Pragmatism, Freedom and Critique:

Beyond The Epistemological Strategy of Modernity

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent book, Hilary Putnam characterizes pragmatism in the following way:

> From the earliest of Peirce's Pragmatist writings, Pragmatism has been characterized by *antiscepticism*: Pragmatists hold that *doubt* requires justification just as much as belief; and by *fallibilism*: Pragmatists hold that there are no metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly-held beliefs will never need revision. That one can be both fallibilistic and antisceptical is perhaps the basic insight of American Pragmatism.[1]

My aim in this paper is to discuss some of implications of this basic insight of pragmatism for political theory. In the first two parts of the paper, I discuss two common features of modern political philosophy, features that are tied to the two aspects of modern naturalist philosophy that pragmatism seeks to upend.[2] The first is the pursuit of theoretical certainty in political theory in the hopes of constructing a political community that is based upon theoretical agreement. The second is the reliance on scepticism about moral reasoning in the defense of human freedom. After describing each of these features of modern political thought, I will suggest that political

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Author's note: This paper was written in a rush at the end of a long bout with a persistent upper respiratory infection. It is very much a rough draft and is thus not to be quoted from or cited without my permission. If you find it coherent at all, I would very much appreciate comments and criticism.

I am very grateful to Diane B. Gottlieb and Katja Gottlieb-Stier for their important contributions to my work.

1. Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism*, pp. 20-21.

2. I use the term "naturalism" to refer to the dominant strand of modern philosophy which holds up the natural sciences as a model for all inquiry. It is this naturalist tendency I will be referring to when I talk about modern epistemology and metaphysics. There are, of course, other strand in modern philosophy, such as the historicist tendency which originates in Vico and the romantics and can be found in such contemporary philosophers as Foucault and Rorty. Sometimes, as in the case of Rorty's work, this historicist tendency is identified with pragmatism. But, for reasons I mention below, my view is that pragmatism should be understood as transcending both naturalism and historicism.

thought would be better off without them. And I will give some reasons to think that adopting a pragmatic view of human reason would help us discard them.

In the third part of the paper I a present sketch of what political theory—and political life as well—might look like if we were to adopt a pragmatic conception of reason. Here I argue that pragmatism supports a procedural defense of the human rights to liberty and democracy. But the pragmatic proceduralism I defend is rather different from the kind of proceduralism with which we are most familiar. For it rejects the sceptical claim that reasoning about the human good is impossible. Instead, it holds that the very possibility of such reasoning allows us to defend rights to liberty and consent to government. And thus pragmatic political thought combines a procedural defense of rights with an acceptance of the broadest kind of debates about the human good and our own good, and thus, also, with an acceptance of the broadest uses of the political power to attain different visions of the good.

Before proceeding, let me make one further prefatory remarks. While part I of this paper outlines two recurring features of modern political thought, I should immediately say that there are certainly many forms of modern political thought that cannot be characterized in this way. Indeed, while many forms of liberalism exemplify these characteristic two features, others forms of liberalism do not. And my own pragmatic proceduralism is similar to and draws on these other forms of liberalism. So, I do not want the arguments of part I to be taken as applying to *all* modern political theory or all varieties of liberalism. No such generalization about an enormously diverse body of thought is likely to be terribly plausible. Nor do I want to claim that the vision of political philosophy I sketch originates either with me or with a pragmatic view of rationality. There are some obvious antecedents to the ideas I present in the liberal tradition, some of which I mention below. And that is to say that this vision of political philosophy can be defended apart from a pragmatic conception of rationality. The point of this paper is merely that what I take to be an attractive vision of the relationship between political theory, on the one hand, and political practice, on the other, can be seen in an even more attractive light if we dispense with two modern assumptions about the aims of political theory. And it is precisely a pragmatic account of rationality that helps us do this.

I. THEORY, PRACTICE AND CONSENSUS

Theory and Practice

Let me begin to address the question of the relationship between theory and practice in modern and pragmatic political theory by pointing to what might seem to be a contradiction in some of the common refrains of Straussian political theorists. On the one hand, Straussians—or at least those Straussians among my friends—are fond of talking about the fundamental choices we must make. Of course, the fundamental choices tends to vary from time to time. Among us denizens of the modern world, the first fundamental choice we face (or once faced) is among liberal democracy, communism and fascism. But there is also the fundamental choice between

the ancients and the moderns. And then there is the, perhaps even more fundamental choice between reason and revelation or, as Straussians are wont to say, between Jerusalem and Athens.

On the other hand, Straussians frequently imply that the ancients had a better grasp on the fundamental nature of political and social life than the moderns. This is, of course, to make one fundamental choice. But, curiously, when we read Plato and Aristotle, it is not clear that they saw political as involving any such fundamental choices. Plato and Aristotle talk about the different political claims made by different groups of people. They hold that it was the task of politicians to find some basis for agreement between these different groups. And, perhaps more importantly, they say that it is the task of political theory to help politicians find a basis of agreement that reflected a particular conception of a good political community. In this way the claims of the few and the many, of the rich and poor and perhaps also of the of the adherents of different Gods would all be, in so far as possible, harmonized in a political community that was most likely to lead its members to look beyond their claims to the good of human beings as such. Rather than asking human beings to make fundamental choices, Aristotle, in particular, seems to put forward a political theory that leads most people away from the recognition that such choices must be made.

My point here is not to criticize my Straussian friends or Strauss himself. Rather I mean simply to ask why it is that we moderns, including modern Straussians, assume that, rather than living with conflicting views, it is our task to make "fundamental choices" between them? The answer is that, as has often been remarked, modern political thought has a very different understanding of the relationship between theory and practice from that found in ancient political thought. It is this new understanding of the relation between theory and practice that gives modern political thought—and modern politics itself—its heavily ideological character.

The Modern View

The modern understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in political thought is very much influenced by the relationship between theory and practice in modern natural science. Modern natural science makes theoretical knowledge practical. As many philosophers have noted, the causal-mechanical knowledge characteristic of modern natural science is knowledge that can be used to predict and control the world around us.[3] Thus modern technology is, at least on the modern philosophical understanding of this technology, mainly the result of the application of scientific theory.

This relationship between theory and practice is very attractive to modern political theorists. What makes it particularly attractive is that modern natural science seems to be a form of knowledge that makes it relatively easy for different inquirers to reach theoretical agreement. Modern naturalist philosophy offers two, not incompatible, accounts of what makes this theoretical agreement possible.

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3. For example, Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

Epistemological naturalism holds that what distinguishes modern natural science from pre-modern views is a certain method. On this view, modern epistemology provides a framework within which scientific knowledge can and must be pursued. On the most optimistic versions, and epistemological framework guarantees the objectivity of our understanding of the world. That is, it insures that theoretical agreement will be reached and that our theories will accurately represent the world as it is in itself. The most common version of what I call epistemology as framework is foundationalism, which holds that predictions about the course of the events may be deduced from the premises of our scientific theories and that these predictions are then tested by reference to our empirical observations of the world.

Metaphysical naturalism holds that what is distinctive about natural science is that it contains a fundamentally new picture of the world around us. This materialist—or, in more recent naturalist metaphysics, physicalist—conception replaces the teleological view characteristic of the pre-modern understanding of the world. Because this new picture of the world is both less comforting and yet so much more powerful than the older view, we can have some confidence that it provides an objective understanding of the world as it is in itself.

Modern political theory differs in some important ways from modern natural science. For one thing, political theory concerns itself with our ends, while natural science is, on the naturalist understanding, indifferent to our ends. But there are important ways in which the modern understanding of political theory reflects some of the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of the naturalist view of natural science. For modern political theory also hopes that epistemological or metaphysical advances can bring us theoretical agreement.

The search for an epistemological framework for political theory can be seen in the use of such theoretical devices as the state of nature and social contract; the categorical imperative; the greatest happiness principle; or the original position. These devices have been taken by political theorists to provide a framework be for political knowledge. The hope of the theorists who present us with these devices is that they will serve as a moral archimedean point by which to distinguish rationally justified from rationally unjustified political claims.

The metaphysical approach of naturalism can be seen in the frequent claims of modern political theorists to have, finally, penetrated beyond the diversity of human beings to have discovered the essence of human nature or the human situation. In different ways, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx and even the philosopher who is held up today as the first "post-modern," Nietzsche, all makes this same claim. Not only do each of these theorists claim to have penetrated the illusions of their predecessors, they each claim to have the exclusively correct understanding of political and social life as it really is.

