if the librarian nudges his patron toward sound political conclusions by warning him about the errors of his chosen authors or by directing him toward more accurate social theorists, does he violate the intellectual autonomy of his patron?

Scenario B

Librarian B recently graduated with a degree in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, where he learned that homosexuality is a natural and morally blameless form of human desire. Prompted by the experience of a close friend who was forced to go through conversion therapy as a teenager, he wrote a paper on conversion therapy demonstrating that it is pseudoscientific nonsense that causes unnecessary suffering for those forced to endure it.

Patron B is a middle-aged father troubled by homosexual tendencies that he has observed in his son. His son has not yet come out as gay, but the father is worried that the boy is headed toward an unhappy life of social exclusion. Patron B recently heard a radio interview about a book called *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* by Joseph Nicolosi and wants to learn more about reparative therapy. He asks the librarian to help him find Nicolosi's book and others like it.

During the reference interview, librarian B struggles with a moral dilemma. He knows that reparative therapy is nonsense, but he fears that it will be attractive to the patron in his current frame of mind. If the librarian simply helps the patron find the books he wants, he may encourage a course of action that will cause much suffering for the patron's family. However, if librarian B warns the patron about Nicolosi's errors and directs him toward authors who will give the patron a better understanding of what his son is experiencing, is librarian B using his authority to undermine the patron's intellectual autonomy and his ability to develop his own moral opinions?



Scenario C

Librarian C is a born-again Christian who suffered from sexual confusion until he had a conversion experience when he was 21. His moral values are based on his study of scripture, the guidance of his pastor, and the moral intuitions derived from his close relationship to God. Librarian C knows that giving in to the type of homosexual desires that tormented him as a teenager alienates sinners from God and leads to unnecessary suffering both in this life and the next.

Patron C is a 15-year-old boy who has been troubled by increasingly strong homosexual fantasies. In the reference interview, patron C expresses the desire to learn more about where his desires come from and what he should do about them. He has been afraid to talk with anyone he knows because his family and friends disapprove of homosexuality. Somewhere, he heard about book called *The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens*. Does the library have it or books like that?

Librarian C's dilemma is like that of librarian A or B. If he simply directs the patron—without warning—toward the literature that the patron has requested, he may doom the patron to a life of sin. The librarian knows that those books are misleading, but they are likely to seduce the patron in his current frame of mind. Does the librarian's obligation to respect the patron's intellectual autonomy take precedence over his obligation to protect the patron from moral corruption?

Separation of Spheres

In these thought experiments, the tension between advocacy and neutrality does not necessarily derive from irrationality, dogmatism, or an unwillingness to consider alternative points of view. It comes from something deeper and more profound—from our society's ongoing debate about the legitimacy of conflicting systems of moral value in which reasonable people may disagree. Three factors lead to the librarians' dilemmas:

1. Moral and political beliefs matter. Is socialism a utopian fantasy or a viable political option? Is homosexuality a natural form of sexual desire or a dangerous perversion? Actions based on the wrong answers to these questions lead to injustice and suffering.

2. There is no universal agreement about what is morally good, and there probably never will be. As one social theorist has argued: "Many of our deepest moral and metaphysical beliefs, like how to live a good life or which God to worship, are inherently contestable—reasonable people can and will disagree."²²

3. Librarians serve as an interface (gatekeeper?) between patrons and the information that patrons seek to develop and defend their values. Our authority comes from our official role as mediators between patrons and organized collections of evidence that support different points of view. If we choose, we can use our authority to favor our own views at the expense of alternatives. Our influence derives from several aspects of library work:

- a. As in my thought experiments, the reference interview gives librarians a chance to guide patrons to data and arguments consistent with our own views.
- b. Collection and preservation decisions can favor information consistent with our own values.

- c. Metadata created by librarians to organize collections can impose moral judgment through categorization by, for example, labeling some religious communities as cults or some forms of sexual desire as psychological disorders.²³
- d. Search algorithms created (or adopted) by librarians can make it easier to find information consistent with our own values and harder to find evidence that challenges our biases.²⁴

So, when and how should we use our professional authority to direct patrons to the correct moral views as we see them? Perhaps there is no systematic theoretical resolution to the conflict between proposition A and proposition N. In practice, most librarians will be guided by intuition and experience when they encounter these dilemmas in their work. Can we go beyond that? Can we determine if proposition A or proposition N ought to have priority when they come into conflict in the work of librarianship? That to me, is the deep question at the heart of the debate about library neutrality.

