

Three Ends and a Beginning:

Theory, Ideology, History, and Politics

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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 the implications of pragmatism, understood in Putnam's way, for political theory. Part I is an exploration of the way in which modern political thought hopes to avoid the fallibilism of pragmatism. I begin by discussing the modern pursuit of theoretical certainty and consensus in politics. After explaining how theoretical certainty is initially supported by the central ideas of what I call naturalist philosophy, I consider the political and moral goods that are supposed to follow from the attainment of theoretical consensus. And I show that, long after the philosophical doctrines that justify the pursuit of theoretical certainty have been dismissed, the pursuit of theoretical consensus still guides much contemporary political philosophy. Then I point out that the pursuit of theoretical certainty is part of the explanation for both the rise of ideology in modern political life and also for the hope of bringing ideological dispute to an end. Finally I briefly show that, in the hands of certain modern theorists, the goal of theoretical certainty is transformed into the search for the end of history, in the sense of a telos of political and social life that is reached only at the conclusion of a long process of historical development. A theory of history can, on this view, both explain the nature of ideological conflict and show us that how it will come to an end with the attainment of theoretical consensus at some future date.

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This paper is a descendant of an earlier paper entitled "Pragmatism, Freedom and Critique: Beyond The Epistemological Strategy of Modernity" which I gave at the annual meeting of the Southwest Political Science Association in 1996. I would like to thank Larry Chappell and Jim Read for their comments on that earlier paper. Much of what I wrote in that earlier paper on the liberal denial of the possibility of reasoning about the good has been excised here and will appear in another paper entitled "Pragmatism and Freedom: Beyond the Sceptical Strategy of Liberalism."

The newest sections of this paper involve my discussion of the ideological or non-ideological nature of politics in the liberal democracies today. I don't think I would have come the conclusions I do about the importance and nature of local political action if I had not recently moved to a wonderful, progressive community, the West Mount Air section of Philadelphia and had not enrolled my daughter at a wonderful, progressive school called Miquon. So this paper is for all my new friends in Mount Airy and at Miquon.

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

In Part II, I discuss some difficulties in the pursuit of theoretical certainty. After a brief rehearsal of the reasons for the collapse of naturalist philosophy, I mention some reasons to think that the modern understanding of the relationship between theory and practice is deeply flawed. And then I briefly discuss some of the failures of modern political philosophy.

In Part III I address what I call the current moment in the life of liberal democracy. The theory of liberal democracy has failed in its own terms. But liberal democracy is stronger than ever. And, in a sense I try to define, we have reached the end of ideology and of history as well as the end of the modern notion of a theoretical politics. But these three ends lead to a new beginning, of a politics of the good. Such a politics, I suggest, can be one in which dramatic and radical change will take place against the background of liberal democratic institutions and practices. I conclude this part by asking what we might want from a political philosophy in such circumstances.

In Part IV, I argue that what we want from political philosophy can be given to us by pragmatism. I give a sketch of a pragmatic account of rationality, one that tries to find a way between the hyper-rationalism of naturalism and the irrationalism of contemporary relativists and historicists. Since some of these relativists and historicists, such as Richard Rorty, call themselves pragmatists, I make a special effort to show why pragmatism should take the possibility of rational discourse in political and moral thought, properly understood, seriously. Pragmatism, as I understand it, helps us transcend the search for theoretical certainty in politics. Yet I suggest that it also opens the possibility of the radical, searching, and theoretically informed experimentation and change within the broad realm of a fundamentally liberal political community. I then discuss some of the implication of pragmatism for political and moral life. I argue that contemporary political disputes and, in particular, the politics of the good, will continue to stimulate both theoretical inquiry into politics and political movements seeking to realize these theoretical ideals. Yet, provided we free ourselves from the hope for theoretical certainty, these efforts will not take the form we have come to expect from radical politics. I suggest that pragmatic politics will, indeed, in two different senses, bring us to the end of ideology. A pragmatic politics is likely to be one in which liberalism is triumphant and in which we give up any hope of total revolution guided by agreement on a new theory of politics. And thus it will also bring us to the end of history. We will, for the time being, not focus on fundamental choices between one kind of regime or another. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the end of ideology and of history will free us from the blinders that stand in the way of radical and experimental attempts to transform our political and social life. And it will bring about a politics that is conflictual and agonistic in nature. The prospect of a conflictual and agonistic politics worries many political theorists and citizens. I argue, however, that that these worries are misplaced. Profound disagreement can be found in stable, and just, political communities. For we have, I think, discovered some of the institutional mechanisms that can allow a political community to take advantage of the new opportunities for conflict and debate offered by pragmatism while at the same time remaining stable, and just.

Finally, in concluding the paper, I try to show that my vision of a pragmatic politics is no utopian ideal. For the beginnings of such a politics can be seen in the contemporary world and, in particular, in the variety of feminist (and anti-feminist) movements. It is not yet dusk and the owl of Minerva is not ready to spread her wings. But we can, perhaps, see in the way feminist theory

and politics has transformed our lives, the glimmerings of a new understanding of political and social life.