Modern political theorists do not just ape the naturalist hope to find some epistemological or metaphysical guarantees that they have reached the truth about political and social life. They also share the great faith of modern philosophers in the importance and efficacy of theory. Modern political theorists expect to find a more or less detailed, programmatic, theoretical account of what a good polity and society will look like and / or what path we need to follow to

attain it.[4] They generally present their ideal political communities as not only being capable of being realized but as requiring realization more or less as the theory itself specifies.[5] Rather than calling for the adaptation of their theoretical models to the specific circumstances of different political communities, modern political theorists are more likely to call for bending an ongoing political and social life to the ideals they defend. Of course, no political theorists can fail to recognize that there will be more than one way to realize their ideals. And, there is some important variation among modern political theorists as well. Those who are more embedded in practical politics, such as the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, or who are more attuned to ancient thought, such as Rousseau and Hegel, are more inclined to recognize that there is no direct route from theory to practice. On the other hand, those modern theorists who more distant from practical politics or who are especially taken with naturalist picture of science, are more likely to insist that political reality be adjusted to meet the demands of their theory. In an extreme form, the application of political theory to political and social life is taken to be almost algorithmic in nature. This can be seen in many different forms. It is most spectacularly found in the technocratic dreams of some philosophes, such as Condorcet or Helvetius, some positivists, such as Comte, and some behaviorists, such as Skinner. It can also be found in the more scientistic versions of Marxism. And, in a rather different way, it is found in such doctrines as the formalist understanding of how law is to be interpreted.

The importance of theory in modern political thought helps us understand the ideological character of so much of modern political and social life. There are, of course, a number of reasons that political and social life has been so often understood in ideological terms in the last three centuries. For example, it is no doubt true the great political ideologies have been used to mobilize and motivate the masses of people who, for the first time in Western history since the decline of the ancient polis, play an ongoing role in politics. It may also be true that the difficulties and complexities of political and social life will always call forth simplified, more or less ideological, understanding of politics. For these ideologies do help the mass of people choose between different candidates and parties.[6] But there are a lot of ways in which our political choices can be simplified. That we so often do so by assuming that all political questions can be answered in terms of some overarching theoretical perspective is in large part the result of the modern conception of theory and practice.

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4. Marx is obviously one philosopher who rejects the notion that theory can give us a full account of the good polity and society. But he does expect that theory can tell us roughly how this good we be attained.

5. Again, there are some exceptions. Rousseau did not expect his ideal political community to be realized easily, if at all. In this respect, Rousseau is closer to the ancient understanding of the role of political and moral theory.

6. However, the evidence of recent years suggests that many people, at least in America, are turned off by ideological disputes that offer them oversimplified and implausible alternatives. See for example, E J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics*. In their distaste for ideological disputes, the American people as a whole may be a great deal more sophisticated than the chattering classes, including most academics, who are so prone to understanding any political dispute in ideological or party terms.

This conception is so dominant that its influence can even be seen in the modern alternatives to it. In recent years various conventionalist or historicist conceptions of rationality have become popular in both philosophy and political theory. At their most extreme, these views call into question the possibility of reaching rationally any justifiable conclusions that transcend our conventional presuppositions. This is not the place to discuss, in any detail, why so many philosophers and political theorists have come to accept historicist conclusions. But a few remarks about the arguments for historicism would be useful here. The case for historicism rests on two things: the powerful arguments against the modern naturalist conception of rationality I have been discussing; and the assumption that, if this naturalist conception is false, there is no other ways to understand the possibility of rational argument and debate that transcends our conventional presuppositions. As Putnam has pointed out, historicists such as Rorty suppose that rational argument is possible only if it takes place within some shared framework of inquiry, whether that framework is an epistemological understanding of how inquiry in this area is to be conducted or a metaphysical view about the fundamental features of the matter under concern.[7] But Rorty and other historicists hold that there is no universal framework of inquiry. Any shared framework of inquiry can only be a contingent product of the historical trajectory of inquiry in some area. And thus historicists claim that, if different people do not share some contingent framework of inquiry, it will become difficult or impossible for them to find any rational grounds for adjudicating their disputes.

The Difficulties of the Modern View

In a moment I will sketch a pragmatic alternative to modern assumption about the relationship between theory and practice. But, before doing so, let me suggest a few reasons, both theoretical and practical in nature, to think that the modern project should be rejected.

There are, to begin with, certain general philosophical reasons to conclude that the modern project has collapsed. Indeed, the epistemological side of modernity is already a dead letter among most philosophers. The various arguments of Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, and Kuhn have shown us that notion of an unchangeable framework for all inquiry is a dream. There seem to be no beliefs—including our beliefs about what we observe and our beliefs in the laws of logic—that are not subject to possible revision and replacement.

Contemporary Anglo-American philosophers in the naturalist tradition have more recently taken refuge in the metaphysical notion that the natural sciences tell us about the world as it is in itself. But the failure to reduce all of the myriad ways in which we understand of the world to that presented by the basic natural sciences calls this program deeply into question. Not a few contemporary naturalists have adopted the self-refuting position that, precisely because it cannot be reduced to physics, we should jettison our everyday understanding of people as creatures who have beliefs and desires. And, even if this view were not self-refuting, it would be of no interest to political theorists who cannot but understand human beings as rational creatures.

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7. Putnam, *Pragmatism*, pp. 74-75.

In addition to the general problems with naturalist metaphysics and epistemology, we have very good reason to think that no political theory can give us a complete account of the political and social world in which we live. The modern conception of the relationship between theory and practice presupposes that the growth of knowledge makes political and social life an open book. It presupposes, that is, that we can come to a surview of the most important features of how we live. But, no such knowledge is possible. Political and social life will, in important ways, always remain opaque to human understanding. There are many reasons for this.

First, the differentiation and complexity of political and social life as we now know it stands in the way of a complete theoretical grasp of how we live. Political and social differentiation creates an enormous range of institutions and practices which have a host of intended, and more importantly, unintended consequences. It is inconceivable that we could be able to predict in any detail the outcome of these human interactions. As MacIntyre has pointed out, attempts to analyze the complexity of these patterns of interaction in terms of such things as game theory falter in light of the indefinite reflexivity of political and social life—which makes it impossible to discover equilibrium points in many patterns of interaction—as well as the efforts of human beings to produce false impressions in others and the multiplicity of goals and purposes of human beings in political and social interaction.[8]

Second, political and social differentiation also leads to an ever greater proliferation of theoretical knowledge which no one person can fully grasp. Moreover, as the role of theoretical knowledge becomes more important, predictions about the future of political and social life become dependent on predictions of innovations in human thought. But, as Karl Popper has forcefully argued, it is impossible to predict, in any detail, the course of future theoretical innovations.[9] For, to predict that certain that a new theory will come to be accepted, we would first have to invent the theory in question.

Third, the very freedom we prize so much makes limits our ability to control the future development of our theories and our political and social life.[10]

If the problems with modern naturalism in general or its application to political and social life in particular are not enough to disabuse us of the modern conception of theory and practice, we can take a glance at the fate of some of the leading modern theories of politics. Since the time of Locke, liberals have looked for rationally certain principles of political morality. But no form

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8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 97-99. He adds two other reasons to think that political and social life is systematically unpredictable. First, we cannot predict our own future actions and these have implications for the actions of others. And second, there is what MacIntyre calls pure contingency which I would say results because political and social life is not a closed system. In a yet unpublished paper, the noted scholar of the Supreme Court, Lawrence Baum, gives some wonderful examples of the unpredictability of the Court due to such factors as the health and longevity of the Justices and other such things.

9. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*.

10. J. Donald Moon makes this argument in *Constructing Community*, pp. 198ff.

of liberalism has ever reached this goal. The proper formulation of liberalism remains contested as debates rage between contractarians and utilitarians and between egalitarian and libertarian liberals. Similarly, Marx and his followers promised a scientific understanding of political and social life that would lead mankind into the promised land. But the Marxist tradition quickly became enmeshed in dispute and the politically dominant forms of this doctrine lead to tyranny and barbarism.

Of course, the failures of all of the grand political theories of modernity have to be seen in light of the tremendous practical success of liberal democracy. For while Francis Fukuyama is, for reasons I will come back to, wrong to say that the end of history is upon us, he is right to say that liberal democracy is now unquestioned in most of the world and is certainly the only option for us. But the triumph of liberal democracy should not be seen as the triumph of the modern view of political theory. Indeed, it is perhaps more appropriate to say the opposite. Liberal democracy is not dominant because we have all come to accept the truth of one particular political theory. For, as I mentioned, there are any number of incompatible theoretical defenses of liberalism. And none of them are broadly accepted as the correct theory of our political and social life. The dominance of liberal democracy, I would suggest, consists in what Rawls calls an overlapping consensus on, not a theory, but a number of principles, institutions, and precepts. The unquestioned success of liberalism brings with it not the end of history but the end of ideology. For there are no ideological alternatives to liberalism. And, while there is political conflict galore within the liberal democracies, this conflict is largely not the result of ideological disputes—with the obvious exception of some freshman members of the House of Representatives, whose Jacobinistic adherence to the principles of libertarianism have helped lead to the farce that is the Republican revolution of 1994.

