Introduction: The new liberalism and the liberal–communitarian debate

Avital Simhony and D. Weinstein

Some contemporary liberals now acknowledge, partly in response to their communitarian critics, that they must “tap neglected characteristics of the liberal tradition” if they are to revitalize liberal political theory.¹ We seek to do just this by retrieving the new liberalism. We agree, in other words, with Stephen Macedo’s claim that liberalism “contains the resources to mount a positive response to the communitarian critics.”² The new liberalism, we hold, is just such a valuable resource. It transcends the discourse of dichotomies that dominated the early phase of the liberal–communitarian debate. It also has much to offer the current phase of the debate which is propelled by the widely accepted claim that, far from being opposed, communitarianism and liberalism are mutually supporting.

Retrieving the new liberalism as an unjustifiably neglected strand of liberalism serves, moreover, as a timely reminder that there never has been a liberalism but rather a family of liberalisms. Hence, not only should we hesitate to identify liberalism with the contemporary dominant strand of philosophical liberalism, but we should take more seriously the richness of the liberal tradition.

The first part of our Introduction suggests possible reasons why contemporary liberalism became vulnerable to the caricature that the first round of earlier communitarian criticism was prone to make of it. The second part contends that the debate between liberals and communitarians is misconceived in two fundamental ways regardless of which side deserves the greater blame. Part three explores how new liberals such as Green, Hobhouse, Hobson, and Ritchie accommodate liberal and communitarian concerns, thereby fortifying our contention that this debate has been misconceived from the start. In particular, part three claims that the new liberalism is distinctively non-individualist insofar as

it takes community and common good seriously without abnegating liberalism’s traditional devotion to the cultivation of individuality. In the fourth part, we introduce each of the contributions to this volume with the aim of weaving them together according to the foregoing themes.

The liberal tradition

The self-understanding of contemporary philosophical liberalism

“So why,” asks David Miller, “did we start talking about a liberal–communitarian debate?” Miller is surely correct in suggesting that much of the answer lies in the fact “that a certain widely held form of liberalism, which for the sake of convenience rather than historical accuracy I shall call standard or mainstream liberalism, does have a natural affinity with individualist anthropology.” For Miller, “liberals of this sort characteristically defend their political positions by invoking an individualistic view of the self.” But liberalism’s individualistic anthropology has not been the exclusive impetus for the communitarian reaction. Liberalism’s historical forgetfulness has likewise, we suspect, probably encouraged this reaction.5

Much contemporary philosophical liberalism has been largely analytical. Contemporary liberals have consequently inherited the ambitions of analytical philosophy, namely conceptual precision in building and defending systemic political theories. They have too often abjured history and politics in the name of what Rawls has come to disparage as “metaphysical” once-and-for-all grand theoretical edifices.6 Contemporary liberalism has, in short, been disposed to abstract severity and inflexibility.

The analytic nature of much contemporary liberalism, by featuring solitary abstract individuals who find fulfillment in separation from each other, has probably contributed to its individualistic anthropology. No

4 Ibid.
5 As a self-confessed left communitarian, Miller holds that the left communitarian “like the liberal communitarian and unlike the right communitarian, values personal autonomy, but whereas the liberal picture is of each individual choosing which way of life to adopt after encountering several possibilities, the left picture is of us choosing our way of life together, through critical reflection on the one we now have in common.” (Ibid., p. 179.) Miller regards Kymlicka and Raz as representative liberal communitarians whereas he regards Walzer as a like-minded left communitarian. Typically, nonetheless, he completely overlooks new liberals who are as much liberal communitarians as they are left communitarians.
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wonder, then, that first-generation communitarians found contemporary liberalism such an inviting target for violating what Charles Taylor calls the "social thesis."

But just as significantly, contemporary liberalism’s analytic nature has also encouraged its partisans to ignore important moments of their past, compressing the entire liberal tradition into an unbroken celebration of individualism. No wonder, too, that first-generation communitarians also found receptive ears for their overly simplified portrayal of the liberal canon.

But communitarianism, in turn, may be prone to the same aspirations plaguing contemporary liberalism, despite communitarianism's Hegeilian roots and its purported greater deference to historical context and situatedness. Contemporary communitarianism and contemporary liberalism are arguably opposite sides of the same analytic coin. The partisans of both sides are members of what Kevin Mulligan calls the same "Anglo-Saxon club," causing the contest between them to risk becoming overly exclusionary and therefore excessively inbred. Hence, we should be unsurprised by the unvarnished nature of the struggle, especially in its formative rounds, between liberals and their communitarian foes.