Despite Berninghausen's hyperbole, his essay offers a powerful means of addressing the dilemma through a strict segregation between our private and our professional lives. He argues that librarians can meet the demands of both proposition A and proposition N by applying them in different spheres. "In their private, personal lives, librarians exercise their rights as *citizens* to play active roles as partisan proponents and supporters of social, political, or religious causes and organizations."²⁵ As citizens, family members, and friends, proposition A takes precedence, and librarians should use their influence to fight for social justice as they understand it. However, as librarians, proposition N takes precedence: "In their *professional* work, which they consider a part of the communication system by which human beings maintain contact with the world around them, librarians maintain as high a degree of impartiality and neutrality as is humanly possible."²⁶ For Berninghausen, the library is an institution devoted to the support of the intellectual freedom for all citizens, and the goals of the institution take precedence over the private moral convictions of librarians in their professional work. At times, this priority leads to internal conflict because our professional commitments prevent us from performing moral acts we would be obligated to perform in our private lives. However, the importance of preserving the long-term value of the library as a source of intellectual autonomy for everyone makes professional restraint worthwhile.

Although Berninghausen strives to provide moral clarity, the blunt alternative that he offers between social activism and librarianship may have the opposite effect for many librarians. If the Library Bill of Rights requires parking our moral values outside every time we go to work, maybe something is wrong with *it*. Why should librarians restrict their social advocacy precisely in the arena where their training and expertise give them the greatest social influence? Why exactly are the Freedom to Read Statement and the Library Bill of Rights so important to librarianship in the first place?

A Library Neutrality Syllogism

Answering these questions has been difficult for me because the values expressed in the Library Bill of Rights seem so obvious that they hardly need justification. Who could disagree when the Library Bill of Rights asserts that "materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation"? Who



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could argue when the ALA’s Freedom to Read Statement says that “the ordinary individual, by exercising critical judgment, will select the good and reject the bad”? For most

of my career, such sentiments have been easy platitudes, the inevitable moral landscape of librarianship, rather than controversial political commitments that could be challenged. But the critique of library neutrality interrupts my dogmatic slumbers. Recent United States elections make me wonder if it librarians really ought to “trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe” as the Freedom to Read Statement asserts. In a “post truth” era, faith in the critical judgment of the

ordinary individuals may be disastrous. Can librarians really assume that patrons will recognize fake news for what it is if we do not “protect” them from propaganda or if we refuse to “foster education by imposing as mentors the patterns of [our] own thought”? The neutrality debate forces me to interrogate the deeper political assumptions implicit in the platitudes so confidently expressed in mid-twentieth century ALA documents. Are they still viable for twenty-first century librarianship?

My attempt to think through these questions has led me to the library neutrality syllogism summarized here. The following sections of the essay will flesh out the steps of the argument and then respond to potential objections.

Major Premise: Libraries and the Enlightenment

In *Libraries and the Enlightenment* (2012), Wayne Bivens-Tatum, author of the Academic Librarian blog, argues that “the philosophical and political principles of the European Enlightenment provide the philosophical foundation of American academic and public libraries.”²⁷ These principles include a commitment to liberal democracy.

Minor Premise: Liberal Neutrality

Several twentieth century American political philosophers, including Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Martha Nussbaum, argue that “neutrality between different conceptions of the good” is essential to a liberal political state. If a state fails to maintain neutrality between different moral ideas, it fails to treat every citizen with the equal care and respect she deserves as a member of a liberal society.

Conclusion: Librarians Should Be Neutral between Different Conceptions of the Good

If Bivens-Tatum is right about the political principles of American librarianship and if Dworkin, Rawls, and Nussbaum are right about liberal neutrality, librarians should do their best to maintain neutrality between differing moral ideals to provide an intellectual environment in which every citizen has an equal opportunity to discover, develop, and defend her own conceptions of the good.



Libraries and the Enlightenment

Bivens-Tatum traces the historical origins and the ongoing “telos” of American librarianship to ideas developed by European Enlightenment thinkers in the seventeenth century, who believed in the power of human reason rather than traditional authority. Although the scholarship about the Enlightenment is vast, Bivens-Tatum relies on a recent analysis by intellectual historian Jonathan Israel to summarize Enlightenment ideals. In *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Israel argues:

Radical Enlightenment is a set of basic principles that can be summed up concisely as democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press . . . Its chief maxim is that all men have the same basic needs, rights, and status irrespective of what they believe or what religious, economic, or ethnic group they belong to, and that consequently all ought to be treated alike, on the basis of equity, whether black or white, male or female, religious or nonreligious.²⁸

Israel does not argue that all seventeenth century Enlightenment thinkers were ready to grant “full freedom of thought” to everyone immediately. Many famous Enlightenment philosophers denied equal rights to women, non-Christians, the poor, or non-Europeans. Many American revolutionaries steeped in Enlightenment ideals proclaimed that “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence while they continued to own slaves.²⁹ Nevertheless, Israel argues that Enlightenment thinkers developed a new understanding of the relationship between the individual and society that encouraged democratic equality. As Enlightenment ideas became more successful, that ideal was applied to broader and more inclusive groups of human beings.