Of course, the end of ideology I am talking about here is far from that expected by the proponents of this thesis in the early 1960s. The end of ideology, as presented by such thinkers as Daniel Bell, was really a triumph for one ideology, a essentially technocratic liberalism. (The representative man of this whole way of thought was, of course, Robert McNamara.) Bell and other proponents of the end of ideology shared the modern hope that political conflict would more or less be brought to an end by the conversion of political disputes into technical questions to be resolved by experts and managers. What we have today, however, is continued and perhaps even growing political conflict. But, while the participants on the various sides of the many political conflicts today draw upon different theoretical models of political and social life, they tend not to present grand programs in the style of high modernism.

If we are to understand the relationship between theory and practice today, then, we will have to find an alternative to modern naturalism. For, on one the hand, we have good philosophical reason to reject modern naturalism. And, on the other hand, our political life does not conform to the modern pattern: we have neither theoretical agreement nor theoretically determined ideological conflict. But, despite all these reasons to reject the modern understanding of theory and practice, the modern naturalist conception remains dominant today. Indeed, we have see that it is presupposed by the historicist opponents of naturalism. The modern conception remains so dominant in our political life that, even though I have presented it in an extreme and unflattering light, I expect that many readers of this paper will still find it hard to dispense with

this view. Thus the only way to overcome the modern naturalist view of rationalist is to present a plausible alternative.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism, I believe, is such an alternative. Again, this is not the place to present a full account of the pragmatic view of rationality. But let me point out a number of ways in which pragmatism departs from the modern naturalist conception. I will begin by listing nine distinctive features of the pragmatic conception of rationality.[11] Then I will turn to the relationship between theory and practice in the political and social sciences understood in pragmatic terms..

First, pragmatism is a fallibilistic view. It holds that there are no beliefs or theories that we can know to be certainly true. Any one of our theories or beliefs can be revised in light of new evidence or other changes in our beliefs.

The fallibilism of pragmatism extends to our understanding of the proper methods or procedures of inquiry in any intellectual endeavor. So a second feature of pragmatism is its rejection of the notion of a framework within which all claims to rationally justified belief can be evaluated.. Pragmatism gives up the idea that we determine the criteria for the rationality of our beliefs by reflexively examining our own processes of reasoning in abstraction from what we are reasoning about. It holds that the ways in which we rationally evaluate different beliefs and theories come from reflection about what we are already doing when we inquire into some area. We can reflexively examine the sort of explanations we are prepared to accept, the criteria we apply to our theories and beliefs, our presuppositions about the object of our inquiry, and the point or purpose of our inquiry. However, the result of this reflective examination is not some unchanging framework of inquiry. Rather, reflection gives us an explicit understanding of the practices of inquiry we already accept. The results of this reflexive inquiry are, indeed, normative. Since we usually expect to continue to pursue inquiry in some area as we have in the past, our efforts to make our practices explicit will influence what we do in the future. But, by the same token, we are prepared to change these practices of inquiry when that seems warranted.

While pragmatism recognizes that we have on-going practices of inquiry, it denies that rational inquiry is only possible within them. Thus the third distinctive feature of pragmatism is that it offers a non-criterial conception of rationality.[12] As we have seen, naturalists argue that we

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11. What I present in the next few paragraphs is a summary of an account of pragmatism I have developed at greater length in two manuscripts, *Nature and Culture* and *Reason, the Good and Human Rights*.

While my account of pragmatism is very much influenced by the work of Hilary Putnam, I present and defend pragmatism in rather different terms. Thus Professor Putnam should not be held responsible for my way of putting any of the following seven points. And, while Putnam has emphasized the importance of a notion of human flourishing in theory choice, I do not know if he would accept my way of putting what I call the seventh distinctive feature of pragmatism.

12. I learned the idea of a non-criterial form of rationality, and the term itself, from Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, pp. 105-113.

can only be said to be rational if we have explicit criteria to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate explanations and rational and irrationally held beliefs and theories. Historicists agree with this, but point out that the criteria for rational belief vary from one time and place to another. That is why they insist that rational justification is always a culture bound phenomena. Pragmatism does not deny that we evaluate our beliefs and theories in terms of certain criteria. And, it also agrees that our criteria for justified belief change over time. Moreover, pragmatism goes further and points out that, even within a tradition of inquiry, we can find a number of criteria for justified belief that have different implications in any particular case. We do not apply these criteria and determine their relative importance on the basis of further criteria. However, that does not mean inquiry is at base arational or irrational in nature. For rational thought is not and cannot be a criteria, and more generally, rule-bound phenomena. Rational thought is always a matter of revisable judgments about the meaning and importance of our criteria for rational belief and about the other elements of our practices of inquiry as well.

Our judgments about which theories meet our criteria for theory choice—as well as our judgments about what criteria we should adopt—do not rest on explicit rules but on an implicit sense of how things are. And that, in turn, is tied to our practical training in some practice of inquiry. Thus, the fourth distinctive feature of pragmatism is that intellectual inquiry is always a form of practical activity as well. For our capacity to take part in rational inquiry—to conduct experiments, evaluate evidence, develop theories, engage in disputes and reflexively analyze how we do all of these things—is impossible if we have not been trained in a social practice of inquiry.[13] Thus not everyone who investigates some phenomena will necessarily come to the same conclusion. Scholars and scientists educated in the same tradition of inquiry will usually come to agree. But, when these traditions are themselves the subject of controversy, then agreement is much more difficult. This is especially the case when we are considering debates between members of different cultures. In such disputes, what is often at issue is not just the criteria for knowledge in some area, the appropriate form or forms of explanation, and the nature of the phenomena in question but also the point or purpose of a form of inquiry. Pragmatism holds that reasons can be advanced about all four issues and some consensus can thus be reached. However, a new consensus might not be formed for years or decades. And, in some areas of inquiry, consensus might never be attained.

That we disagree is not a sign that rational agreement is impossible or that one or more of us are clinging to our views on irrational grounds. To think that disagreement shows the limits of reason only makes sense if, with naturalists and historicists, we expect what Imre Lakatos called "instant rationality."[14] The fifth distinctive feature of pragmatism is its rejection of instant rationality. Pragmatism denies that, in the absence of agreement, we must conclude either that reason is limited or that disagreement is the result of the bias or prejudice of one or both of the

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13. That we can invent a new practice of inquiry does not vitiate this conclusion. For, on the one hand, no practice of inquiry is entirely sui generis. And, on the other, the invention of a new kind of inquiry is always at the same time the invention of a new practice of inquiry. And even the inventors of a practice of inquiry have to train themselves in it.

14. Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes."

parties to a debate. To have reasons for our views, even if these include contestable judgments, is worlds apart from prejudice, bias, unreason and the like. And this is particularly the case if we recognize that our opponents also have reasons for their views and if we acknowledge their right to raise questions about our own. Rational disagreement of this sort leads to dialogue and a continued search for new arguments and evidence. Pragmatism denies that, on the most important issues, we can always settle our disputes here and now. But it also holds that this does not make our disputes something less than rational in nature. Pragmatism offer no guarantees that rational agreement on all issues will always be possible. But, by the same token, it sees no philosophical grounds for believing that there are limits to the kinds of rational consensus we can reach. We might find that, in one area or another, rational consensus is hard or seemingly impossible to attain. But conclusions of this sort can only come after, not before we have engaged in our investigations. And they, too, are revisable.

Sometimes disagreement will result because different groups of inquirers are looking at a different aspect of some phenomena. This is perfectly acceptable from a pragmatic point of view. For the sixth distinctive feature of pragmatism is that it denies the metaphysical naturalist claim that rational inquiry is only possible if our aim is to discover the world is as it is in itself. And it breaks with the epistemological naturalist claim that our beliefs are only rational if somehow the world as it is in itself can confront us and thereby constrain what we say about it. Pragmatism agrees with the historicist notion that we can describe the world in many different ways and that no one description tells how the world is as it is in itself. And it recognizes that our practices of inquiry partly constitute the objects of inquiry. That is to say that pragmatism sees an element of invention in any of these descriptions. But pragmatism does not lead to the conclusion that inquiry is all invention and no discovery. We invent our descriptions of the world, but we discover whether these descriptions meet the conditions of rationality.

The pragmatic emphasis on the partly constitutive or invented character of human knowledge is connected to a seventh feature of pragmatism, its support of an essentially interpretative political and social science. Pragmatists can acknowledge the importance of theory in our understanding of political and social life. And, as we shall see in a moment, pragmatists can even claim that there are some universal and invariant features of human nature or the human condition. But they also recognize that human thought and action is inseparable from the invention and elaboration of new and different descriptions of ourselves and the world around us. Thus it is impossible to understand other people (or ourselves) apart from interpreting their (and our) social practice and what Charles Taylor has called the constitutive meanings that underlie them.[15] The emphasis on the interpretative character of political and social knowledge is supported by two other features of pragmatism I have already mentioned..