Moreover, too few contemporary liberals have taken seriously Terence Ball's contention that the meanings of concepts are unstable and that they have histories. Thus, we should find it unremarkable that contemporary liberals have often abused their own tradition, forgetting that the terms of today's political philosophical discourse mean things to us that they didn't mean for our predecessors. And this is no less true for the term "liberalism" itself as for any other political philosophical term.

7 Kevin Mulligan, “The Great Divide,” TLS (June 26, 1998), 7. Mulligan's review of recent books on twentieth-century analytical and continental philosophy is a succinct depiction of the differences between these two traditions.

8 According to Terence Ball, the "linguistic turn" in philosophy structured the character of Anglo-American political theory over the last half-century. During its first phase, linguistic political theory echoed the ambitions of logico-positivism in seeking to purge political discourse of its metaphysical and normative conceptual baggage. In its subsequent phase, in Ball's view, ordinary-language analysis beguiled political theorists as they tried clarifying what we mean when deploying concepts like justice, liberty, and power. In its next phase, Anglo-American political theorists sought inspiration in W. B. Gallie's view that certain types of concepts are "essentially contested," making hopes of discovering, once-and-for-all, what we mean by the cardinal terms making up our political philosophical discourse illusory. Finally, in its most recent phase, political theorists began embracing "critical conceptual history" as a modified version of essential contestability. Accordingly, political philosophy is thoroughly contextualized, both historically and culturally, making conceptual metamorphosis and ambiguity unavoidable. As Ball observes, "words do not have histories but concepts do." See Terence Ball, "Political Theory and Conceptual Change," in Andrew Vincent (ed.), Political Theory (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 41.
Contemporary liberalism too often seems impervious to the conceptual permutations that the term “liberalism” and its constituent concepts have enjoyed in the past. By becoming unwittingly mesmerized by the meanings of the basic terms of our political philosophical discourse, including especially the meaning of liberalism, contemporary liberals have become too parochial and therefore prone to an anachronistic understanding of their own tradition. Parochialism, whether of the ordinary-language variety or even of the more recent “political not metaphysical” variety, promotes anachronistic insensitivity to liberalism’s variegated past, causing us to forget it. To domesticate parochially is to take too much for granted and then to forget. And to forget who we have been is to risk wasting precious intellectual energy reinventing ourselves but again.

In sum, contemporary political philosophy, particularly its American variant, has been prone to debilitating anachronism because analytic political philosophy seems to encourage anachronism. Contemporary liberals seem disposed to view their own past through the prism of their infatuation with something they insist on calling “liberalism.” Consequently, contemporary liberalism domesticates its richly textured past in the image of its current, analytic self-understanding. Contemporary liberalism thus risks becoming reified, and the liberal tradition, an overly myopic, canonic narrative it keeps retelling itself. Liberals would do better to heed Conal Condren’s admonition concerning the abuse and misuse of political philosophical traditions: A tradition is itself a context for its putative members. It is correct to say that some sense of traditionality will provide illuminating, even necessary, contexts for given texts in political theory. Nevertheless, The Tradition — in which, for example, Machiavelli provided a context for Hobbes, Aquinas for Machiavelli, by virtue of being, for us, the previous thinkers of real note — has proved particularly vulnerable to accusations of anachronism. It has meant mislocating a late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century sense of intellectual tradition, the convenient construction maintained partly for educational purposes, and superimposing it upon the past-awareness of earlier times.9


10 J. G. A. Pocock has criticized enthusiasts for Rawls for deploying the terms “liberal” and “liberalism” as if their meanings have always been unambiguous and consistent. For instance, at her talk entitled “Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” The Johns Hopkins University, March 1985, Pocock pressed Amy Gutmann emphatically: “What is this ‘liberalism’ thing which you keep referring to?”