The belief that all people are capable of reason and ought to have the freedom to develop their own moral and political ideals is central to Enlightenment values. In his famous 1784 essay “What Is Enlightenment?” Immanuel Kant stated, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”³⁰ The idea that everyone can reason for themselves undermines paternalistic forms of religion and society, which assume that most people are not capable of finding the truth on their own. Traditional pre-Enlightenment rulers in Europe believed that access to truth was limited to a small, educated elite and that political power should be restricted to a small class of aristocrats. Most people were destined to serve the will of God or the needs of the state rather than to pursue their own ends. The liberal conception of society as an institution that can only be justified by the benefits it brings to its individual citizens is built on the Enlightenment’s ideal of autonomy.

Bivens-Tatum argues that American libraries have earned social legitimacy based on their promise to promote Enlightenment values. Academic libraries primarily serve the modern university’s quest for knowledge as an end unto itself. Before the Civil War, most American universities focused on moral training for ministers and political elites in specific religious traditions. Because “instruction was dependent on studying a few classical texts closely, or through recitation from textbooks, there was hardly any need for academic libraries to support the curricula.” College libraries were “just not that important” because there was little need for intellectual exploration beyond the approved



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texts.³¹ Only when American universities began to adopt the Enlightenment model of German universities at the end of the nineteenth century did American academic libraries become important. As the search for new knowledge became the primary purpose of

the university, large and well-organized libraries were needed to store the endless accumulation of learning and to support the independent exploration of scholars.

American public libraries gained popular support as a means of promoting the intellectual self-development of democratic citizens. Bivens-Tatum demonstrates that the earliest publicly funded libraries—also built in the middle to late nineteenth century—were justified as a supplement to public schools because they allowed adults to continue the

education that the schools had started. Access to a library was valuable to democratic society because “the largest possible number of persons should be induced to read and understand questions going down to the very foundations of social order, which are constantly presenting themselves, and which we, as a people, are constantly required to decide.”³² Although there has been debate about whether public libraries actually do enlighten the public instead of merely entertaining them, justifications for using tax dollars to pay for libraries continue to focus on their role in promoting the free inquiry necessary for a liberal democracy.³³

Bivens-Tatum does not address the Freedom to Read Statement directly, but the document buttresses the connection that he makes between the Enlightenment and the ethos of American librarianship. The language used by the ALA in 1953 closely resembles Kant’s 1784 essay on enlightenment. According to Kant, “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 . . . The public use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among mankind.”³⁴ Kant’s emphasis on intellectual independence is mirrored in the ALA’s credo: “We believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture.”³⁵ The public library embodies the intellectual self-reliance prized by Kant. Unlike a school or a church where intellectual development is directed by a master, the library creates an open intellectual environment where individuals are guided by their own curiosity.

I believe that Bivens-Tatum succeeds in his effort to trace the origins and ongoing purpose of library values to the Enlightenment. His historical account shows that the ideals of librarianship in a liberal democracy are not eternal truths inherent in the universe but are embedded in specific social institutions designed to achieve specific political ends.

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Liberal Neutrality

The thesis of liberal neutrality was developed by several American political philosophers in the late twentieth century in response to the same political conflicts that led to the ALA debate about library neutrality during the 1970s. In a famous 1978 essay on "Liberalism," Ronald Dworkin asked if liberalism still was a viable political philosophy after the disaster of the Vietnam War—conducted by Americans who called themselves liberals—and the dissolution of the New Deal liberal consensus. In the 1970s, many believed that Vietnam "exposed hidden connections between liberalism and exploitation" and decided that "the line between liberalism and conservatism was . . . [a] sham."³⁶ To continue to believe in liberalism as a morally coherent political philosophy, Dworkin sought to find a deeper principle beneath the flawed policies of Cold War politicians.

The principle that Dworkin proposed is that liberal "government must be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life."³⁷ Because people have differing ideas about "what gives value to life," liberals believe that the only way "for the government to treat all its citizens as free, or as independent, or with equal dignity" is to allow everyone to live according to their own standards of virtue as much as is practically possible. According to Dworkin, the ideal of liberal neutrality is compatible with differing political and economic policies. Dworkin himself supported a market economy modified by income redistribution and a social safety net but thought that liberal neutrality also was compatible with more extreme versions of *laissez-faire* or with socialism. The key difference between liberalism and competing political philosophies is not a matter of specific economic policies but the fundamental belief that citizens ought to decide for themselves how to live their lives. Non-liberal political philosophies assume that the government must have its own "theory of what human beings ought to be" and then develop policies that encourage citizens to live according to appropriate standards of virtue.³⁸ Liberalism focuses on increasing the autonomy of citizens to choose their own version of the good life, whereas other forms of government encourage (with more or less force) citizens to live a good life as the government has defined it.

In *Political Liberalism* (1993), John Rawls, perhaps the most influential American political philosopher of the twentieth century, built a complete system of political morality out of the insights in Dworkin's essay.³⁹ According to Rawls, pluralistic democratic societies are composed of groups of people who believe in a wide variety of "comprehensive" moral doctrines, including Catholicism, Lutheranism, Islam, Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Marxism, and many others. Comprehensive moral philosophies offer a thoroughgoing account of the universe and human nature to explain the standards of virtue that ought to govern human behavior. Differing comprehensive philosophies offer conflicting accounts. For example, Muslims believe that human behavior ought to be consistent with the word of God as transcribed by Muhammad in the Quran, whereas Utilitarians dismiss all forms of religious belief and argue that human behavior ought to be governed by the desire to produce the greatest amount of collective happiness for humanity. Other comprehensive moral philosophies offer many other incompatible theories of virtue.