We have seen that pragmatist believe that the activity of theorizing is impossible apart from some training in a social practice of intellectual inquiry. For it is such training that produces our implicit grasp of the aims, criteria and presuppositions that define a practice of inquiry. This pragmatic view of our practices of inquiry is part of a broader conception of human activity, one which emphasizes the implicit skills, capacities and understanding that is part and parcel of all human practices. Not just theorizing but all aspects of human life are impossible apart from the

15. Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”.

training that gives us our implicit grasp of how to engage our human practices. Thus we cannot understand a form of political and social life apart from giving an explicit interpretation of the implicit skills and standards that make up the human practices found there.[16]

We have also seen that pragmatists recognize the possibility of multiple descriptions of what are, in some sense, the same phenomena. Pragmatism can thus reject the naturalist assumption that all forms of knowledge must be reducible to the basic sciences of physics and chemistry. Pragmatism, then, does not call into question the existence of a non-reducible, interpretative dimension to political and social life.

Most historicist also accept the invented character of human knowledge and the necessity of interpretation in the political and social sciences. But, for historicists, our understanding of rational inquiry in some area is wholly a matter of invention not discovery. Historicists do, of course, recognize that, by and large, the world is not malleable to our will. We can insist on describing the world in some particular way, but always at the cost of having to make some adjustment to our other descriptions of the world. A critic of historicism might point out that these costs are often to our own happiness and fulfillment. Historicists respond, however, that what we take to be happiness or fulfillment *is always* malleable to our will. And thus, if we are willing to adjust our ends sufficiently, there are no constraints to what we can say about anything. For pragmatism, however, our ideas of human happiness and fulfillment need not just be a matter of invention. Thus the eighth feature of pragmatism, rightly understood, is that it must recognize the possibility of making discoveries about human nature, that is about the common wants that underlie, and are articulated by, the desires that human beings are socialized to have in different polities and societies.

What I have called the eighth feature of pragmatism is likely to be the most controversial aspect of my view of this conception of human rationality. For Richard Rorty has explicitly held that pragmatism rejects the possibility of making discoveries about human nature. He does so because he thinks that claims about human nature are incompatible with the fallibilism of pragmatism and its rejection of any permanent framework of inquiry. But there is nothing in these pragmatic doctrines that rule out the possibility of coming to fallible and revisable claim that there are certain wants all human beings must satisfy if they are to live fulfilling lives For, suppose that we find that that, in most times and places, men and women have tried, in one way or another, to satisfy these wants. Or we find evidence of frustration and dissatisfaction where they haven't tried or haven't been able to satisfy them. Such evidence might include various emotional reactions and agitations, self-deception, weakness of will, false consciousness, mass irrationality and the other pathologies of individual and social life.[17] Such a theory of human nature might be very useful, both in helping us understand the varieties of and transformation in

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16. This is not always obvious to us when we study commonplace features of our own polity and society. For we do not have to explicitly interpret the practices that our readers are likely to be familiar with. On the other hand, we must engage in such interpretation when we study a different polity or society or some specialized institution or practice in our political community.

17. I discuss this proposal at greater length in, *Nature and Culture* and *Reason the Good and Rights*.

political and social life and in helping us to live more fulfilling lives here and now. How could a pragmatist then say that there was no point in talking about human nature then? Talk about human nature might be just as useful as talk about quarks.[18]

We saw above that historicists claim that if there are no constraints on the variety of human ends, there are no constraints on the conclusions we can reach about any other phenomena in the world. For we can always find a reason to defend any position, provided we are willing to pay the costs of doing so. However, if there are some natural constraints on human ends, if reasoning about human nature and human fulfillment is possible, then this barrier to rational argument and debate can be overcome. That we can make discoveries about human nature, then, means that there can be reasons for having one or another view of *any* phenomena. That is not to say that pragmatism guarantees that human beings can reach some consensus about human nature or anything else. The attainment of what philosophers call theoretical convergence depends in part upon whether and to what extent there are important underlying ends all human beings have in common. And it also depends upon our own willingness to look for and capacity to discover such commonalities. The central claim of the version of pragmatism I am defending here is that Rorty and other historicists are wrong to think that we have some philosophical reasons to presuppose that there is no human nature and thus no possibility of reaching convergence in any of our pursuits of knowledge.

This brings us to the ninth and, in some ways, most radical feature of pragmatism. For naturalists, the rational justification of our beliefs about the world must be entirely independent of the human perspective or human concerns. For them, rational beliefs aim to tell us how things are from a viewpoint that transcend our human one—from what Thomas Nagel calls the view from nowhere.[19] And our beliefs are regulated not by our purposes in forming them, but by the world as it is in itself, or our framework for knowledge or both. Pragmatism, like historicism, rightly denies that our beliefs can be regulated in this way or can attain the view from nowhere. And it recognizes the important role that our ends plays in shaping our understanding of everything else.[20] Thus pragmatism and historicism emphasize the centrality of what we might

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18. The really difficult question raised by these remarks is how are we to understand the relationship between any more or less common and, presumably, natural human ends, and the ends human beings are socialized to have. What we need here is a new and plausible philosophical psychology that makes room for understanding both natural and socially constructed human ends. I have tried to provide such a philosophical psychology in *Nature and Culture*.

19. Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere.*

20. As Putnam has emphasized, among these ends can be a desire for intellectual understanding of a certain kind. See *Pragmatism,* chapter 1.. Pragmatism is not the doctrine that for a belief to be true is for it to be useful. (As Putnam points out, this was *not* James's view.) Nor must pragmatists insist that the only human concern that play a part in guiding intellectual inquiry is our interest in the instrumental benefits of our theories and beliefs. Pragmatists can accept the ancient view that human beings have an intrinsic in understanding the world around them. What pragmatists cannot accept is that to act on this concern lifts us entirely out of the

call the human perspective in the pursuit of knowledge. But, as we have seen, pragmatism holds that that we can make discoveries about human nature and human fulfillment. Thus to accept the centrality of the human perspective is not, for pragmatism, to undermine the possibility of reason. Rather it is to return, in a rather different way, to something like the ancient claim that knowledge of the world around us is not independent of knowledge of the human good.

The centrality of what we might call the human perspective in pragmatism should not lead us to conclude that a conception of the human good provides the foundation for our beliefs and theories of everything else. Pragmatism offers no foundations of any kind. Our view of the human good is not just shaped by our conception of human wants, but by our understanding of the possible forms of political and social life. And that, in turn, is tied to our understanding of the natural world around us.[21] So our broadest understanding of our place in the world must reach what John Rawls calls a "reflective equilibrium" on all of these matters.[22]

Pragmatism, Theory and Practice

I have been discussing some of the distinctive features of the pragmatic view of rationality. The question for us now, then, is what are the consequences of accepting this view of rationality for our understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice?

One importance consequence of pragmatism is that it encourages a certain modesty among theoreticians. Like any other sensible view of human rationality, pragmatism recognizes the importance of our gaining a theoretical understanding of the political and social world in which we live. But, for three reasons, pragmatists reject the notion that any one theoretical perspective will be either entirely correct or entirely adequate to understanding the full range of our political and social experience.

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mundane realm of embodied human life. But, I would argue that, properly understood Aristotle, and perhaps Plato as well, make no such claim.

21. And for theists, all of this is tied to an understanding of God's order in the world and what he commands us to do. I am focusing on a secular reason—and in particular secular political and moral thought— in this paper, so I will put largely aside the implication of pragmatism for theism. But it should be evident that there are other parallels between pragmatism and the ancient understanding of knowledge besides the one I have just mentioned. Given these parallels, then the possibilities for a theistic pragmatism become evident. For if we conclude that we it is impossible for us to understand ourselves apart from an understanding of our relationship to God, then our knowledge of all aspects of the world rests not on what I have called the human perspective but on a broader perspective that centrally includes our understanding of God. The most difficult and interesting question then is how the notion of revealed truths fits together with pragmatic understanding of rationality.

22. For Rawls's notion of reflective equilibrium, see *A Theory of Justice*, §4..

First, pragmatic fallibilism reminds us that we might come to recognize that even the most plausible and defensible theoretical formulations are grossly wrong. There are no epistemological or metaphysical guarantees against error. No method that can tell us what conclusions to reach and no fundamental insight, surpassing all others, can reveal the final truth about human beings or political and social life.

Second, we have seen that the pragmatic account of rationality supports an interpretative understanding of political and social knowledge. Theories that that attempt to generalize about political and social life will have to draw upon, and can only be tested by, the interpretative understanding of the particularities of political and social life in different times and places. Given the partly invented character of political and social life, there is good reason to believe that any broad and general features of that life identified by our political and social theories can and will be realized in many different and particular ways. Thus any effort to explain the institutions and practices of a polity and society will have to draw upon both general theories and the interpretations of the particularities of that political community.

