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978-1-107-10985-8 - Defending Rorty Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue

William M. Curtis

Excerpt

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Introduction

Defending California: Richard Rorty's Virtue Liberalism

A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a very difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a D.S.'s criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity – you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually. This kind of stuff is advanced U.S. citizenship.¹

– David Foster Wallace

For liberals like Dewey, the good life is a process, a way of living, or interacting with the world, and of solving problems, that leads to ongoing individual growth and social transformation. One realizes the end of life, the good life, each and every day by living with a liberal spirit, showing equal respect to all citizens, preserving an open mind, practicing tolerance, cultivating a sympathetic interest in the needs and struggles of others, imagining new possibilities, protecting basic human rights and freedoms, solving problems with the method of intelligence in a nonviolent atmosphere pervaded by cooperation. These are primary among the liberal democratic virtues.²

– Steven C. Rockefeller

Liberalism holds out the promise, or the threat, of making all the world like California.³

– Stephen Macedo

¹ David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005), 72.

² Steven C. Rockefeller, Comment on Charles Taylor's "Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 91.

³ Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 278.

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Recently, I attended an academic conference that featured an unusually high concentration of a certain species of political theorist known as the “radical democrat.” As the label implies, these scholars attempt to theorize a more genuinely democratic politics, one that properly addresses the many social inequalities and ills that afflict contemporary liberal democracies. They look to powerful thinkers like Laclau and Mouffe, Sheldon Wolin, William Connolly, and Judith Butler for inspiration. They have also co-opted Hannah Arendt, who has been all the rage in this province of theory for the last couple of decades, and seem to be increasingly interested in the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. Although they have diverse views about what the practice of radicalized democracy entails, they are united in their excoriation of *liberalism*.⁴ They accuse it of securing the status quo by masking appalling political inequalities beneath a merely formal veneer of equal rights and liberties.

Thus, when I explained to those at the conference, who were kind enough to ask, that I was working on a project to recast the philosopher Richard Rorty as theorist of “virtue liberalism,” I was met with quizzical expressions followed by questions like, “Why would you want to do that?” and “Why do you want to ‘save’ liberalism?” In response, I reflexively essayed something to the effect that liberal justice, with its ideals of individual freedom and equality, remains the best hope for humanity, and so forth. Unconvinced, one interlocutor pressed further and asked, “Why Rorty?” I heard myself answer, “Because Rorty is the Thomas Aquinas of liberalism.”

What could I possibly have meant? What does a thirteenth-century Aristotelian Catholic theologian have in common with a twentieth-century post-modern pragmatic liberal? Posed this way, the question must be answered: “Not much.” But what I was getting at is that St. Thomas still attracts the attention of intellectuals seven centuries after he wrote because his provocative synthesis of “Athens and Jerusalem” offers such a rich vision of the human condition and Good Life. Thomism is the complete package: theology, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and politics, all mutually supporting one another to form a uniquely comprehensive and compelling way of understanding man’s place in the cosmos. Aquinas goes a long way toward achieving what Wilfrid Sellars calls *the* goal of philosophy: to understand how “things,” in the broadest sense of the term, “hang together,” in the broadest sense of the term.⁵ Philosophy, on this view, gives us a story and vision by which to live.

My claim is that Rorty successfully supplies a comprehensive story and vision for liberal modernity. He offers us a large, coherent view of how modern science, art, history, religion, democracy, and liberal morality all fit together as

⁴ It is an amusing challenge to explain to Americans outside of the world of academic political theory that, even in our post-Marxist age, “liberalism” is considered conservative and retrograde in various quarters of the academy.

⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1963), 1.