According to Rawls, most political philosophers in the past assumed that political virtue must be embedded in a comprehensive moral doctrine. To build a just society, the philosopher assumes that leaders must first evaluate the various moral systems avail-

able to them. Then, after choosing the right comprehensive theory of value, leaders can evaluate specific political policies based on how well the policies promote their chosen standards of virtue. Rawls considers “political liberalism” an alternative to comprehensive political philosophies because it is based on limited standards of political justice that need not choose between competing comprehensive theories of morality. In a pluralistic democratic society, Rawls believes that almost everyone can agree on shared standards of social justice even if they never will agree about the existence of God or other contested moral questions. Social justice in a liberal society focuses on the virtues of shared civic life, in which diverse communities with differing moral ideals must cooperate to achieve social ends, rather than on the virtues of comprehensive moral systems.

Governmental neutrality between differing comprehensive systems of value is a fundamental feature of justice in a politically liberal state, according to Rawls. Neutrality is necessary to achieve a state that can be legitimate for everyone regardless of their comprehensive system of values. Because no one would agree that a society that systematically suppresses her *own* values is just, everyone must agree not to use the power of the state to impose their views on others. For everyone who agrees to play by the rules of liberal democracy—and does not use force or intimidation to impose their beliefs on others—the state should not privilege any one view above others.

The University of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who adopted Rawls’s political liberalism, offers a powerful explanation of how governmental neutrality promotes a society in which all citizens are treated with dignity:

Respect in political liberalism is, first and foremost, respect for persons, not respect for the doctrines they hold, for the grounding of those doctrines, or for anything else about them. It is because we respect persons that we think that their comprehensive doctrines deserve space to unfold themselves, and deserve respectful, nonderogatory treatment from government . . . For a public official in a leading role to say “X’s doctrine is not as well grounded as Y’s” is, inevitably, to denigrate X, and we want our political principles to show equal respect to X and Y.⁴⁰

Although Nussbaum supports Rawls’s overall theory, she develops an important critique of one aspect of his argument. Rawls thought that liberal societies should be open to all “reasonable” doctrines. So, Nussbaum asks, what makes a doctrine unreasonable? How do we determine what doctrines ought not be tolerated in a pluralistic democracy? Rawls, at times, tried to define unreasonable doctrines as those that are obviously inaccurate or are based on faulty logic. But Nussbaum argues that Rawls’s theory is a moral and political account of society, and its definition of “unreasonable” also should be moral and political. For her, an unreasonable doctrine is one that rejects liberalism’s moral premise that every citizen ought to be treated with equal respect. Thus, the state ought not condone “hate speech” that attacks the fundamental political rights of other groups in society, but everyone who respects the dignity of their fellow citizens should be free to develop, follow, and promote, their own values—regardless of content—without discrimination or bias from the state.⁴¹



Library Neutrality and Political Liberalism

Political liberalism grounds the ideals assumed in the Library Bill of Rights in a broader theory of social justice. According to Rawls and Nussbaum, liberal neutrality is the best means of achieving the enlightened democratic society that libraries are designed to support according to Bivens-Tatum. Rawls's distinction between comprehensive moral systems and the more limited system of political justice provides deeper theoretical justification for Berninghausen's distinction between the private and the professional lives of librarians. In their private lives, librarians have the same rights as any other citizen to develop, support, and promote their own comprehensive conceptions of the good. In their professional lives, librarians who work as public officials have an obligation to treat all comprehensive doctrines with equal respect, including doctrines that they vigorously oppose in their private lives.

According to this view, the neutrality of the public library makes it especially valuable as a means of promoting self-development in politically liberal societies. Nussbaum argues that "real freedom to live according to one's own view also requires protecting the spaces in which people may leave one view and opt for another, and also the spaces in which children learn about options so that they can really live their own lives."⁴² It is hard to imagine spaces better suited to encouraging the exploration of options than public libraries. And it is hard to imagine a more important political responsibility for librarians than to "protect" those spaces by making sure that libraries continue to provide a wide diversity of views for citizens to explore.

This account addresses the primary criticisms of neutrality articulated in recent library discourse. Against the charge that neutrality protects the strong against the weak, the political liberal argues that the purpose of neutrality is precisely to protect the opinions of the minority against the tyranny of the majority. In a democratic society, the danger often is that the majority will use its influence to impose its comprehensive system of moral values on a minority. By protecting a space where all views receive equal respect—including those of the majority, the minority, the powerful, and the poor—the library can counterbalance the tendency to enforce conformity of opinion in democratic communities.

