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Introduction

Human beings are constantly subject to a variety of demands that they act in certain ways. Some of these demands may be ones that present themselves to us as arising (to use an almost unavoidable metaphor) from 'within' ourselves, either directly from our bodily constitution, as when I am cold and wish to warm myself or hungry and wish to eat; or in more highly mediated ways from various long-term projects we hold, as when I wish to read the work of Akhmatova and so must now begin to learn Russian. In addition the various moral or evaluative views we hold may give rise to demands 'from within', as when a decent person refrains from dipping into the unattended till in the shop, or jumping a queue. Sometimes, however, the demands are imposed on me not so much from within as by others. These externally imposed demands are themselves of different types and come from a variety of sources: the Inland Revenue Service invites and requires me to pay out a certain portion of my salary to the Treasury each year in tax (and they will proceed against me through the legal system if I fail to pay), a notice board informs me that the Board of Managers of a certain private club prohibits me from smoking on the club premises (and I will be embarrassed if an officer of the club asks me in front of the assembled members to stop smoking), friends insist that I join them in an expedition and will be very disappointed if I refuse, and so on. All human individuals and groups must act in such a way as to try to attain the goals they have, while negotiating their way through an almost invariably dense thicket of such diverse and, potentially at least, conflicting demands. It is not unreasonable to think that our actions will be more enlightened and successful if we are well informed about the environment in which they take place. 'Practical' (as opposed to 'theoretical') philosophy is devoted to trying to understand the situation of human agents who are confronted with the need to act; political philosophy turns its attention mainly to kinds of collective human action that involve co-operation with or aggression against other

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groups of human agents. Part of the 'situation' is a knowledge of the more important features of the natural world and the causal laws that govern them; a further part is knowledge of the entities and agencies that make up our social and political world and their properties, including their causal properties: what is the European Union and what does it have the power to do to me? How are multi-national corporations run and how much influence do or can they have on the legislative activity of modern states? Who are the parliamentary representatives for this region, how can I get in touch with them, and what can they really do?

The practical situation, then, includes not only natural and social objects, but also the ideas and conceptions people have. In some situations people do just knock one another about, treating each other as no more than physical bodies or as mere animals, like executioners dragging a condemned man off to his fate or enemies confronting each other in a shell-hole, but one cannot get very far in understanding human life if one thinks of it exclusively on the model of moving objects about or getting highly complex animals to do as one wishes. One major reason for this is that people do not simply wish to act, but they also wish to describe their actions in ways that they and others will find acceptable, to deflect possible criticism, to enlist (ideally) active support for projects they think important, and so on. Doing this requires the use of a historically existing language and appeal to existing human ideas and conceptions. I can perhaps change people's views by speaking with them or acting with or on them, but except in extraordinary circumstances there needs to be enough initial 'human contact' for this process of transformation to get going, and such 'human contact' will operate through an existing language and set of beliefs. These existing conceptions are important in two distinct ways. First, I will myself have certain views about the political world and how it works, how it ideally ought to work, and so on, and these will have an important influence on the way I act. Even minimal reflection will suffice to make me aware that I have not myself invented these conceptions but have taken them over from various people in my environment, who in turn had them from others. When I use 'undemocratic' as a reproach, part of the reason I do so is because I have been subjected to a barrage of speech and writing about 'democracy' and its virtues during all of my conscious life. I do not mean that I feel I have been brainwashed; rather I feel that I have been given a good opportunity to develop proper views on this topic. I also know, however, that if I had lived two hundred years ago, I would almost certainly have followed the then virtually universal use of 'democratic' as a term of reproach.