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the ingredients of an attractive, progressive, and truly humanistic civilization. His liberal vision rests on a unique – critics argue “perverse” – mixture of pragmatism and romanticism.⁶ It is pragmatic because Rorty, like his forerunners, James and Dewey, cares only about the practical consequences of holding any theory or set of ideas; assertions that an idea or theory is “true,” regardless of its meaning for practice, are superfluous. As he puts it,

Attributions of reality or truth are, on the view I share with James, compliments we pay to entities or beliefs that have won their spurs, paid their way, proved themselves useful, and therefore been incorporated into accepted social practices. When these practices are being contested, it is of no use to say that reality or truth is on the side of one the contestants. For such claims will always be mere table-thumping.⁷

Rorty’s conception of liberal modernity is romantic because he believes that the imagination – our ability to redescribe ourselves and the world in novel ways – is the most important faculty we possess for facing the challenges of the human condition. This claim should not be confused with the traditional claims of Romantic thinkers that the imagination is the “essence of human nature” or that it, as opposed to “rationality,” puts us in touch with the “Truth” or the “really real.” His claim is rather that society will be more humane, progressive, and interesting if we take the development of our imaginative capacities to be a primary goal of liberal culture. Richer, liberally educated imaginations, Rorty hopes, will both make us better democratic citizens and enhance our private ethical lives. Such imaginations will enable us to more liberally and creatively negotiate the astounding ethical pluralism that the ongoing phenomenon of globalization forces us to confront.

Because he is a pragmatist, Rorty’s ethics and politics are, in contrast to Thomas’s, insistently antimetaphysical (not to mention anti-theological); he eschews the traditional Philosophical endeavor to identify necessary entities, facts, or first principles that “ground” our values and norms. To the contrary, Rorty argues that the rhetoric of metaphysics is *authoritarian* precisely because it presumes to make claims of final and absolute Truth that are meant to be rationally unassailable. The Western Philosophical tradition’s “Quest for Certainty,” as John Dewey memorably labels it, clashes with Rorty’s pragmatic liberalism, which is fallibilistic, experimentalist, and open-ended. Indeed, much of Rorty’s work is devoted to arguing that liberal politics and progress would be advanced if we got over our need to believe that liberal values require indubitable, demonstrable foundations. We should instead understand them as historically contingent and evolving, but no less worthy of devotion for being so.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of Rorty’s romanticism, which is too often neglected or summarily dismissed by his philosopher critics, see Russell B. Goodman, “Rorty and Romanticism,” *Philosophical Topics* 36 (Spring 2008), 79–95.

⁷ PCP, 6–7.

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His pragmatic defense of liberalism shifts the burden of proof to liberalism's critics by asking: Do you have a better practical alternative? Rorty has little patience for theorists, like Ronald Beiner, who claim that their "job" is only to criticize liberalism, not to offer alternatives, as though critique itself does not stem from implied alternatives.⁸ Rorty also attempts to make liberalism look attractive by using historical narrative to persuade his readers that its contingent development should be understood and celebrated as a story of progress. He utilizes a pragmatic liberal rhetorical style that is self-consciously fallibilistic and ironic. As St. Thomas does for late Medieval Christianity, Rorty shows us how liberal modernity "hangs together," how its good features are related to and bolster one another, and how it possesses the conceptual resources to manage or resolve its inevitable flaws and shortcomings.

The goal of this work is to critically extend Rorty's intellectual project in a patently *Rortyan* way. This means several things. Rorty is famous, or notorious, for self-consciously "redescribing" the work of his favorite thinkers in order to enlist them for his own intellectual purposes (with a nod to Harold Bloom's Freudian literary theory that writers must imaginatively misread their predecessors in order to make space for their own original creations). Thus, Rorty's readers will expect – perhaps even insist – that any extension of his project must involve the author's own fruitful redescrptions of Rorty's work. In my case, I read Rorty not primarily as the rogue analytic philosopher who attacks his own discipline, nor as a postmodern gadfly-*cum*-literary critic for whom writing is just ironic play, though I do not dispute that these can be useful understandings of him as well. Rather, I take Rorty to be most usefully understood as a proponent of a *liberal virtue ethics*, whose practical conception of liberalism resembles those of other liberal virtue theorists, like Stephen Macedo, Amy Gutmann, Thomas A. Spragens, Eamonn Callan, and (at least at one time) William A. Galston.⁹ (Rorty's virtue emphasis is one more parallel with the Doctor Angelicus from Aquino, although their respective accounts of the virtues are, of course, very different.)