I. THEORY, IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY IN MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

§1. Fundamental Choices?

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 that appears in the thought of some 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 politics as involving any such fundamental choices. Plato and Aristotle talk about the various political claims made by different groups of people. They hold that it was the task of politicians to find some basis of 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 reflects 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 is most likely to lead its members to look beyond their own 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, at first glance, some Straussians, assume that, rather than living with conflicting views, it is our common 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.

§2. *The Modern Pursuit of Theoretical Certainty and Consensus*

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of modern political theory is its hope to find a theory of political life that is both certain and the subject of the broadest possible consensus. Hobbes, I suppose, inaugurates this way of thought by trying to develop an axiomatic theory of politics. And he, of course, tells the sovereign to make sure that Hobbes's doctrines are accepted by all citizens. Locke, too, once promised to develop a demonstrable theory of morality. While he never explicitly made good on that promise, in his cautious and understated way, Locke claims to have discovered the proper ends of politics for all times and places. Locke does have some doubts about whether most people will ever grasp the rational basis of the law of nature. And he welcomes toleration of a wide range of religious views. But there is little doubt that Locke thought that religious toleration is not only a matter of political right but, also, a way of achieving agreement about the core political truths, that is, those defended in his political theory.

Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Bentham, Mill and Marx are very different from Hobbes and Locke. But, in their own way, each of these philosophers—and most of the modern thinkers of a slightly lower rank—claimed to have, finally, come to the truth about political and social life. And each hoped, and in some cases, fully expected, that their own views would come to be the common sense of mankind. Indeed, the modern notion is so dominant that, until recently, most of us simply took it for granted that the aim of a political theorist is to develop a rationally defensible, theoretical account of politics that can be the foundation of some political regime. And we assumed that a political theory becomes such a foundation by being widely accepted by the members of a political community. No doubt, modern thinkers had different notions of how this glorious day might come about. Of the thinkers listed above, only Marx and Hegel give us an account of the historical inevitability of their own theory and the role it is meant to play in human life. Only Bentham looks to what we would today call technocrats to put his theory in practice while only Hobbes defends an absolute sovereign. Only Rousseau seems to have serious doubts about the possibility of realizing his ideals. Yet, despite all these differences in development, the common theme is evident.

One might object to my claim, I think, only by saying that the pursuit of theoretical certainty and consensus is not a distinctly modern project. For is it not a characteristic of all political thought? The answer, I think, is no. For, while Plato and Aristotle do present certain ideal political communities, they clearly do not expect that these ideals can be easily or often realized.² (This is one of the ways in which Rousseau is closest to ancient political thought.) The regime presented in *The Laws* and the second best, but realizable regime presented in *The Politics* are both very far from the ideals of Plato and Aristotle. They are compromises, both with the ideals themselves, and, more importantly, with the commonplace political beliefs and practices of the polis. These second best regimes do not explicitly call into question the claims of the various factions in the polis. They are not presented as theoretical insights that, once and for all, tell us what kind of political community to seek. And they do not require that the citizens of the good regime come to accept the theory and speak the language of Plato and Aristotle.

2. Indeed, it has often been argued, by Straussians, among others, that the Platonic ideal described in *The Republic* was not meant as a serious political proposal. I find much insight in this interpretation of *The Republic*. But nothing in my argument depends upon it.

The modern search for theoretical certainty and consensus is a distinctive approach. So we must ask ourselves, where did it come from? And what is its purpose? There are many plausible answers to these difficult questions and I cannot hope to explore, or even mention, them all here.³ Let me point to just a few answers that will help us see what is distinctive about the pragmatic approach to political theory and politics I wish to defend.

§3. *Naturalist Philosophy and Theoretical Certainty*

Let me begin by pointing to the way in which 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.⁴ 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.

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, this 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.

3. One answer I will not explore would lead me to qualify the argument of this section. For one could plausibly argue that the pursuit of theoretical certainty and consensus is characteristic of the Christian political thought that precedes the modern era. There are important differences between the kinds of theoretical certainty and consensus sought in Christian thought and that found in modern thought. But there are similarities and, I think, influences here as well. The similarities are important enough, I think, that they call into question the usual assumption that Christian political thought is closer to the ancients than to the moderns. I hope to return to this difficult issue at another time.

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

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 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 are 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

5. 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 will be attained.

6. 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.

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 scientific 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.

Now, not all modern political philosophers accept naturalist philosophy. But, as we shall see below, even those who move furthest from the naturalist view—Hegel and Marx—replace naturalism with a metaphysics and epistemology that seeks the same guarantee of theoretical certainty and consensus.

The belief that reason leads to certainty and consensus is so dominant in our culture 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 any rationally 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 will be useful here. The case for historicism rests on two things: the powerful arguments against the modern naturalist conception of rationality I will discuss in a moment 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, they argue, 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 is impossible for them to find any rational grounds for adjudicating their disputes. Reason is impotent when people start with different presuppositions. People may be converted from one way of thought to another. But that conversion cannot be justified in rational terms.