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Thus Kant held that democracy was inherently a form of 'despotism' because in a democracy a majority vote is taken to warrant overriding the vote of any (dissenting) individual, and many of the framers of the United States Constitution were careful to *deny* that the republic they envisaged would be a 'democracy'.[1]

In 'our' time and place, that is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Western Europe (and in Europe's ideological dependencies around the world), there are prevailing assumptions about politics and the good society which are no less firmly entrenched in our political life and thought for not always being explicitly expressed. One of the most important of these is an assumption that there is a single ideal model for thinking about politics. This model is the democratic liberal state with a capitalist economy, and a commitment to a set of human rights for its citizens. There are five distinct elements here – liberalism, democracy, the state, the capitalist economy, the doctrine of human rights – but in much contemporary thinking about politics it is tacitly assumed that these five items form a more or less natural, or at any rate minimally consistent and practically coherent, set. I want to suggest – and this is the main thesis of this book – that such an assumption is to a large extent an illusion. The conjunction of these five elements in contemporary Western societies was by no means virtually inevitable or even especially likely, but is rather the result of a highly contingent historical process. Furthermore, if the individual parts that compose this framework are considered carefully, some of them will show themselves to be highly confused or at best only very dubiously coherent, some are extremely implausible, and several can be seen to stand in relations of considerable tension with other elements in the set.

We are familiar with the kind of claim made in the last paragraph – that often the people living at a particular time and place will share a characteristic set of conceptions and assumptions of the kind described. If one wants to understand the politics of an epoch of which this is true, it is argued, it is natural to start by trying to understand that set. It is, however, in my view very important to see exactly what 'shared conceptions' means, and equally important to see what it does not mean. To start with the negative, there is a common way of proceeding which can be found in the work of some historians and which is broadly characteristic of most forms

[1] I. Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, 'Zweiter Abschnitt. Erster Definitivartikel zum ewigen Frieden', in *Kant Werkansgabe*, ed. W. Weischedel (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1977), vol. XI. See T. Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 59–60, 76–8. In the ancient world note Alkibiades' speech to the Spartans in Thucydides VI. 89.

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of liberalism, although by no means restricted to liberals. This approach thinks of a society as a moral whole characterised by a single, unitary, consistent underlying conception of the world, morality, and politics. Thus people in sixteenth-century Florence accepted 'The Renaissance World-View', people in late nineteenth-century Britain were 'Victorians', and so on. Often there is then a shift from this purported historical or sociological fact to a series of normative theses which are presented as if they followed simply and directly from this fact, but which are, on the contrary, highly speculative and highly questionable. Although this shift is rarely expressed in so many words, operating rather more frequently by insinuation, one can reconstruct it as involving three steps. First, it is suggested that if two people live in the same society at the same time, they will share many concepts, values, and views. It is an empirical question whether or not this is true in given circumstances, but when it is true, it is true enough. Then from this the conclusion is drawn that such people agree on a coherent central set of substantive moral beliefs that are, at least in principle, capable of being articulated, and that would continue to be felt to be binding by the agents, if they were fully articulated. Finally from this is drawn the conclusion that agents in the society could always, if they wished, and if the conditions were propitious, reach *moral consensus* with each other (because, after all, they 'share the same world-view' at some level).[2]

It is sometimes suggested that liberalism is about the recognition of human variety. This is not false, but it is, I think, a superficial view – only one very small part of the full story, and a highly misleading part, if taken in isolation. Liberals think rather that human societies are *capable of consensus* despite their variety. Arabs and Israelis, Russians and Tchechens, Serbs and Albanians, Tutsis and Hutus, Muslims and Christians may disagree superficially, but they *can* find consensus that will allow them to live together in peace. What is characteristically liberal is the attempt always to see society *sub specie consensus*. This approach, however, is completely misguided. It is not that consensus is inherently a bad thing, but it is such

[2] The German philosopher Habermas presents an almost clinically pure instance of this which differs from other versions in two ways. First his version seems to turn on a pun involving the German expression (*sich*) *verständigen* (which can mean either 'understand and make oneself understood to another other person' or 'reach a binding agreement with'). Second he thinks that there are a priori grounds to believe that at the deepest level we *all* – all humans – must share the same world-view, or at any rate must share a commitment to the same set of formal conditions for having a world-view, and thus must all be capable of reaching a universal consensus. See his 'Wahrheitstheorien', in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Festschrift für Walter Schulz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), pp. 252ff. and *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 97–9.