⁸ Ronald Beiner, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 15.

⁹ Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Ideals* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtue, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Other "virtue liberals" include: Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Emily R. Gill, *Becoming Free: Autonomy and Diversity in the Liberal Polity* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001); Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jason A. Scorza, *Strong Liberalism: Habits of Mind for Democratic Citizenship* (Lebanon, NH: Tufts University Press, 2008).

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According to the virtue ethics approach to liberalism, the success of liberal politics and society depends on citizens possessing the right set of habits or ethical character traits – as opposed to having a correct theory of politics or merely the right institutions and procedures – although, somewhat paradoxically, one of these habits is critical reflectiveness, that is, an ability to theorize, which can be used to scrutinize the habits themselves. While theory – systematic reflection on our practices and goals – cannot be avoided by critically reflective agents, virtue theorists believe that theoretical attempts to render abstract, general answers to moral questions tend to be of limited practical use at best and produce moral myopia and confusion at worst. Morality is too complex and situational to be effectively reduced to a general method or set of principles. Virtue ethics instead places its trust in agents who have been educated and habituated in a certain way to do, as best as possible in an often tragic world, the right thing. While reflection on moral rules and principles can be useful and even plays a role in developing virtue, the generalized guidance that rules and principles provide is of little use unless it is acted upon by virtuous agents who are attuned to the unique complexities and nuances of any particular moral choice they face. As Dewey argues, we should not look to moral philosophy to give us a system of maxims or final moral answers; rather, “philosophy can proffer only hypotheses, and that these hypotheses are of value only as they render men’s minds more sensitive to the life about them.”¹⁰ Rorty elaborates, “Like Hegel, Dewey viewed moral principles not as self-evident truths but as rough summaries of past practices.” Deciding what it is right to do in a particular situation is the outcome of “an endless process of reweaving our networks of beliefs and desires. This process is rarely a matter of applying antecedent criteria.”¹¹

A second way in which this book is Rortyan is that it is constituted mainly by essays that relate Rorty’s thought to the work of other important thinkers. This is how Rorty proceeds in his work, constructing enlightening dialogues between himself and his influential interlocutors. The first two chapters present my redescription of Rorty’s project and thus provide the background for the dialogues featured in later chapters. Specifically, Chapter 1 discusses Rorty’s anti-authoritarian pragmatism about truth and knowledge and shows how it fits with and supports his conception of liberal politics and culture. Chapter 2 demonstrates that Rorty’s entire intellectual project can best be understood as promoting a conception of virtue liberalism. The subsequent chapters then place this “virtue liberal Rorty” in debate with a host of writers, most of whom have jostled with Rorty in the past. The subjects of these discussions include everything from epistemology, to politics, to religion and literature, thereby illustrating the breadth of Rorty’s vision of liberal modernity. As we will see,

¹⁰ John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976–83), vol. 12, 91–92.

¹¹ PCP, 58.

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my “virtue liberal Rorty” is less vulnerable to the many criticisms that these thinkers have aimed at his work. Chapter 6, however, relates Rorty’s thought to a new interlocutor: Aldous Huxley.

This is the third way in which this work is Rortyan: it takes Rorty at his word that in his ideal liberal culture, professional philosophers and theorists of the humanities would take on the seemingly less exalted, but more pragmatic, roles of the “intellectual dilettante,” the “kibitzer,” and the “all-purpose intellectual.”¹² They would use their erudition not to offer theories of final truth within their respective disciplines, but rather see themselves as offering historically contingent but nevertheless edifying and useful visions of “how things hang together.” Rorty suggests that literary critics, for instance, are more in the habit of regarding their interpretations of literary works with a proper sense of irony, making them more open to the possibilities of new interpretations. He contrasts these intellectuals with the traditional Philosopher, who fancies himself to be plumbing the depths of reality (which in this day and age often means playing handmaiden to natural science) and emerging with necessary, “redemptive” truth. On Rorty’s account, this latter endeavor is rhetorically authoritarian and thus threatens liberal freedom and progress. If literary intellectuals, who are “ready to offer a view on pretty much anything, in the hope of making it hang together with everything else,” are the vanguard of Rorty’s “liberal utopia,” then identifying and fleshing out the ethical persona of these conceptual innovators is key to understanding his political project.¹³ My claim is that Huxley is an exemplar of the Rortyan literary intellectual, and that his utopian novel, *Island*, presents an imaginative version of a Rortyan liberal society.