Of course, no library exists in the perfectly liberal society imagined by Rawls. Marred by persistent racism, sexism, and increasing economic inequality, twenty-first century America has not come close to achieving a political order in which every citizen receives equal respect. If librarians ignore these distressing realities and act as if our society has already achieved social justice, many of the inequities in the surrounding environment will be replicated within the library walls. Affirmative action within the library can mitigate the consequences of injustice outside the library while maintaining the ideal of neutrality between different conceptions of the good.⁴³ Librarians ought to seek out and collect

By protecting a space where all views receive equal respect—including those of the majority, the minority, the powerful, and the poor—the library can counterbalance the tendency to enforce conformity of opinion in democratic communities.

viewpoints infrequently expressed in the mass media because they are inconsistent with the interests of those who have money and power. Making sure that unpopular and unconventional opinions are available in the library and increasing their visibility is a useful means of countering biases of conventional wisdom. However, from the perspective of political liberalism, the goal always is to expand the diversity of options available to patrons rather than to direct them to conclusions that the librarian considers correct. For the library to emphasize specific doctrines—either minority or majority—because they are “right” would undermine the library’s role as a space that treats everyone with equal respect and gives them the opportunity to explore differing options of the good.

Political liberalism also answers the charge that library neutrality is an ahistorical, apolitical myth. Because it grounds library values in the philosophical vision of the European Enlightenment and commits the library to the support of liberal democracy, this argument does not pretend that neutrality is a natural ideal that transcends politics. The library’s neutrality is embedded in and limited by its political commitments. The library should not remain neutral when citizens, especially those who have power, refuse to play by the rules of political liberalism by using violence, threats, or intimidation to suppress the free expression of others. The library should, however, remain neutral between different conceptions of the good adopted by groups of citizens who are competing for political influence in democratic ways.

Liberal and Radical Critiques

Critics of the library neutrality syllogism fall into two camps, depending on which premise of the syllogism they challenge. Liberal critics accept the major premise that libraries are founded on Enlightenment ideals but reject the minor premise that liberal democratic institutions ought to be neutral. Radical critics reject the major premise that libraries ought to support Enlightenment values. They may agree with Bivens-Tatum’s historical account, but they disagree with the claim that liberalism ought to guide librarianship in the future.

The Liberal Critique

In the philosophical literature, liberal political theorists who reject liberal neutrality have been called perfectionists. They believe that a successful liberal society depends on specific types of virtue that the government must promote. From their perspective, simply taking a hands-off approach to political discourse and allowing the marketplace of ideas to determine what people believe does not offer adequate protection against irrational forces that threaten to overwhelm democratic societies.⁴⁴ Rawls argues that most pre-twentieth century liberals, such as Kant and John Stuart Mill, were perfectionists who did not make his distinction between comprehensive theories of justice and the more limited theory of political justice. They were “comprehensive liberals” rather than “political liberals.” Both Mill and Kant developed comprehensive moral theories that emphasized reason and believed that the government should discourage traditional religious dogmatism. In contrast to political liberals like Rawls, who believe that the government must maintain neutrality between scientific and religious accounts of the good life, liberal perfectionists agree with Mill and Kant that the government



has a responsibility to actively defend society against dogmatic ways of thinking that undermine rational discourse.

At the end of *Libraries and the Enlightenment*, Bivens-Tatum rejects library neutrality in favor of a comprehensive theory of Enlightenment rationalism. He argues:

Librarians cannot be, and should not be, neutral at all. Intellectual freedom should not mean the freedom to believe nonsense, but only to read it. And as proponents of intellectual freedom, librarians are by default implicated in the entire scheme of Enlightenment values I have elaborated . . . Intellectual freedom does mean that libraries should provide all information to all people, but it does *not* mean that librarians have to remain neutral towards that information.⁴⁵

Here, Bivens-Tatum embeds librarianship in a thoroughgoing scheme of Enlightenment rationalism. The moral obligation of librarians is not simply to preserve a place where citizens can explore different points of view but also to promote scientific reason against “nonsense.”

Because Bivens-Tatum believes that librarians ought to collect and provide access to all points of view regardless of their validity, the implications of his non-neutrality are subtle. However, his stance suggests that librarians have a responsibility to advise patrons on which views are more enlightened. In my reference desk thought experiments, he would presumably expect librarians to warn patrons about any nonsense in their chosen texts while directing them toward more enlightened authors. At one point, Bivens-Tatum argues that “sectarian religious views on homosexuality” contradict the enlightened views that librarians ought to promote.⁴⁶ He also expresses cautious support for efforts of early twentieth century public libraries to Americanize “immigrants from countries without democracies.”⁴⁷ While he advocates respect for all cultures, Bivens-Tatum suggests that libraries have a positive role to play in educating immigrants in habits of mind required for successful democracy. His argument suggests that not all comprehensive moral cultures are compatible with liberal democracy and that libraries ought to promote and encourage cultures consistent with democracy.