Third, as we saw above, there are inherent limits to our ability to understand, let alone predict and control, political and social life in a theoretical way. Political and social differentiation, the importance of theoretical knowledge and human freedom all stand in the way of a complete theoretical account of our political and social life.

The upshot of the pragmatic understanding of political theory, then is that it can inform but not direct political practice. A pragmatic political theory could certainly propose models of an ideal polity and society. Indeed, it is quite possible to reconstruct the ideal models of many of the great political thinkers in the Western tradition in pragmatic terms. But, however plausible any political ideal may be, there is no way directly to transform it into practical terms.

For one thing, we have no guarantee that our model is realizable or, if realized, likely to result in either a stable or satisfactory political community. For another thing, no political theory can provide a complete account of a complex form of political life. Thus it cannot provide a total guide to realizing an ideal political community. The ideals articulated by a political theory must be translated into the terms appropriate to our particular polity and society. The institutions and practices recommend by our ideal must be given a concrete specification appropriate to our ongoing political and social life. And we must determine what political steps can and should be taken to transform our own political and social life in the light of our ideals. There are likely to be many different ways of taking any of these steps from ideal model to concrete political activity. Which steps to take, and thus what political direction to move in, is impossible to determine if we do not have a detailed understanding of our political and social life. And, decisions of this sort can be made well only if we have the requisite degree of phronesis. And that, of course, is a form of practical knowledge that, for pragmatic as well as Aristotelian reasons, can not be given a explicit theoretical formulation.

A pragmatic conception of political theory allows for alternate theoretical specification of the good life and the good political community. But it rejects the modern naturalist notion that a general political theory, by itself, can give us answers to our concrete political problems. Pragmatism, then, can help us overcome the tendency within modernity to an overly ideological

politics. Or if what I said above about Fukuyama's thesis is at all accurate, pragmatism can help us explain why the end of history—or more accurately, the end of ideology—is not, at the same time, the end of our attempts to create a better and more just polity and society. We have no reason to hope for nor any expectation of the end of political conflict. But we can hope for forms of political conflict that are less motivated by theoretically based ideologies. The end of ideology may enable us to grapple with the difficult questions of how to create a good and just form of political and social life, without engendering the rabid, partisan fighting so often associated with ideological politics.

The Pursuit of Consensus

A pragmatic understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice, then, helps us understand, moderate and perhaps even welcome the political conflict that is likely to survive the end of ideology. But the notion that political conflict is to be welcomed is likely to be resisted largely, I think, because the modern understanding of political theory leads us to have unwarranted hopes for the end of political conflict. So let me conclude this part of the paper with some remarks about just how dominant this hope is and why we should be rid of it.

Theoretical consensus is important to the modern conception of political theory for a number of reasons. Political theory tells us what goals to aim at and how to achieve them. But, even more importantly, the modern understanding of political theory promises to help us create a form of political life united by agreement on one theoretical view of politics.

Why is such consensus important? First, because it promises to create the peace and security that most human beings crave. So liberals promise that freedom, particularly of religion, and economic growth with bring with it the end of domestic dispute. Kant then raises the ante by telling us that when all states accept liberalism, war will come to an end as well. And Marxism suggests that come the revolution, all conflict between man and man will be eliminated.

Thus, for moderns, agreement on a theoretical vision of political life has important practical benefits. But is also a moral good. For on the most common modern understanding of politics, political power can only be justified by the consent of the governed. Taken to an extreme, this view leads us to conclude that political power that aims at ends contrary to our own is oppressive. Thus, the radical theories of Rousseau and Marx call for an agreement on the ends of our common life so complete as to eliminate all oppression from political life—which, for Marx, is to bring politics itself to an end.

Though the failures of modern political thought I mentioned above are widely acknowledged, the belief that political theorizing must aim at universal agreement is still very widespread. Consider two examples.

First, think about the reception of Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice.* In that work, Walzer tells us that to understand the requirements of distributive justice in our own political community we must look to the common meanings of socially defined goods. Each of these goods, he argues, should be distributed in a way that respects their particular meanings.

Now a common criticism of Walzer's work says that, in pluralistic political communities like our own, we have no fully shared understanding of some or most of the social goods whose distribution comes into question. Rather, we engage in ongoing debates and disagreements about the nature of these goods and about how they are to be distributed.[23] This is very much true. But why is this fact supposed to be a criticism of Walzer's approach? After all, Walzer acknowledges that, in many cases, there will be different interpretations of some goods. He holds that there will often be better or worse interpretations of the meanings of these goods. But he also acknowledges that there are no knock-down arguments that can bring debates about the proper interpretation of these goods to a close. Moreover, Walzer points out that the participants in these debates will often have to compromise with another. A divided community the distribution of certain goods might be left to regional or local governments so that their manner of distribution might vary from one place to another. Or the members of such a community might decide to split the difference in their decision about the provision of some good. These forms of political compromise will, perhaps bring political conflict to an, undoubtedly temporary resolution. But they will not bring it to an end. And it is precisely because it will not bring such conflict to an end that Walzer's critics believe that his theory of distributive justice is inadequate.[24]

Walzer's critics typically take it as obvious that a political theory that does not show us how to bring debates to an end is faulty. To see why they make this assumption, it will be helpful to consider the polar alternative to Walzer's view, albeit one that shares Walzer broader commitment to liberalism, John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*.

Rawls's hope in *Political Liberalism* to find a set of political principles that can be agreed to by people who accept widely different comprehensive religious and moral views. He hopes, that is, that his two principles of justice will be agreed to by an overlapping consensus of such comprehensive conceptions. And thus, even though Rawls abandons the modern aim of reaching consensus on a set of rational moral principles—an aim that still animated *A Theory of Justice*—he insists that the goal of political theory is to find political principles that practically everyone in a liberal political community would find acceptable. As many critics have pointed out, it is highly unlikely that the two principles of justice will ever be agreed to by the kind of overlapping

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23. For a good example of criticism of Walzer along these lines, see Moon, *Constructing Community,* pp. 17-20.

24. Other critics of Walzer say that he is not open to all of the ways in which the debate between adherents of different conception of some good can be continued. (I make this claim in a paper entitled "The Moral Attractions of Relativism.") For example, Walzer tends to deny that human beings might transcend some of the conventional understandings of social goods by, for example, attending to some account of human nature. But even those of us who make this criticism of Walzer's account of distributive justice, have to recognize that there is no way to bring to a close debates about the best way to understand the meaning of certain goods, let alone debates about the best way to understand human nature.

So neither Walzer, nor those of his critics who reject his historicism, can satisfy the other critics who claim that the moral procedure presented in *Spheres of Justice* cannot bring our debates about distributive justice to a conclusive end.

consensus hoped for by Rawls.[25] The key question for us, however, is why Rawls takes such an agreement to be the end of political theory in the first place.

One answer is this: Rawls claims that political stability is impossible if there is no publicly agreed conception of justice.[26] This claim, however, is highly implausible. It is no doubt true that a consensus on some theory of justice would contribute to political stability. But political stability is possible with much less than full agreement about all the issues included in Rawls's theory of justice.[27] An overlapping consensus accepting the central civil liberties and democratic government would certainly enhance political stability. But complete agreement even here is not necessary. Liberal democracies do survive even when there are disputes about some important questions of civil liberty, such as abortion, and even when there are differences about what political institutions are acceptable. Beyond a rough consensus about basic political institutions and practices—and a recognition on the part of all that prudence and moderation in pursuit of their preferred political aims is necessary to preserve civic peace—a liberal democracy can survive a great deal of conflict and division. So long as most everyone believes that their current regime is better than any of the likely alternatives, political stability is assured.

A second reason Rawls hopes for an overlapping consensus on his principles of justice is that he believes that reasoned dispute about political matters is impossible if there are no agreed principles of justice by which to evaluate them. That is to say that Rawls still hankers after something like the archimedean point of naturalist epistemology. But, once we accept a pragmatic account of rationality, there is little reason to think that rational debate in political matters is impossible unless we all accept some one set of principles.

It is surely true that rational debate will be difficult if not impossible when there is nothing about which we agree. But there are many forms of agreement besides agreement about first principles. People with political views that differ in many ways might agree in their evaluation of certain specific political institutions, practices or policies. Or they might find that they share certain broadly defined human ends. Or consensus could exist about certain middle level principles—e.g., no taxation without representation—that different people support for very different reasons. It hardly matters where agreement is found. If it can be found in some places, then people can talk and argue with one another. They can challenge the adequacy or consistency of some of the matters upon which they differ in terms of other beliefs they hold in common. The ultimate result might not be—indeed it is unlikely to be—a shared reflective equilibrium on all matters. But, by means of this rough and ready political discussion, we can find new bases of agreement with our political opponents on practical matters.

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25. Moon, *Constructing Community*, pp. 51-60

26. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lecture IV.