My defense of Rorty as a virtue liberal, however, immediately invites at least two objections. The first is the general charge that that virtue liberalism itself is an indefensible conception of liberalism. The second is that Rorty is not plausibly described as a virtue liberal. Indeed, there are critics who go so far as to claim that Rorty offers no “theory of citizenship,”¹⁴ and that his liberalism is “peculiarly apolitical and uncivic.”¹⁵ Such misinterpretations,

¹² CP, xxxix–xl, 73; PMN, 317.

¹³ CP, xxxix.

¹⁴ Daniel Conway, “Irony, State and Utopia: Rorty’s ‘We’ and the Problem of Transitional Praxis,” in *RRCD*, 81. Conway gives this assessment on the heels of describing what he takes to be Rorty’s “model of citizenship,” which involves “the following exhortations: read good books; dream [and have hopes] of a better future; publicly honor liberal ideals; expand the quest for human [liberal] solidarity; privately pursue projects of self-creation; pragmatize the metaphysical ideals of utopianism; cherish the unprecedented freedoms secured by liberal democracy; and don’t be cruel” (80–81). If Conway had added, “get a comprehensive liberal education” (though perhaps this is implied by “read good books”), he would have a very good one-sentence description of Rorty’s “theory of citizenship,” so it is a mystery why he claims that Rorty does not have one.

¹⁵ Thomas L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 58.

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however, get Rorty exactly wrong. Just as Socrates claims in Plato's *Gorgias* that, despite appearances, he engages in politics in his idiosyncratic way, Rorty is "doing political philosophy" throughout his opus; he is just doing it in an unconventional way because of the limits and impracticality he identifies in more traditional ways of philosophizing about politics. I deal with these two objections in the next two sections, respectively, and conclude with a brief description of the chapters that comprise the rest of this work.

Why Virtue Liberalism?

Life in the modern liberal polity is uniquely dynamic and cognitively demanding; the history of human association has never seen anything like it. Indeed, Joseph Schumpeter's famous description of capitalism as a process of "creative destruction" is aptly applied to liberal culture more generally. We perpetually face a dizzying array of novel political issues that emerge from the diverse and protean activities of free individuals. As democratic citizens, we are, at the very least, nominal participants in the ongoing public debate to determine what central liberal concepts, such as "freedom," "equality," and "justice," mean in practice in the midst of highly fluid social circumstances. Liberal democratic politics requires us to continually reexamine the meanings of our rights and duties, and the justice of our various public and private projects. As novelist David Foster Wallace shrewdly observes in the epigraph above, "This kind of stuff is advanced US citizenship." It does not come naturally to people. To the contrary, it takes a lot of socialization and education to develop the unique capacities necessary to live successfully and justly as a citizen of liberal democracy.

In light of the challenging nature of life in the liberal polity, virtue liberalism insists that we understand liberal democracy to be much more than merely the deliberative political activity that takes place in the "public sphere." It is more than an arrangement of democratic institutions combined with a constitutional framework of laws protecting a set of individual rights. It is more than a theory of justice or a societal "overlapping consensus" on a (merely) political morality of equality and freedom. These concepts can be useful for our attempts to describe and justify liberal democracy, but they are, as it were, only the tip of the iceberg. Virtue liberalism, by contrast, properly conceives of the commitment to liberal democracy as constituting, in Dewey's candid phrase, "*a way of life*," which means that it is something that overwhelms theoretical articulation.¹⁶ This is why Macedo's poetic one-liner about "California" – the promise of the mythical Golden State as the culmination of Wallace's "Democratic Spirit" – is in many ways far more instructive about the nature of liberal democracy than

¹⁶ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), vol. 1, 226 (emphasis added).