Bivens-Tatum’s belief that librarians have an active role to play in the fight against nonsense is particularly attractive at a time when many liberals worry that fake news and anti-intellectualism are undermining democratic discourse in Western societies. In a “post truth” world where many Americans refuse to believe in global warming, want to teach creationism in public schools, or believe that vaccinations cause autism, it seems important for librarians to stand up for reason. Recently, science itself has indicated that scientific reasoning needs help to get traction in the popular mind. Social psychologists and behavioral economists argue that our minds are governed by motivated reasoning and naturally gravitate toward ideas that are emotionally satisfying rather than toward reasoned argument and objective evidence.⁴⁸ Fake news spreads faster than objective reporting on social networks because it is designed to trigger powerful emotional instincts that go deeper than our commitment to reason.⁴⁹ If librarians fail to take the side of reason in such an irrational world, how can we expect our dedication to rational discourse and democratic liberalism to be effective?

As attractive as it is, Bivens-Tatum’s comprehensive, non-neutral embrace of Enlightenment rationalism leads to difficult questions about who is qualified to be a librar-

ian. Should people who disagree with the theory of global warming or the theory of evolution be allowed to serve on the reference desk, where they might mislead patrons? What about a librarian who believes in the Gospels, the Torah, the Book of Mormon, the Quran, or the Apache Creation Story? For me, none of these religious myths have any more rational warrant than arguments against global warming. As a library director, should I refuse to hire anyone who maintains religious beliefs at odds with my scientific understanding of the universe or at least force the employee to toe the line of science on the reference desk? What about librarians who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, perhaps because they believed some of the news about Trump and Hillary Clinton that was distributed by Russian trolls? Can someone who was irrational enough to vote for a politician based on false information distributed by foreign agents be trusted to distinguish nonsense from reason working at the reference desk?

Bivens-Tatum's rejection of library neutrality on perfectionist grounds harkens back to an earlier version of the Library Bill of Rights. According to Berninghausen, the Library Bill Rights used to include a clause saying that "books 'of sound factual authority' should not be proscribed or removed from libraries."⁵⁰ Including the qualifier "of sound factual authority" gave librarians leeway to keep nonsense out of their collections. However, after a public librarian in Illinois rejected a Protestant journal that criticized Catholicism because the journal lacked "sound factual authority," the ALA decided to remove the phrase from the 1967 version of the Library Bill of Rights instead of trying to determine whether Catholicism was more factual than Protestantism.

This change made the Library Bill of Rights more consistent with Nussbaum's interpretation of liberal neutrality, in which the state does not take an official stance on the scientific beliefs held by different groups in society. As indicated in the Freedom to Read Statement, the neutral approach requires faith in the critical judgment of ordinary individuals rather than in the moral guidance of librarians to protect democratic societ-

Librarians should build their institutions with the expectation that citizens will use them to expand the scope of democratic freedom and hope that their faith in the critical judgment of ordinary people is justified.

ies from authoritarian demagogues. It may be impossible to give any definitive proof in advance that such faith is justified, especially with our growing understanding of the power of irrational ideas and undemocratic impulses in human nature. Nevertheless, if faith in the judgment of ordinary citizens is not justified, I doubt that librarians can fix the problem by "imposing our own patterns" of thought on patrons—at least, I do not think that library paternalism could fix the problem in any way that is consistent with democracy. Thus, my ultimate argument against per-

fectionism is less a matter of evidence and proof and more a matter of hope and faith. Librarians should build their institutions with the expectation that citizens will use them to expand the scope of democratic freedom and hope that their faith in the critical judgment of ordinary people is justified. We will see what happens.



The Radical Critique

Radical critics of the library neutrality syllogism do not care if liberalism requires a neutral state because they reject liberalism itself. Conservative radicals reject liberalism on behalf of traditional moral values that they believe have been abandoned by modern society. They want to ground morality in traditional cultural beliefs because they believe that liberal, individualistic societies render people rootless and alienated.⁵¹ Revolutionary radicals reject liberal individualism not on behalf of abandoned social orders of the past but on possible social orders of the future. They argue that liberalism prevents people from achieving alternative social arrangements more consistent with human aspirations because liberal neutrality makes oppressive institutions seem inevitable by embedding them in false beliefs about human nature that are impervious to political change. Although conservative radicals appear to have more influence in contemporary American politics, I will focus on revolutionary radicals here because they are more influential in the current discourse of librarianship.

Whereas I have argued that liberal neutrality means that everyone in a democratic society should have equal opportunity to promote their moral views if they play by the rules of democratic discourse, radicals argue that the rules are rigged. Playing by the rules necessarily leads to inequities that undermine efforts to achieve social justice because liberalism encourages people to seek individualistic solutions to systematic problems that can be resolved only through collective action. For example, Andrew Carnegie contributed generously to public libraries because he wanted to give everyone in America the opportunity to become self-made entrepreneurs like himself. The resulting ubiquity of public libraries in the United States as arenas of self-improvement encourages the poor and ambitious to improve their social condition by increasing the “human capital” that they can sell in the marketplace rather than by joining together with others to seek political solutions to inequality. Public libraries may allow the lucky few to emulate Carnegie, but they encourage neglect of collective responses to inequality that have the potential to increase social justice in a more comprehensive way.