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an obscure and elusive concept that one is right to be suspicious of substantive claims that depend too strongly on it. Furthermore it is less clear than is often suggested that consensus in any of the usual and morally laden senses of that term is potentially universal: there simply is less of it around than people often suppose, and there are reasons for suspecting that there are strict limits to how much consensus 'could' be attained in any practically significant sense of the word 'could'. The normative standing even of 'real' existing consensus is not always unproblematic. Those in power obviously have an interest in claiming that a state of affairs which benefits them rests on a stable, morally binding consensus, so one must take their testimony with a grain of salt. In general, the price that would have to be paid for it is often higher than liberals are willing to admit (which does not, of course, imply that it is never reasonable to pay it).

In contrast to the liberal view, Marxists, of course, have always claimed that practically irreconcilable conflict is just as basic to all existing human societies as actual or potential consensus is. Nietzsche adds to this the very astute suggestion that we see 'modern' individuals as inherently guided by *different* and not self-evidently compatible 'moralities', that is, both diverse ways of acting and diverse ways of judging action morally.[3] Conflict exists, that is, not merely between groups but also within each individual as diverse forms of morality struggle for hegemony. No era and no individual has a completely clearly articulated, single consistent world-view. 'What we all share' is usually an overlapping jumble of only half-developed and potentially contradictory views. In nineteenth-century Britain, for instance, people may in one sense have been said to 'have' or 'share' the same world-view in that virtually all of them may have felt the gradual ebb of Christianity and feudal beliefs about status and honour, and the force of utilitarian considerations – but it did not follow that anyone *agreed* with anyone else in any significant or substantive sense. First of all, virtually all of the elements in this mixture were ill-defined – *what* exactly was meant by 'Christian morality' to begin with? – and second there would be no unique recipe according to which the ingredients of the melange had been combined.

Nietzsche views human society *sub specie belli*, although the *bellum* in question need not be conducted with fists, pikestaffs, or missiles but may consist of the genteel exchange of witticisms. Politics is about conflict and disagreement, and this means not only that parties will disagree,

[3] F. W. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* in *Kritische Gesamt-ausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967ff.), vol. V, § 215.

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but also that they will have a motivation to exploit existing conflicts or ambiguities in shared beliefs and values. Thus at certain times and places there might be a widely shared belief that society is naturally hierarchical with a king at the head, and also that there should be an established church. This is compatible with disagreement about who is to be king, what the king's specific powers are, and how the king is to be related to the established church. There may be both genuine and opportunistically dissimulated differences in the conception of what is demanded by reason, custom, decency, prudence, and scripture; there are also, of course, differences in the other values and priorities individual human beings will have, and greatly divergent judgements about the empirical world and the possibilities of human action. All of this will offer fertile ground for discord.

Since the ancient world[4] it has been a commonplace that forms of large-scale 'disagreement', like war, presuppose at least *some* form of internal consensus among the parties in conflict. The troops of country A cannot effectively attack those of country B unless the officers of A have control of their own troops, a control that would be ineffective if it rested on nothing more than brute force. This is sometimes mobilised as an argument in favour of at least a limited priority of consensus. Considerations from the observation of the early development of human infants might also be marshalled in the same cause. It requires no great astuteness to suggest that neither consensus nor conflict is the exclusive basis of human life and history. One has only as much consensus as one has (and no more), and can get only as much as one in fact 'can' get (in specificable senses of 'can') and no more. Standing pools of consensus exist, as do cascades of conflict. Some of the pools are malarial, and many of the cascades are dangerous and destructive. One must approach both with as much care and as much moral scepticism as one deploys anywhere else. Nevertheless I would wish to argue that a focus on conflict and discord has, at least, distinct methodological advantages, given the centrality of disagreement in politics.

In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* Nietzsche develops an approach to history which he calls 'genealogy'.[5] Genealogy starts from a form of historical nominalism. Nietzsche thought that Socrates had put us on the wrong track by suggesting that it was important to try to get formal definitions of those human phenomena that were of the greatest concern to us. It

[4] Plato, *Republic*, 351c–352a.
[5] I discuss these methodological views further in my 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', now reprinted in *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999).