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are volumes of analytical rights theory or sophisticated models of democratic deliberation.

Dewey elaborates that liberal democracy “signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life.”¹⁷ This conception of liberal democracy means that we can only properly understand politics and justice if we situate them in a larger, supportive culture, which frames the lives of citizens who are ethically constituted in a particular way. It means that liberal society is characterized by a specific ethos; its denizens swim in a normative sea of liberal values and, of course, even our ongoing, agonistic deliberation over the meaning of those values is itself a quintessentially liberal practice. If we remember our Aristotle, there should be nothing shocking about this: we should hardly be surprised at the contention that liberal democratic regimes, like all regimes, depend on a certain type of citizen who displays specific virtues and cultural knowledge that enable her to understand, support, constructively criticize, and successfully navigate societal institutions and practices.

The liberal virtues are, of course, different from the classical Aristotelian virtues; the latter describe the ideal character of the aristocratic gentleman of ancient Athens, not the citizen of a modern liberal democracy. In addition to the capacity for critical reflection mentioned earlier, a standard list of liberal virtues typically includes such things as: toleration of pluralism; open-mindedness; individual autonomy; experimentalism; liberally educated moral imagination; a capacity for rational deliberation and a willingness to engage in it to resolve disputes; a practical understanding (*phronesis*) of equal individual rights; a respect for democratic processes; an active commitment to liberal justice (i.e., to the “equality and freedom of all citizens,” the meaning of which is perpetually debated as the substance of liberal politics); liberal patriotism; political courage; democratic humility; and the like. Such lists, however, always fall short of fully or adequately describing the virtuous liberal citizen. Indeed, this is why Rorty controversially insists that literature is more important than traditional moral philosophy for cultivating liberal ethics because literary description tends to do a better job than theoretical description of presenting meaningful and useful ethical insights. One obvious reason for this is that superbly depicted characters and scenarios in works of literature capture ethical complexity and nuance in a way that analytical reduction to lists of moral principles or qualities cannot.

Rorty’s goal is to update and further articulate this Deweyan conception of liberal democratic politics and culture.¹⁸ Although Rorty’s project is much

¹⁷ Ibid. Daniel Savage’s book, *John Dewey’s Liberalism: Individual, Community, and Self-Development* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), convincingly makes the case that Dewey is best understood as a “virtue liberal.” Obviously, the epigraph from Steven Rockefeller supports this as well.

¹⁸ Dewey scholars roundly criticize Rorty for his alleged misinterpretations of Dewey; defending him against such charges is beyond the scope of this work. For an argument that the liberties

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more wide-ranging than those of the liberal virtue theorists listed in the previous section, his work should be read as fundamentally recommending and attempting to cultivate a certain sort of ethical character that will be ideal for liberal democratic citizenship and simultaneously produce an intellectual class whose conceptual innovations are essential for civilizational progress. The qualities of this character are especially cultivated through sentimental liberal education, which not only teaches the intellectually promiscuous substance of the liberal arts but also instills liberal virtues, such as open-mindedness, critical thinking, and, more controversially, an ironic fallibilism toward one's own beliefs. Thus, Christopher Voparil is especially perceptive when he identifies Rorty's opus as a type of *Bildungsroman*: a genre of literature that presents and endorses a model of ethical self-development and individuality.¹⁹ Reading his work shows us how to approach our biggest questions, which give rise to the liberal arts and sciences (and most especially to philosophical thought), with a proper, pragmatic sense of irony. This suits us well to live flourishing and just lives in a liberal society.