In her essay “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,” nina de jesus articulates the radical rejection of library neutrality with explicit directness. Her analysis is based on the social theory of Andrea Smith, a professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside. Smith argues that white supremacy, slavery, and genocide are inherent in the social institutions of modern capitalist societies.⁵² For me, the fundamental claim in her analysis is that white supremacy and genocide are essential rather than accidental features of modern liberal societies. Almost no one today—certainly no one whom I would call “liberal”—would defend white supremacy as a good thing. And few people—certainly no one whom I would consider honest and well-informed—would deny that white supremacy continues to exist in modern American society. Where Smith and de jesus disagree with me is in their assertion that it is impossible to get rid of white supremacy, slavery, and genocide without doing away with capitalism and liberalism. From their perspective, trying to eliminate white supremacy while playing by the rules of liberal democracy is like using a little bucket to remove the water from a boat full of holes. Faster than reformers can remedy social injustices generated by capitalism, the moral flaws at the heart of system create more violence and exploitation.

Because de Jesus considers liberal democracy rotten to the core, she argues that any institution—including libraries—that supports it contributes to the ongoing oppression of nonwhite people around the world: “The ideal of libraries as liberal institutions existing to make democracy ‘better,’ thus stronger, is no less than an ideal wherein the genocide of Indigenous peoples is finally completed (putting democracy in its strongest position).”⁵³ By “creating better citizens,” libraries contribute to the reproduction of an unjust social order based on violence. Librarians who assert that their institutions are politically neutral thus legitimize the violent oppression of indigenous people perpetuated by capitalism. Specifically, as institutions that collect and organize knowledge, libraries support the commodification of information through intellectual property rights. Although libraries try to share information with a broader audience, they participate in a system in which information becomes property by restricting access to information according to copyright rules. Only by “breaking and disrupting the system of intellectual property and other aspects of capitalism, especially the publishing industry” can librarians hope to make their work contribute to social justice instead of racial oppression, according to de Jesus.

As a citizen, I disagree with Smith’s and de Jesus’s political analysis because I am convinced by Israel’s and Bivens-Tatum’s argument that Enlightenment ideals and liberal values genuinely promote human freedom despite the obvious flaws of modern capitalist societies. Even if I agreed with de Jesus, I doubt that rejecting library neutrality would be the best strategy for disseminating her views. Librarians who seek to maintain neutrality between different conceptions of the good have an obligation to make Smith’s analysis available to their patrons regardless of whether they agree with it so that patrons can decide for themselves. A library committed to neutrality that hired de Jesus would ask her not to give preference to Smith’s social analysis over alternative theories while she was at work, but de Jesus would be free to write articles defending Smith or to engage in social activism to “unsettle America” on her own time without worrying about losing her job.⁵⁴ Thus, de Jesus’s conception of the good would get a hearing and a chance to prove to citizens that it is preferable to the alternatives.

If, in contrast, librarians were expected to actively engage in the moral education of patrons, de Jesus would have more freedom to fight against the oppressive preconceptions of liberalism at work, but librarians who disagree with her would also have more liberty to dismiss her views. While de Jesus thinks that “the enlightenment is and was evil because it is the ideology of colonialism,” Bivens-Tatum considers it the ultimate

Ultimately, radical views that currently reflect minority opinions will more likely get heard if librarians are committed to neutrality than if they are committed to radicalism.

source of beneficial modern social values.⁵⁵ Presumably, Bivens-Tatum would dismiss de Jesus’s article as an expression of moral nonsense that library patrons should be free to read but not to believe. Consequently, a patron who visited the library while Bivens-Tatum was at the reference

desk would receive a radically different moral education than a patron who came while de Jesus was on duty. And, if government agencies that hire librarians expected them to be morally engaged rather than morally neutral in their work, many agencies would

likely prefer to hire librarians who agree with Bivens-Tatum or me over librarians who agree with de Jesus or Smith. In conservative districts where traditional religious views hold sway, it would be difficult for any of us to get work. Ultimately, radical views that currently reflect minority opinions will more likely get heard if librarians are committed to neutrality than if they are committed to radicalism.

Perhaps one could argue that a commitment to library neutrality is a huge missed opportunity because the practice of librarianship confers superior moral insight on librarians. Perhaps the psychological tendencies that entice someone into a career of librarianship are more conducive to the discovery of moral truth than the tendencies that lead to a career as a banker or a dentist. Perhaps daily exposure to a wide variety of literature, diverse systems of information retrieval, and the social needs of patrons makes librarians more sensitive to moral reality than the average citizen. Perhaps librarians are like the philosophers in Plato's allegory of the cave who have escaped the distortions of vulgar opinion to see moral truth in the full light of day. If becoming a librarian imbues us with a deeper understanding of the evils of capitalism that remain obscure to most of our fellow citizens, perhaps we have a moral obligation to lead the way to a better society instead of passively hiding our insight behind false claims of neutrality. Perhaps the profession of librarianship is particularly well-suited to produce an intellectual vanguard committed to social justice.⁵⁶