11 Conal Condren, “Political Theory and the Problem of Anachronism,” in Vincent, Political Theory, p. 54. Of course, while insisting that the new liberalism has much to offer liberals laboring to respond to their communitarian critics, we must concede that the essays in our collection are invariably tainted by a measure of anachronism. Our
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Retrieving the liberal tradition

We have been suggesting that the liberalism vs. communitarianism debate quickly flared into an overheated contest between two oversimplified conceptual dualisms. Earlier partisans on both sides neglected Alfonso Damico’s warning that while “formal political discourse aims to produce a more careful and systematic inquiry,” it too often “proceeds according to some elementary oppositions.” Early on, contemporary liberals also contributed more than enough to causing the rivalry between liberalism and communitarianism to evolve into a rivalry of philosophic stereotypes by domesticating historic liberalism and thus reifying it. Their historical myopia has only exacerbated dualistic theorizing. For instance, by forgetting our new liberal past, contemporary liberals are just now rediscovering that strong rights and devotion to the common good need not be ineluctably opposed values. New liberals embraced strong rights as enabling powers which guaranteed all citizens the opportunity to flourish and thereby contribute to the common good. Similarly, by forgetting our new liberal past, too many of us are just now reappreciating that liberalism and perfectionist politics are not mutually exclusive and may even be mutually required. New liberals never doubted the state’s role as an active moral agent charged with indirectly making ethical personalities out of us all.

Forgetting our new liberal past has, in addition, made communitarianism’s initial response to contemporary liberalism seem both much more original and debilitating than is warranted. Its criticisms were less penetrating than appeared because the new liberalism had already reformed the liberal tradition internally by incorporating many of the concerns of present-day communitarians. And precisely because the new liberalism had already absorbed so many of these concerns decades ago, communitarian objections, as well as recent liberal efforts to accommodate them, are considerably less imaginative than their respect-

12 Damico, “Introduction,” p. 2. Damico continues: “such ‘divisions’ are seen as antonyms implying some necessary invidious contrast between the two sides of the division, giving pride of place to one or the other.” (p. 3.) Moreover, he adds that insofar “as the quarrel between liberalism and its critics persists, it should now be seen for what it is: a judgment about how best to combine the practices and values signaled by various concepts and categories, not which set to choose.” (p. 4.)

13 See, in particular, James Meadowcroft’s contribution to this volume.

14 In highlighting the new liberalism's corrective role within the liberal tradition, we do not mean to exaggerate its coherence particularly with respect to the practical policies new liberals recommended. As Gerald Gaus’ contribution to this volume, on Bosanquet, reveals, the kind of moral perfectionism endorsed by new liberals need not justify extensive welfareist public policies.
tive advocates assume. Perhaps the most that can be said, then, of the liberal vs. communitarian debate is that it constitutes the latest round in the “eternal recurrence” of rhythmic corrections of liberalism of which the new liberalism was an earlier, but now largely ignored, predecessor.\textsuperscript{15}

Recently, contemporary liberals have begun appreciating how the contest between liberalism and communitarianism has produced an overly stylized and fantastic account of the liberal tradition that merely reinforces the cartoon earlier communitarians drew of the purported essence of contemporary philosophical liberalism. Indeed, partisans on both sides of the debate have grown fatigued by its predictable tedium and have begun seeking avenues of theoretical accommodation. For their part, contemporary liberals have begun reexcavating the liberal tradition in order to remind us that its variegated complexity has always incorporated conceptual features advanced by communitarians. For instance, Stephen Holmes has vigorously insisted that liberalism does not exemplify the caricature imputed to it by communitarians insofar as liberalism has always privileged communitarian concerns such as common good, community, and the social nature of humans. But Holmes restricts his reexamination of the liberal tradition to canonical figures like Locke, Kant, and J. S. Mill.\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, Donald Moon has recently argued that liberalism has never championed many of the positions attributed to it by communitarians. In particular, according to Moon, liberalism has never valorized the ideal of radical, unencumbered self-determination. But, like Holmes, Moon appeals to the familiar liberal canon, invoking first Mill and then Rawls as if liberalism between Mill and Rawls was a philosophical dead space devoid of interest and originality.\textsuperscript{17}

And, similarly, Thomas Spragens has recently argued that liberalism’s communitarian values have “often been obscured or denied by careless readers who anachronistically read twentieth-century premises” or “ideological proclivities” into the classical liberal tradition.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} See Michael Walzer “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” in Amitai Etzioni (ed.), \textit{New Communitarian Thinking} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 70. For Walzer, communitarianism is “doomed” to the not unworthy fate of repeatedly correcting and repairing the disassociative excesses that are forever threatening liberalism.