27. Remember that even though justice as fairness does not deal with questions of the common good as well as other issues, an important part of that theory is to exclude many of these issues from politics.

One way to see the difference between what Rawls is aiming for and what a pragmatic conception of political would seek is this: Rawls calls for an overlapping consensus, but on only one side of the equation. On one side, he expects people to hold different comprehensive views. But, on the other, he expects them to all agree on one set of political principles. Rawls fails to recognize that a two sided or double overlapping consensus is also possible. The different comprehensive political and moral theories people hold, on one side of the equation can create, on the other side, an overlapping set of agreements to, not just principles, but also institutions, practices, procedures and policies. Different groups of people are likely to find different things to admire or condemn in the polity. But, with enough agreement not only stability but, also, rational political argument and debate will be possible.

Now it is precisely this kind of debate and discussion about the meaning of social goods that Walzer envisions. He gives us no reason to assume that full agreement about the meaning of different goods will arise. But even where people have important differences, the possibilities for continued discussion and debate will remain. This does not mean that a broad agreement about the meaning of some good will always be possible. But where such agreement is not possible, the kinds of discussion and debate Walzer points to might leave us more willing to moderate our own claims and compromise with our opponents precisely because we recognize that their claims, too, are based in an, at least partly, disinterested and, not entirely implausible conception of some good. And, as I suggested above, there are many forms that acceptable compromise can take.

Of course, there will be times when we cannot reach reasoned agreement or an acceptable compromise with others. And then we may find ourselves outvoted. Political theorists influenced by the modern assumptions I am questioning here often take this to be a moral calamity or tragedy. Sometimes, when the voters support what we believe is the wrong position on a matter of great importance, the results will, from our point of view, be calamitous or tragic. And, in some cases, if the moral calamity or tragedy is serious enough, we will have reason to pick up arms and fight for our view. Both prudence and morality tell us to try to avoid such an outcome, for civil war is almost always calamitous and tragic, even where it is necessary and just. But, while some political decisions may be morally wrong, and civil war is always disastrous, the mere fact that our political community has chosen to reject our counsel is, in itself, neither calamitous nor tragic. It is an unavoidable fact of life. From a pragmatic point of view, neither the state of nature, nor a radical revolution that will overcome all grounds of political conflict is a real option. There is no escape from the possibility of political conflict and defeat. And thus there is no basis for claiming that our very defeat renders our political institutions illegitimate or oppressive or even questionable. That is not to say that, when we are defeated, we cannot call for political change and renewal. That is always an option. But political reforms have to be justified by an examination of their concrete consequences in a variety of circumstances. That our current political institutions and practices are contrary to our own preferences, however reasoned they are, is, by itself, no reason to complain and no argument for change.

Modern political theorists of many stripes hoped to avoid the fact of political conflict by finding an archimedean point that will lead us to political agreement. From a pragmatic point of view, this can only be seen as an attempt to escape from the contingency and finitude of human life. That attempt is no more likely to succeed than the Ancient attempt to rise above the hurly-

burly of everyday life and seek the purity of philosophic contemplation. But the modern route away from contingency and finitude is more dangerous. For the expectation that politics must be guided by firm and unchallengeable moral principles often leads people to the illusion that they have such principles. At best, this leads to the kind of moralism that makes the moderation and compromises of civilized life difficult to achieve. At worst, the illusions of modern political thought lead to the kinds of tyranny that can only be attained by those who aim at radical political renovation guided by a theoretical vision of the good polity and society.

II. The Sceptical Strategy and the Defense of Liberty

Alternative Formulation of the Sceptical Strategy

The first part of this paper criticized modern political theory for its hubris. This second part of the paper criticizes modern political theory for its humility. In particular, I would to examine and reject what I call the sceptical strategy of modern political thought.

Scepticism plays an important role in modern epistemology and metaphysics. Scepticism is often taken to be a threat. For the representational view of knowledge characteristic of modern thoughts makes scepticism a real option that, for reasons Hume gave us, can be neither answered nor accepted in any practical way.

But while scepticism is a threat to the modern epistemological project, it is also a weapon. It is a device that modern philosophers and political theories used to overcome both the claims of religion and of the pre-modern philosophy, when these claims threatened to interfere with intellectual progress and or civic peace. Thus Locke's doubts about our capacity to know the real essences of things, is meant, among other things, to help put aside the scholastic disputes about essences in order to make room for the new science.

In modern political thought—and most importantly in modern liberalism—scepticism is an even more important weapon. For scepticism about the possibility of reasoning about the human good is central to the liberal defense of freedom and civil liberty. Liberals have always argued that, if there is no possibility of reasoning about the human good, then the choice of how to seek our good is best left in our own hands. Interference with our freedom can thus no longer be justified by the appeals which Kings, aristocracies or priests make to superior knowledge of the proper ends or good of mankind.

This sceptical denial of the possibility of reasoning about the human good has been defended in many different ways. Early liberals accepted a Cartesian or subjectivist account of human ends and action. On this view, the good is satisfaction of our wants whatever they happen to be. Each of wants is thought as an independent cause of our action, not a part of an overall, hierarchy of human ends. And we each have indubitable knowledge of our own ends. Given the evident diversity of human ends, and the claim that we cannot be mistaken about our own ends, early liberals such as Locke held that we can reject the pre-modern notion of a summum bonum. There is no ground for holding that all human beings have, by nature, certain common ends. And thus there is no reason to think that reason can discern the good life for human beings.

Liberalism is not the only modern political and moral view that makes use of the sceptical strategy. The broad acceptance in the post-World War II era of the emotivist conception of moral reasoning rests, in large part, on the emotivists's reliance on the sceptical strategy.

To see this, recall that many of the defenders of emotivism in moral philosophy were, explicitly or implicitly, also defenders of the end of ideology thesis. These writers were extremely pleased that a consensus on liberalism had been more or less reached, whether that consensus was rationally motivated or not. Satisfaction with the end of ideology was the result, in

no small part, of exhaustion with the ideological debate of the pre-war years.[28] No one wanted to return to the turmoil of that time and the ideological conflicts that were often held to be responsible for the war. For conflict between fascism and communism was rightly blamed for undermining democracy in Germany and Italy (and to some extent in France) as well.

Given this history, ideological consensus was widely held to be all to the good. In addition, even those who could not find reasoned arguments in defense of liberalism could claim that, under favorable conditions, the consensus on liberalism would be stable. Liberalism, they believed, met the fundamental human aim of prosperity. And, even if the desire for civil liberty was not universal, it contributed to political stability by reducing tensions in the polity. Moreover, economic growth also reduced such tensions and, in addition, allowed for a modicum of redistribution of income. The expansion of the welfare state in liberal democracies promised to further reduce political tensions and perhaps even meet a plausible standard of distributive justice, for those who still had such an ideal in mind.

Despite all of these promising features of the political landscape, liberals had no guarantee that liberalism would survive. The Soviet Union was a serious threat. And internal divisions were not out of the question. But liberal defenders of the end of ideology thesis were cautiously hopeful. And many post-war liberals concluded that, given the consensus on liberalism, there was no need for a rational defense of their political beliefs. Rather, they believed that what was needed was an antidote to the political philosophies critical of liberalism. For the greatest threat to liberalism was not just the military power of the Soviet Union but the ideological extremism that supported it and had supported fascism. Many post-war liberals had a great fear of the propensity of human beings to combine the promise of modernity with the millennial ideas of Christianity and then come to expect that the world can be remade and drastically improved. The failures of communism and fascism had, at least temporarily, chastened the radical critics of liberalism who put forward such extreme ideas. For it had become evident that, even where they were well intentioned, radical political movements were likely to take an authoritarian, if not totalitarian, form. And, the problem was not just that radical political movements could only take power organizing themselves in an authoritarian manner. Under the influence of Niehbur, many liberals came to take the notion of original sin seriously, at least in political if not theological terms. They came to believe, that is, that the human tendency to do evil and, in particular, to seek power over others, is likely to corrupt any centralized political movement or state and thus undermine attempts to radically change political and social life.

Thus many post-war liberals held that the greatest threat to their political ideals were radical alternatives to them. Given that view, w can see why they approved of emotivist conceptions of political thought. To deny that rational thought in moral matters is possible is to undermine the possibility that liberalism could be shown to be a mistaken point of view. So long as liberalism continued to be widely accepted—and defenders of the end of ideology thought that this was likely—then a critique of the possibility of rational alternatives to liberalism was as

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28. I learned to see this as an important source of post-war moral thought in conversation with Judith Shklar.

good, or perhaps better, than a rational defense of liberalism. These "believing skeptics" held that, in so far as supporting liberalism was concerned, the best offense is a good defense.[29]

In making this argument, post-war liberals were thus adopting and radicalizing the epistemological strategy of the earlier liberals. Liberalism had originally undermined the claims of philosophers to know the human good and priests to know the path to salvation in order to defend the right to civil liberty. Now emotivism was used not just for this purpose but also to undermine the claims of all those political philosophies that might disturb the liberal consensus. And just as the early liberals criticized the religious enthusiasm that lead to civil war, the defenders of the end of ideology criticized the political enthusiasm that created movements like fascism and communism.