I doubt that I can provide a definitive deductive argument against this view any more than I can prove that democracy will not be destroyed by the inherent irrationality of human nature. So far, however, political movements led by vanguards with superior moral insight have not gone well. In China, Eastern Europe, and Cuba, they produced totalitarian societies in which the government tried to mold the thoughts and actions of citizens in a particularly pervasive way. My hope still is that the best political responses to the challenges of our collective life will emerge from open discourse in a democratic society that respects the intellectual autonomy of all its citizens. Even if the economic individualism of a market society generates economic injustice, it does not necessarily follow that the intellectual independence encouraged by liberal morality and the ethos of American librarianship also is unjust. Individuals can agree to participate in collective action through unions and radical politics without abandoning their moral autonomy to decide for themselves what is right and wrong.⁵⁷ Faith in the moral independence of democratic citizens may be disastrous in a society distorted either by the fundamental irrationality of human nature or by systematic violence embedded in our institutions, but it still seems the best bet that we can make in an uncertain world.

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Notes

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12. David K. Berninghausen, *The Flight from Reason: Essays on Intellectual Freedom in the Academy, the Press, and the Library* (Chicago: ALA, 1975).
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29. See Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018), 109–52 for a good account of the Enlightenment ideals of the founders of the United States and how their ideals were compromised by slavery.
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32. Boston Public Library, “Upon the Objects to Be Attained by the Establishment of a Public Library: Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1852,” cited by Bivens-Tatum in *Libraries and the Enlightenment*, 107.
33. For a recent discussion of the entertainment versus education debate, see John Buschman, “On Democracy and Libraries,” *Library Quarterly* 88, 1 (2018): 23–40. Buschman analyzes Wayne A. Wiegand’s *Part of Our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015). Interestingly, Wiegand argues that his social history undermines the thesis that public libraries support democracy. Buschman argues that Wiegand misinterprets the evidence discovered in his own research because he understands “supporting democracy” in an overly narrow way. For Buschman, democratic education goes beyond wonkish interest in public policy such as reading the ballot propositions or knowing who your congressman is (for which libraries provide little help, according to Wiegand). Training for democratic citizenship includes broader forms of self-development and community engagement, which are widely supported by libraries, according to Wiegand’s history.
34. Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”
35. ALA, “The Freedom to Read Statement.”
36. Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism,” chap. 6 in Stuart Hampshire, T. M. Scanlon, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Ronald Dworkin, *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 113–14.
37. Dworkin, “Liberalism,” 127.
38. Ibid.
39. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
40. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, 1 (2011): 33.
41. The question of “hate speech” is challenging in this context. I define “hate speech” as speech that does not play by the rules of liberal discourse because it deliberately creates prejudice that hinders targeted groups from participating in civic life. Thus, libraries ought not be neutral about it. Of course, one must be careful about using a loose definition of “hate speech” as a backdoor escape from neutrality in general by defining any idea that one does not like as hate speech. Nevertheless, the challenge of applying the distinction in practice should not lead us to throw up our hands and not even try, as “free speech absolutists” tend to do. This is an important question that goes beyond the scope of the current essay. For a good discussion, see Jeremy Waldron, “Dignity and Defamation: The Visibility of Hate,” *Harvard Law Review* 123, 7 (2010): 1596–657.
42. Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism,” 36.
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44. Two political philosophers who have argued against liberal neutrality are Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1986) and George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
45. Bivens-Tatum, *Libraries and the Enlightenment*, 187.



46. Ibid., 133.
47. Ibid., 112.
48. A great deal has been written on these topics. For an overview of some of the recent research, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
49. Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, 6308 (2018): 1146–51.
50. Berninghausen, *The Flight from Reason*, 9.
51. For a relatively recent philosophical defense of conservatism, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
52. nina de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression>. de jesus cites Andrea Smith, "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy—Centre for World Dialogue," *Global Dialogue* 12, 2 (2010): 1–13.
53. de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression."
54. On "Unsettling America," de jesus refers to the website "Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory & Practice," <https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/about/>. If de jesus were an academic librarian, she might write articles in support of Andrea Smith on the university's time. For academic librarians, who often are expected to engage in scholarship as part of their work, the commitment to neutrality applies to their work with collections and patrons, not to their work as scholars. As scholars, librarians should have the intellectual freedom to articulate controversial opinions related to their areas of expertise without fear of losing their position. Neutrality applies at the reference desk or in collection development, where librarians should not give preference even to their own scholarship in relation to the work of intellectual opponents.
55. de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression."
56. See Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>, for an interesting discussion of the idea that "librarianship is a sacred calling" and the sense of moral superiority sometimes associated with the profession of librarianship.
57. For an economic/political analysis that comes closest to my current views on these questions, see Robert Kuttner, *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?* (New York: Norton, 2018), especially chapter 11, "Liberalism, Populism, Fascism."

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