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the cultivation of virtue, community, and civic solidarity featured prominently in the thinking of classical liberals like Locke, Condorcet, and J. S. Mill. Unfortunately, according to Spragens, liberalism began changing in the late nineteenth century, eventually splitting into today’s libertarian and egalitarian camps that are both individualistic and rights-oriented. In short, liberalism became “divorced from its original moral culture” and consequently became the atomistic brute contemporary communitarians rose up to slay.19

To be sure, Spragens is correct in holding that the late nineteenth century marks the splitting of liberalism into libertarian and egalitarian camps, both of which have been overtly individualistic. But the late nineteenth century also marks the expansion of liberalism in the very communitarian direction which Spragens holds contemporary liberalism should continue taking.

So, like Holmes and Moon, Spragens looks back to liberalism’s canon in order to prove that the liberal tradition is heterogeneous and is therefore incompatible with the simplistic picture that first-generation communitarians eagerly claimed for it. And, like Holmes and Moon, Spragens appeals to the liberal canon, squeezing out of it communitarian preoccupations while ignoring altogether the new liberalism as a much richer resource for the “communitarian liberalism” he seeks to defend.20 Indeed, the new liberalism is arguably more than an under-valued resource for Spragens’ reformed liberalism and is, instead, its prototype.21

19 Ibid., p. 42. Moreover, according to Spragens, neither “libertarians nor the egalitarians, it might be noted, give much attention either to the problem of human virtue or to the goal of community.” (p. 44.) Both “extract a single element of the good society from its context and offer it as the dominant if not exclusive goal of political organization and policy.” (p. 45.)

20 Spragens’ insensitivity to the new liberalism as an anticipation of the kind of communitarian liberalism he advocates is reflected in his claim, already noted, that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism split into two individualistic and rights-oriented camps, namely libertarianism and egalitarianism. But this assessment totally forgets the new liberalism’s prominence as a dominating mode of political philosophical discourse roughly one hundred years ago especially in Britain.

21 For example, see Spragens’ contention that the communitarian liberalism he advocates takes both individuality and community seriously:

First, a reformed liberalism could recapture some of the normative complexity of earlier liberalism by insisting upon the importance of all of the three goals of its Enlightenment predecessors: liberty, equality and fraternity … Fraternity in this context should be understood as standing for “civic friendship within a flourishing community.” And against this backdrop, liberal individualism would be understood not as a kind of empirical or normative atomism but simply as an insistence upon the moral autonomy of each liberal citizen and upon the crucial value of personal development. (Ibid., p. 47.)

Spragens continues:

Fraternity in this expanded sense should in fact, I would argue, be construed as the capstone goal of a liberal society. For that reason, my preferred version of liberalism is quite properly characterizable
The new liberals transformed liberalism by ridding it of its self-centered, narrow individualism, though each did so from different resources. Whereas Green brought together Kant, Aristotle, and Hegel, Hobhouse relied on biology and sociology, while Ritchie sought to reconcile Darwin and Hegel. Both idealism and biology converged at the close of the nineteenth century, disconnecting liberalism from narrow individualism and instead connecting it with what we, including Spragens presumably, would now call communitarianism.

According to Spragens, “There never was a liberalism” but “only a family of liberalisms.” We agree and suggest that the liberalism of the new liberals is a great store within the “family of liberalisms” which contemporary liberals can draw from profitably. Its omission from contemporary liberal reassessment of the liberal tradition is, therefore, unfortunate.

We have been suggesting that the tendency among philosophic liberals to understand the liberal tradition anachronistically, ignoring liberals who do not fit within contemporary liberal self-image, is one source of this omission. And to the extent that T. H. Green is not ignored, we contend that his liberalism has been tainted by Isaiah Berlin’s condemnation of positive freedom as illiberal as well as by Green’s misunderstood claim that individuals have no rights against the state.

Our collection aims, in the first place then, to retrieve the new liberalism from the shadows of the liberal tradition where contemporary liberalism has discarded it. Hence, this volume is intended as a curative to the partial and debilitating amnesia afflicting contemporary philosophical liberalism’s historical self-understanding. It aspires to help liberals remember all that liberalism has been so that they can avoid as much as possible reinventing themselves, in their bid to accommodate liberalism with communitarianism, as if such accommodation were a fresh discovery. Our collection, in short, is primarily retrospective, but not entirely.