The history of the sceptical strategy of modernity does not end with emotivism. It can also be found in some contemporary, historicist liberals, such as Michael Walzer and Richard Rorty.

Moral historicism is attractive to Walzer because he thinks it leads to moral relativism. And moral relativism for Walzer is not a doctrine which we must reluctantly accept. Rather it comes close to being a moral imperative itself. Relativism is attractive to Walzer because he believes it rules out philosophical arguments that could justify one or another form of tyranny. The moral advantages of relativism flow from the kinds of moral arguments which it excludes. That one can rationally justify some moral principles in terms which transcends the conventional beliefs and values of our own or any other society is, for Walzer, a potentially dangerous claim. For any such argument can justify the domination of those who do not have this knowledge by those who do. Someone who, if only in thought, stands outside his society and claims moral insight unavailable from within it, can thereby legitimate the rule of other outsiders. Thus, for

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29. I take the phrase "believing skeptics" from Robert Booth Fowler's excellent book of that name. One of Fowler's main concerns is to present the various ways in which post-war liberals used moral skepticism to defend their own political and moral beliefs.

I should note that, in addition to the argument discussed in the text, which has a certain plausibility, other similar, and very bad arguments, were made along the same lines. In particular, it was sometimes held that, if rational moral argument democracy were not possible, liberal democracy was the only justifiable form of government. Since no one could make a justified moral claim to adopt one end or public policy rather than another, no ones preferences should take precedence over the preferences of anyone else. Thus, in this state of complete moral equality, everyone should be free to live as they choose in so far as this does not interfere with the liberty of others. And public policy should be determined by majority rule. What is wrong with this argument, of course, is that if one presumes that there is no rational grounds for any moral claim, then that holds true for liberal democracy itself. You may have no moral right to tell me how to live my life. But, by the same token, I violate no moral right in using force to get you to do my bidding. Thus this argument for liberal democracy entirely undercuts moral argument entirely. Liberal democracy, on this view, can only be a result of a particular balance of power among individuals. To accept this argument is to accept that MacIntyre is right to think of politics in liberal democracies as a form of civil war carried out by other means.

Walzer, moral scepticism is a guarantee against tyranny. And, for those of us who live in liberal regimes, moral scepticism protects our rights to liberty and democracy.

Richard Rorty's historicism rejects one of Walzer's central claims. Yet he too makes use of the sceptical strategy. Rather than accepting relativism, Rorty argues that historicists should be ethnocentric. Rorty rejects the notion that one view as good as another in either natural science or morality. We can always evaluate different claims to knowledge in terms of our own beliefs. And this is the only way in which scientific or moral claims can be adjudicated. For, given the ways in which we live, other ways of coping with the world are not real options for us. Rorty, like Bernard Williams, argues that we do not need reasons to prefer our scientific or moral views beyond that they are our own.[30]

For Rorty, then, historicism leaves us with the moral principles and claims we already accept. Indeed, by denying that there can be any rational grounds for rejecting what we already believe, historicism provides us with a good defense of our own views.

Scepticism about Scepticism

A wide range of modern political theories make use of the sceptical strategy. I would argue, however, that sceptical arguments for civil liberty are much weaker than generally acknowledged.

Consider, for example, the use of the sceptical strategy in social contract theory. For contractarian liberals such as Locke and Rawls, liberty is basically an instrumental good, one we seek as a means to securing other goods. There is no doubt that this is true. But there are other such instrumental goods such as civic peace, income and wealth. And the protection of liberty sometimes comes into conflict with these other instrumental goods, let alone our various final goods. Why, then, should we—or, more accurately, our representatives in social contract theories—give a preferred place liberty? Hobbes did not think that a rational person would insist that government protect our liberty. Locke's version of social contract theory solves this problem, but only by building a preference for liberty into a law of nature that precedes the social contract. And many critics of Rawls's work claim that the rational contractors in the original position do not have a good reason to prefer liberty, or the first principle of justice, the minimum income and wealth guaranteed by to the second principle of justice.

The emotivist and historicist employment of the sceptical strategy are likely to be effective, so long as a social consensus about the importance of liberty survives. Emotivists and historicists do give up the hope of making arguments for the protection of civil liberty that might convince those who are initially against it. Instead they rely on the negative claim that no on can give us reasons to reject our own commitment to civil liberty. The problem with this defense of civil liberty, however, is that it give us nothing to say when them becomes us. That is to say, emotivists and historicists have very little to say in response to the members of a domestic political movement who argue that we have other ends besides civil liberty and that these ends

30. Bernard Williams, *Morality*, chapters 1 and 2; Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity."

are much harder to attain when liberty is granted to those who hold pernicious views or who engage in offensive practices. Historicists and emotivists can make certain arguments. They can, for example reiterate all of the reasons we have found civil liberty to be good. They can say that it reduce political conflict, allows for intellectual progress and for individual choice. The problem, however, is people may not always values these things. Or they may come to think that other things, such as protecting our citizens against foreign ideas or disgraceful forms of art or violence on television is more important than the abstract and distant concerns of civil libertarians.

Liberals have always hoped for an absolute argument for civil liberty, a knock-down drag-out argument that that does not put civil liberty on the same scale as our other ends. For those of us who take the protection of civil liberty very seriously, this would be a good thing to have. Even those of us who have doubts about the modern project of settling *all* political conflicts by means of knock-down drag-out arguments might hope to find one here. But there is little reason to think that the sceptical strategy will give us what we are looking for.

I would like to briefly suggest an alternative, pragmatic argument for liberty, one that reverses the sceptical strategy. Indeed, for reasons I gave in the last section, pragmatism conflicts with the sceptical strategy. For, just as pragmatism can offer no guarantees of reaching rational agreement in any one area of intellectual inquiry, it can offer no guarantees that rational agreement is impossible either. And, as we have seen, pragmatism allows for the possibility of reasoning about the human good. That is, pragmatism allows us to look for commonalities in human nature that might allow us to say that one, undoubtedly general, kind of life was the best for human beings.

Now it is the possibility of such reasoning about the human good that the sceptical strategy is meant to reject. For the claim to know the human good has often been the basis of tyranny. I would like to suggest, however, that the fallibilism of pragmatism dramatically reduces the dangers of acknowledging that reasoning about the human good is possible. Moreover, the combination of pragmatic fallibilism and the possibility of reasoning about the human good provides the beginnings of a powerful, absolute argument for civil liberty.

On most modern defense of civil liberty, liberty is taken to be an instrumental good that, like other instrumental goods, can be a means to the attainment of our final goods, those things that we want for their own sake. As such, we can always ask ourselves whether a little less liberty and a little more wealth, or a little less liberty and a little less crime, would better enable us to satisfy our final desires. But, for pragmatism, liberty is not just a means to ends we already have. Rather, it is an absolute requirement for reasoning about the human good and our own good. That is to say that civil liberty, and the possibility for discussion and experiment permitted by it, allows us discover what a good life is for human beings in general or for us here and now. On this view of liberty it is not an instrumental good that can be balanced against other such goods. Rather it is the most central good because it is necessary if we are to come to recognize both what final goods we should pursue and what instrumental goods would enable us to attain these final goods. Moreover, a very similar argument can be made for democracy. For we can come to have a better understanding of not just how to live our own lives but how to live together. The kinds of reasoning and experimentation that make this possible can only be guaranteed by a democratic form of government.

The defense of civil liberty and democracy I have just sketched is, of course, not new. It is one of the central arguments of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Yet, while it is in many ways a very powerful argument for civil liberty, it has often been questioned. Indeed, many critics of Mill have argued that this argument could not be successfully made within the framework of utilitarian. And the problem here is that most utilitarians, like most modern political theorists generally, accept the premise of the sceptical strategy. That is to say, they reject the possibility of reasoning about the human good. Set within a pragmatic framework, one which allows for the possibility of fallibilistic reasoning about the human good, this Millian defense of civil liberty becomes very powerful.

III. A Model of Pragmatic Liberalism

My aim in this paper has been to make some observations about the implications of pragmatism for political and social life in the course of criticize criticizing two characteristic doctrines of modern political thought. Let me now draw together these arguments and present a sketch of a pragmatic view of political theory and political life.

A pragmatic conception of liberalism has two central elements. On the one hand it is committed to the role of fallibilistic reason in political and social life. It holds that, in so far as possible, political decisions should result from free and reasoned discussion and debate. On the other hand, a pragmatic liberalism would open to the broadest possible reasoning about political and social matters and to any use of political power that does not infringe upon civil liberty and consent to government And that means that a pragmatic politics will take seriously the various critiques of liberalism that hold that the human happiness and well being is undermined by the institutions and practices of liberalism.