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was perfectly possible and appropriate, Nietzsche thought, to seek for definitions of abstract items or of features of the natural world. Thus terms like 'triangle', 'water', 'mass', or 'gene' could be defined. The reason this was possible, in Nietzsche's view, was precisely that such terms designated items which were not part of history. A triangle was a triangle in fifth-century Greece or in nineteenth-century Tasmania, and the same was true of water. Human history, though, was concerned in the first instance not with entities such as these, but with objects such as Christianity, punishment, conscience, and morality, which were historically inherently *variable* configurations of powers, functions, structures, and beliefs. These 'objects' were bearers of multiple 'meanings' at any given time, and the constellation of the meanings associated with any one of them was constantly shifting. Incarceration in the twelfth century has a different role, function, and meaning from incarceration in the penal systems of the nineteenth century.[6] Freedom meant something different for Luther, Epictetus, and Herzen. Third-century Christianity was not the same as eighteenth-century Christianity. 'Christianity' – the concept and the reality – is what a succession of humans have made it by virtue of acting in certain ways. In acting people have different goals, changing values, variable interests, and these differences come to be reflected in the shifting meaning of the term. Was Christianity 'really' or 'essentially' Christ's first-century Jewish way of living, the doctrine of Paul, or the decrees on the nature of the Trinity made by a certain church council? Was it inherently a form of liberation from the Law or a highly restrictive discipline of the will? Was Manicheanism a form of Christianity? Was the Inquisition 'Christian'? Was Cistercian architecture particularly Christian? How about the architecture of the Austrian baroque? Or Hagia Sophia (now a mosque)?

In Nietzsche's memorable phrase, only what has no history can be defined. To try to get a single adequate formal definition of Christianity, punishment, liberalism, or democracy is to miss the point. Human words and human institutions are interlaced. Words arise and develop through actual human uses of them in contexts in which power is being exercised in one way or another. Through time human institutions are modified to serve new ends. Each re-use of a word like 'democracy' or 'Christianity' in a new context is potentially a reinterpretation of it. There are no 'natural' or unbreachable limits to the ways in which such reinterpretation can take place. What one must understand in dealing with

[6] See M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

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phenomena like Christianity or the state is a history, that is, a precise way in which through the course of time institutions and words have evolved under the pressure of the conflicting demands put on them by individuals and groups of humans, the natural world, and other institutions. This is not a reductivist view which claims that the ideas people associate with Christianity, the penal system, and other such things are 'mere' epiphenomena – a view held by some vulgar Marxists. Rather it is the view that beliefs, words, thoughts, intentions, and concepts are absolutely essential because without them and the 'meanings' they help humans impose on the world there would be no Christianity to study. At the same time, however, the beliefs that Christians hold in any given era are only *part* of the full story of Christianity. One can make a map or get a systematic overview of different forms of Christianity using 'empirical' ('historical' in the Greek sense) methods, but there is no analytic short-cut, no Royal Road (or Kantian *Heerstraße*) which bypasses history and yet leads to any significant understanding. Concepts, then, at any rate those which refer to human phenomena, are usually historically accumulated constellations of rather heterogeneous elements.

The Nietzschean view I have just sketched seems to undermine the claim which I earlier described as 'the main thesis of this book' in two respects. First, if virtually *all* world-views are historically contingent conjunctions of ill-defined concepts and half-unarticulated theoretical fragments, then it is no particular indictment of 'our' model of political life that it has that property. Second, if the concepts we actually use in politics are irremediably fuzzy and open-textured, and we can shape and warp them in indeterminately flexible ways to suit our purposes, then what exactly is the concern about coherency? The pragmatist variant of this second objection is that it is a mistake in any case to worry too much about the general coherence of theoretical structures. If theories are like tools, then the only useful question to ask about them is how well they do a particular job in the particular context in which their employment is envisaged. Abstract speculation about the 'coherence' or 'incoherence' of different tools is inherently otiose.