Even though our collection by no means aspires to “solve” some if any of the problems identified by communitarians as plaguing contemporary liberalism, our collection is invariably prospective, at least implicitly. Though this volume aims to avoid committing, as best it can,
the sins of anachronism, of domesticating the liberal tradition according to recent liberal preoccupations, it likewise seeks to avoid falling victim to the opposite exegetical sin of antiquarianism. We want, to borrow from Condren, to “enrich the theoretical world we now inhabit.”\textsuperscript{23} We want contemporary liberals and communitarians to cease ignoring the new liberalism, not just because they need to understand better their shared intellectual past for its own sake but because we also hope that the new liberalism will assist liberals in bridging their differences with communitarians. We believe the new liberalism is a neglected and uniquely rich reserve within the liberal tradition itself which contemporary philosophical liberals can exploit in their struggle to come to terms with communitarianism.\textsuperscript{24}

Santayana once remarked that if we want to learn from a crowd of faces, then we ought to focus on the unfamiliar faces rather than on the familiar and comforting ones. Otherwise, we risk simply mirroring back to ourselves our own parochial and limited concerns. Similarly, if we, as liberals, want to learn from our liberal past, then we ought to concentrate our interpretative gaze on its less familiar phases such as the new liberalism.\textsuperscript{25} But we must at least be aware that these less familiar phases once existed and flourished before we begin focusing on them for assistance. Unfortunately, contemporary liberals have largely forgotten their own new liberal past, so little wonder they should not bother to appeal to it for encouragement and inspiration.

\textbf{A misconceived debate}

We seek to retrieve the new liberalism in light of the current liberal–communitarian debate because we concur with Ryan who says in his

\textsuperscript{23} Condren, “Political Theory and the Problem of Anachronism,” p. 56.

\textsuperscript{24} In this respect, our collection shares Damico's ambitions for his earlier collection of essays on the liberal tradition. However, Damico explicitly says that his collection is more prospective rather than retrospective, whereas our intentions are more the reverse. Ironically, Damico claims that the essays gathered in his collection “recovered” what he labels “new liberal themes” though by “new liberal” he is not referring to the historical new liberalism. See Damico, “Introduction,” pp. 1–2.

\textsuperscript{25} For a similar claim, see Ball’s defense of the benefits accruing to political theory from doing conceptual history.

As one among many approaches to the study of political theory, conceptual history serves to alert us to features of our world that familiarity has obscured. It supplies us with the distant mirror of past practices and beliefs that seem strange and alien to our modern (or perhaps post-modern) eyes. To encounter and attempt to understand these beliefs and practices in all their strangeness requires the stretching of our own concepts and categories. The conceptual historian aims to address this sense of strangeness, of difference; not to make it less strange or different, but to make it more comprehensible. The aim is to shed light on past practices and beliefs, and in so doing to stretch the linguistic limits of present-day political discourse. (Ball, “Political Theory and Conceptual Change,” pp. 42–3.)
contribution that it “is by now not much disputed that the so-called ‘liberal–communitarian debate’ was nothing of the sort . . .”26 The debate is misconceived, first of all, because liberals have recently begun accepting crucial communitarian tenets, admitting that liberalism has always been capable of accommodating them though it has not always been overtly sensitive to them. Second, the debate is misconceived because both sides have too often argued at cross-purposes.

Communitarian liberalism

According to Simon Caney, modern liberals have “developed a liberalism” combining “the best in communitarianism with traditional liberal commitments.”27 Therefore, much of the debate has grown misplaced because both sides do not realize how much they have always shared. Then “Why,” Caney wonders, “did communitarianism arise?” It arose, he insists, because “in many ways political thought in the 1970s seemed to be taking the same course as political thought had in the last two centuries.”28 That is, in the last two centuries, liberalism moved from utilitarianism to Kantianism to Hegelian communitarianism. Likewise, since the 1970s, liberalism has moved from utilitarianism to Rawlsian neo-Kantianism to Hegelian-inspired anti-Kantianism. But, in retracing this move a second time in the twentieth century, liberalism purportedly learned from its previous mistakes by more self-consciously and effectively integrating many essential communitarian concerns with traditional liberal commitments.

Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift strongly disagree. They claim that it is Caney who misconceives the debate because he “tends to overemphasize the unity of the liberal tradition and under-emphasize the degree to which liberalism’s self-understanding has been importantly altered by its engagement with the communitarian critics.”29 Caney’s characterization of the overall unity of the liberal tradition may indeed be overexaggerated as Mulhall and Swift suggest. They may be correct in contending that liberalism has recently and significantly changed,

28 Ibid.