There are many such critiques. Conservatives have raised concerns about the decline of moral authority. Communitarians have called our attention to the untoward consequences of individualism on our own individual and common lives. Environmentalists have made us aware of the costs to ourselves and the world around us of our efforts to conquer nature. Socialists point out that alienation is still too plausible a description of the work lives of most people in the West. Participatory democrats claim that a sense of social solidarity and control over our work is impossible without a democratization of every day life, particularly in the corporation and local community. Feminists have challenged assumptions about the place of men and women which have gone unquestioned for millennia. And practically everyone recognizes that the political life of the liberal democracies is marred by a troubling mixture: on the one hand, unending and unsatisfiable demands from special interest groups and, on the other, an extraordinary lack of interest, knowledge, and participation in politics among the citizenry at large.

While these various criticisms of liberalism share some themes, they are, in many ways, contradictory. I find some of them quite compelling and others rather problematic. My own views on these matters, however, is not what is at issue. What is important is that many of these criticisms of liberalism rest on a certain vision of human well-being or happiness. Or, as the case of feminism suggests, many of these critical approaches toward liberalism contain a number of partly conflicting views of human well-being and happiness. And it is precisely because many of

these critical views raise fundamental questions about the human good that liberalism so often responds to them by privatizing or ignoring them.

As we have seen, scepticism of reasoning about the human good has been central to liberalism. This scepticism provides the foundation for liberal defenses of civil liberty and freedom. But it also supports the liberal tendency to minimize the role of government and replace relations of power with relations of contract. Because they keep divisive issues off the political agenda, limited government and market relationships are often useful means of preserving civic peace. But it is becoming ever harder to keep up the liberal pretense that limited government and market relationships are neutral to different conceptions of the good. For most of the critical perspectives I mentioned above, active government is necessary if human well being is to be supported.

The goals of feminism will not be obtained unless government helps provide day care and challenges the many practices of corporations that make it so difficult for men or women to pursue a professional career while meeting their commitments to their families. Alienated work will be too common if governments do not challenge the private power of the heads of corporations by helping to institute new forms of workplace democracy. Political participation, and the skills and self-confidence that go alone with it, will be distributed too unequally unless decision making in both local communities and the workplace are radically decentralized and democratized. And, without such political participation, it is hard to see how social solidarity and a sense of community can begin to moderate the individualism of liberal societies. Nor is it easy to see how social solidarity and moral authority will reestablished by if public institutions cannot be used to express and teach a common morality.

Again, I do not mean to be endorsing each and every of these claims. But I do mean to point out that these are important claims that deserve to be taken seriously. There are traditions of liberal thought that have or might again take them seriously. But there are other traditions that hope to escape from debates about these issues by putting them off limits to politics. They do so by insisting that liberal polities must be guided by fixed moral principles that are neutral to competing visions of the good. The great value of a pragmatic account of rationality for politics is that, in ways we have seen, it helps us pull the stool out from these claims.

Thus a pragmatic liberalism would be a form of political life that insists on civil liberty and democracy while, at the same time, allowing government action to be guided by the deepest and broadest possible debates about the human good and our own good. No doubt there are tensions between these two aims. Liberals have not been entirely wrong to say that conflicts about the good can have an ugly spillover. And conservatives and leftists have not been wrong to point out that civil liberty and consent to government tend to interfere with their efforts at moral reformation.

Against the critics of civil liberty and consent, pragmatic liberalism asserts the fallibility of any view of the human good or the good polity and society. Those of us who would like to transform political and social life have to be willing to do it under conditions of freedom. For no vision of the good life can give us a blueprint for political and social transformation. Rather, such transformations can only come about through the freely won cooperation of many people with detailed knowledge of their own political and social life. Moreover, it is only under the condition

of freedom that we can find out if our vision of the good life actually can help human life go better.

Against the critics of active government, pragmatic liberalism asserts that counsels of prudence should not be inflated into fixed moral principles. Active government can, under some circumstances, create political tension and division. But the failure of government to deal with the problems of life in the liberal democracies can create instability as well. And, at any rate, neutral government is an utter mirage. So there are no moral rules that can substitute for the informed judgment and practical wisdom that is needed to reform our political and social life without destabilizing it.

Moreover we have learned something about how to live with those who disagree with us. One of the best features of liberalism is that it has lead to the invention of various institutional devices that enable different groups of people to pursue their own conception of the good in concert with others: pluralism; decentralization and regionalism; market relationships; ethno-national, producer and consumer organizations; and many others. A real concern with enhancing human well being while avoiding political conflict would make the most of these devices and practices. In doing so, we would challenge the dominance of large bureaucracies, be they governmental or corporate. Of course, it may be that some controversial goods cannot be provided at any level lower than that of the state. But that is not a reason, by itself, to avoid a common decision to seek these goods. For, again, we do this today. Only today our debates about common goods are confused and biased because we accept the strictures of modern political thought.

There is no reason to think that the critics of liberalism I have mentioned are likely to win the universal support of the members of any liberal democracy. But to think that political philosophy is nugatory if it does not inspire consensus betrays a cast of mind that pragmatism helps us slough off. To take reasoning about the human good seriously, we do not need everyone to agree with us about what natural and universal human ends there are or what the best way to articulate them would be. Rather, our own lives can be improved if thinking about the good is something we can do with our friends, families and books. And important political and social transformations do not require consensus but just enough support to generate political movements that aim at creating new forms of political and social life within the general framework of the rights protected by the state. It does not matter much if there are more than one such movement. Indeed, if one thinks, as I do, that a strong element of diversity makes for a better life, at least for certain sorts of people, then a variety of articulations of the good are to be encouraged.

Political and social movements of the kind I have discussed can be legitimately brought to bear on political and social decisions even in the absence of a broad consensus and without justifying tyranny. Indeed, the kind of pragmatic political philosophy I am defending here provides the strongest defense against tyranny. For, as we have seen, if reasoning about the human good is largely a matter of empirical observation, then freedom to think and live in different ways is an absolute necessity.

I am well aware this program for a pragmatic political philosophy is likely to be dismissed as utterly idealistic and impractical. When, the critics will ask, has political and social transformation been conducted by debate and discussion about the human good? To these critics I say, look at the impact of feminism on our polity and society.

It simply amazes me that so many of the people—no, actually, so many of the men—I have talked to about this pragmatic vision of political philosophy fail to grasp just how radical a transformation in political and social life we are going through today. I have no doubt that, when the historians of the future turn to our time, they will be most concerned with understanding the rise of feminism. Compared to the efforts that have been made in the last thirty years to overturn millennia of patriarchalism, the rise and fall of communism is a mere blip in history. And the most important part of the women's movement has focused on questions of the human good. Liberal feminism aims mainly at extending the rights of man to women. But the important arguments of radical feminists challenge our conception of the proper role of men and women in a much deeper way. After all, it is not contrary to their rights for women to be the sole caretaker of children and household provided, of course, that they agree to this. To truly break from these rigid roles only makes sense if we accept the more radical arguments of feminists. These arguments hold that the separate spheres of the traditional household and the accepted conceptions of masculinity and femininity stand in the way of the fulfillment of *both* men and women. While no consensus about these issues exists, it would be difficult to argue that these radical claims have not changed our polity and society in striking, indeed in revolutionary, ways. And it is impossible, for me at least, to doubt that political and social life has been changed for the better by the political movements these radical feminist claims inspired. No doubt some problems have also been caused by some of the wilder and less plausible versions of these radical arguments. And much greater problems in our political and social lives have arisen from our continued failure to change the practices and institutions that make it difficult for men and women to break from traditional roles. Impatience about these problems is often politically useful. But anyone with the least historical perspective can recognize the enormous positive strides that have been made, in part, due to radical feminist views of the human good. Those strides have not been made without conflict between feminists and their opponents as well as among feminists themselves. But that is precisely my point. We can learn from and change our individual and political and social lives in response to theoretical works about the human good. And we can do this while allowing different people to hold and act on very different views of the good. Moreover, if we were to take reasoning about the human good more seriously, our debates about the proper roles of men and women would, I think, go more smoothly and be more productive as well. For we would be more willing to stop, listen and perhaps learn from one another.

So if pressed to defend the possibility of the kind of pragmatic political philosophy I am trying to sketch here, I would finally say that it exists already. As always, philosophical reflection about political thought is a response to changes that have already occurred in how we think about our political communities and individual lives. The point of such reflection is to understand these changes and thereby to free a new form of thought from the limitations of the old one, in this case, from modern assumptions about the nature and role political philosophy. To escape from these limitations is fully to open the possibility of reasoning about the human good and our own within the context of a plausible pragmatic defense of our rights. And thus it is also to

emancipate ourselves, by enlarging our capacity to renew and transform our political community and our individual lives.

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