As far as the first of these is concerned, it is true that I see it as no objection to our current political views that they are a historical jumble. It is, however, an 'objection' if we suffer from the illusion that it is *not* such a jumble. Do we, however, suffer from this illusion? Is it really news to us that our concepts have a history and that they do not all fit together like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle? It is true that if one were to ask some of the most profound and astute political thinkers of the past century in

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their most reflective moments, they would admit *individually* about some or even each of my five items (liberalism, the state, the concept of rights, democracy, capitalism) that it had a history, and they would also admit that the conjunction of the five was to some extent the result of particular historical processes which could have had a different outcome. I think that many would also admit that in individual cases there might be some tensions between, say, democracy and liberalism. However, there is a difference between admitting *isolated* forms of historical contingency and conflict, and seeing the whole array of these five items as systematically in conflict. There is also a distinction between the individual insights some elite theorists might catch a fleeting glimpse of and express in moments of special reflection, and their actual ability to think through the consequences of these momentary illuminations fully and embody them systematically in their everyday practice as theorists. There is a difference again between either of these things and the commonly shared political beliefs of relatively unreflective ordinary people. Few people have been able to keep a very firm general grip on the insight that some of the elements of our most deeply held political beliefs are angular, misshapen, brittle, riven with cracks and none too sturdy or stable in themselves, and very ill suited to each other. Getting such a firm grip, I suggest, might change our political practice for the better. Similarly, the fact that we will never succeed in reducing our political views and our world-view to the aesthetically pleasing state of the Code Napoléon or a textbook on mathematics is no argument for failing to try to get as clear about it as we can.

As far as the second objection is concerned, one can turn the pragmatist argument around. The various political conceptions that are under discussion in this text are not mere speculations, but rather tools for guiding action. It is a matter of some practical importance whether or not a certain state is accepted as legitimate and admitted to the United Nations, whether or not legal rights of a certain type are recognised and, if they are, how they are enforced. Even liberal views about toleration and human autonomy are intended to direct us towards certain modes of political action; such views have had a very significant impact in the real world in which we live. Precisely for this reason it is perfectly reasonable to ask, whatever one thinks about the philosophical status of concepts, whether one can *act* on all of these political views together in a coherent way.

If I want to minimise the extent to which I am the mere plaything of a historical and social process over which I have no control, one of the things I will do is reflect and try to give myself an account of the

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basic conceptions that underlie my view of the social and political world. Among other things, it is, then, perfectly reasonable for me to ask where these conceptions come from, what shape they have, and in what contexts it makes sense to try to act on them. Although concepts are flexible they are not *tabulae rasae*. They carry their history with them. This history does not strictly determine how they must be used, but it does affect to a very significant extent how easy or how difficult it will be to modify them, changing their meaning and reference in one direction rather than another. There are limits to how far one can actually succeed in reflecting and probably even more narrowly set limits to the extent to which one can gain any control. We can never absolutely free ourselves from history and attain an absolutely clear and coherent set of action-orienting views about our political world. It does not follow from this – and it seems self-evidently false – that we are no better off in any respect when we are enlightened about our concepts and theories than when we were not.

I take it that it is in the spirit of Nietzsche to hold that as human beings, or at any rate as specifically *modern* human beings, we are ineluctably caught between two contrary impulses. One the one hand, we unavoidably desire to get as much conceptual control over the major areas of our lives as we can. This is the origin of our attempt to attain a unitary systematic overview. The traditional 'definition' was the vehicle of this attempt. On the other hand, once one has fully felt the force of the Nietzschean insight that such definition is impossible, there is no forgetting or going back. If neither of these two impulses is to be denied, the process of continuing to try to 'define' while concretely recognising the limits and the failure of any such attempt is a continuous one in all theoretical enquiries that have a historical component. It is the very stuff of the history of politics and of political thought.

Some may think that in my general account of our political world-view I have left out a sixth element which is of great importance: the state in the modern world, they will claim, is conceived as a nation-state. Nationalism is undoubtedly a significant force in contemporary politics, and not merely in backward places. Recognising this, however, is compatible with thinking that 'the nation' is not of much value as an analytic tool and does not designate a fundamental dimension of politics. In this, as in so much else, it seems to me that Max Weber points us in the right direction.[7] Weber was very concerned to reject a certain nineteenth-century view which held that we can look at the earth and pick out the 'nations' by

[7] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), pp. 527f., cf. also p. 242.

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