Unfortunately, however, virtue liberalism, along with all other conceptions of liberalism that are deemed to be ethically robust or "thick," has fallen out of favor with contemporary liberal theorists.²⁰ The reason for this is the recent theoretical preoccupation with the "challenge of pluralism," which, according to one commentator, is the "the most trenchant critique of liberalism we possess."²¹ This challenge stems from the increasing recognition "that there are a number of equally reasonable yet mutually incompatible philosophical, moral, and religious doctrines, each of which promotes its own distinctive vision of value, truth, obligation, human nature, and the good life."²² The pluralist thesis involves more than the obvious empirical claim that different

Rorty takes with Dewey are actually very much in the spirit of Deweyan pragmatism, see Daniel Conway, "Of Depth and Loss: The Peritropaic Legacy of Dewey's Pragmatism," in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Casey Haskins and David I. Seiple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 221–48.

¹⁹ Christopher Voparil, "On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and His Critics," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 2 (June 2005), 115–33.

²⁰ Indeed, two prominent virtue liberals – Stephen Macedo and William Galston – in later work appear to back away from the robust versions of virtue liberalism they formulated in earlier works (see Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000]; William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002]). Galston, in particular, now rejects "autonomy" as a liberal value because there are ways of life that reject individual autonomy that liberal society must tolerate if it is to live up to its commitment to tolerate pluralism.

²¹ Loren E. Lomasky, "Liberal Obituary?" Review of Liberalisms, by John Gray, *Ethics* 102 (October 1991), 154. For a general account of how the challenge of pluralism became central to liberal theory in the late twentieth century, see Ruth Abbey, "Liberalism, Pluralism, Multiculturalism: Contemporary Debates," in *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates Since 1880*, ed. Mark Bevir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 154–78.

²² Robert B. Talisse, "Two-Faced Liberalism: John Gray's Pluralist Politics and the Reinstatement of Enlightenment Liberalism," *Critical Review* 14, 4 (2000), 443. The term "pluralism"

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persons and groups live by different and often incompatible ethical doctrines. It also contains the normative claim that many of these incompatible doctrines are “equally reasonable” and therefore deserve toleration, equal respect, and perhaps even special political recognition from any genuinely liberal society.²³

In light of this thesis, the problem for an ethically substantive conception of liberalism is readily apparent: there will be many ways of life that are incompatible with it, and that it therefore cannot tolerate or accommodate. Indeed, the more liberalism ethically demands of citizens, the less pluralism it can accommodate. In the specific case of virtue liberalism, the pluralist challenge amounts to the claim that there are many ostensibly legitimate cultures, religions, and ethical doctrines that *reject* the liberal virtues that proponents of virtue liberalism insist must be inculcated for good citizenship and justice. As Macedo points out, ways of life that, for example, emphasize “[q]uiet obedience, deference, unquestioned devotion, and humility,” as well as ones marked by “stronger forms of community” entailing “deeper, unquestioning, untroubled forms of allegiance (to family, church, clan, or class),” cannot be easily reconciled with the liberal virtues.²⁴ Because of this, pluralists accuse virtue liberalism of being intolerant and therefore oppressive of “reasonable” ways of life that are incompatible with it. This is ironic, of course: liberalism has long rested its moral legitimacy on its unique ability to tolerate and peacefully accommodate a wide diversity of ways to pursue the Good Life. Now it finds itself the target of the very criticism that it has traditionally leveled at illiberal political ideologies. Nevertheless, over the last three decades, liberal theorists have concluded that ethical pluralism is a greater philosophical problem for liberalism than was previously thought, and that liberal theory must be creatively reformulated to deal with it.

The pluralist critique applies not only to virtue liberalism, which wears its ethics on its sleeve, but even to the influential Kantian, proceduralist liberal theories developed by philosophers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Bruce Ackerman.²⁵ Indeed, any contemporary theories that can be characterized as resembling the classic “Enlightenment theories of liberalism” have come under suspicion. This category of theories, broadly construed, includes those of Locke, Kant, Mill, and other thinkers who argue that *human reason* uniquely justifies liberal ethics and politics. This confident Enlightenment conception of

is often modified by adjectives like “cultural,” “value,” or “ethical,” and I use these terms interchangeably.

²³ “Pluralism” is, of course, related to or even broadly synonymous with concepts like “multiculturalism,” “identity politics,” and “the politics of recognition.”

²⁴ Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 278–79.

²⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism,” in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 114–34; Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).