The unspoken premise to this whole line of thought, of course, is simply the modern assumption that, to be worthy of the name, reason must operate within a fixed epistemological framework or a metaphysical picture of the universe and that it must bring us certainty and consensus. Pragmatism, we shall see, relaxes this assumption, and recognizes that that rational discourse can take place and be productive even when people start from very different places and where certainty and consensus is not yet available.

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

§4. *Why Consensus?*

Naturalist philosophy—as well as those philosophies that seek to replace it—promise consensus and certainty. But why are these so attractive to modern political philosophers? Two reasons are immediately apparent.

First, theoretical certainty and consensus promises to create the peace and security that most human beings crave. Locke promises that, if we can agree on the basic functions of government, we can put aside the kinds of domestic dispute that can degenerate into civil war. Freedom, particularly of religion, together with economic growth will temper human conflict while diverting many of the ambitious into the pursuit of riches rather than power. Kant 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 modern understanding of politics, political power can only be justified by the consent of the governed. This, of course, is not the ancient or Christian view. For Plato and Aristotle, as for Christianity, human beings can be fundamentally mistaken about not just the good of their political community, but their own good as well. Thus it is in everyone's interest for political power to be held by the wise and the virtuous. This ideal must, of course, be compromised in practice, if only because human beings do disagree about the nature of the human good and thus about who is wise and virtuous. The consent—or, at least, the acquiescence—of the governed is a practical necessity of politics. For modern political philosophy, however, consent is a moral necessity. For Hobbes, Locke, and most of their successors, there is no human good or *summum bonum*. And each of us knows best where our own good lies. So the exercise of political power that aims at ends contrary to our own is oppressive. That is why Locke argues that we all have reason to give priority to instrumental goods we share—peace and liberty—rather than the final goods that divide us. Consensus on these instrumental goods legitimates a limited government devoted to the pursuit of these ends and no other. The same logic underlies Rousseau's insistence that legitimate government is only possible when each individual is so molded by civic life that there is no tension between the good of individuals and the good of the community as a whole. And Marx's expectation that necessity will be eventually be overcome stands behind his hope to eliminate all oppression from political and social life—which, for Marx, is to bring politics itself to an end.

§5. *The Persistence of the Search for Consensus*

I have, to this point, been taking the large view, looking at the broad sweep of modern ideals. There is a danger in that, however. For it might seem that the pursuit of certainty and consensus I identify as a leading thread of modern thought is a relic of days gone by. So, just for a moment, I would like to narrow my focus and show that the modern pursuit of certainty and consensus is still with us. Let us look at two important political theorists, Walzer and Rawls. Examining their recent work, and the reception of it, will suggest just how far we have to go in transcending the modern pursuit of certainty and consensus.

First, let us think about common reactions to 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 all 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.⁸ 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 suggests that there will sometimes 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. In 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. Political compromise of this sort will, perhaps, bring political conflict to an, undoubtedly temporary, resolution. But it will not bring conflict to an end. And it is precisely because it will not bring such conflict to an end that Walzer's critics take his theory of distributive justice to be inadequate.⁹

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

Rawls's hope in *Political Liberalism* is to find a set of political principles that can be accepted by people with 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

8. For a good example of criticism of Walzer along these lines, see Moon, *Constructing Community*, pp. 7-20.

9. 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 Rawls seeks.¹⁰ The key question for us, however, is why Rawls takes such an agreement to be the end of political theory in the first place. In looking at his answers, we will see old arguments brought a little up to date. For, on the one hand, Rawls claims that political stability is impossible if there is no publicly agreed conception of justice.¹¹ And, on the other, he holds 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.

§6. *Modern Ideological Politics*

The importance of theoretical certainty and consensus in modern—and contemporary—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 in the West has been so racked by ideological dispute and political movements motivated in no small part by one ideological tendency or another. It is no doubt true that 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 is also plausible to think that the difficulties and complexities of modern political and social life will always call forth a simplified, and perhaps ideological, understanding of politics. For these ideologies do help people choose among different movements, candidates, and parties.¹² But there are a lot of ways in which our political choices can be simplified. That we so often assume 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. Given that conception, we take it for granted that any serious political dispute—any dispute that involves, say, something more than the pursuit of economic benefits for ourselves—must ultimately reflect deep theoretical differences about the ends and goals of political life. For, in the absence of such theoretical divergence, it would seem that reasonable people should find it relatively easy to settle our disputes. Moreover, given the impetus to certainty and consensus in modern thought, we moderns all have a deep desire to both legitimate our political preferences and bring political struggle to an end. So we organize our political thought in ideological terms. We look for deep connections between one particular dispute and another and find them rooted in opposing conceptions of political and moral life. We start movements devoted to these ideals, movements that often demonize our opponents and seek to overcome their presumably selfish, if not evil, opposition to our own projects. Our political movements typically spend a great deal of energy in the struggle of self-definition as one or another tendency claims to stand for the theoretically pure ideals of the movement as a whole. Our movements aim, at least at first, at radical change, at some kind of transformation of our political and social life. We seek to convince our fellow

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

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

12. Survey research has long indicated that a more ideological understanding of political is largely found in the most educated and politically involved strata of the population. But 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.

citizens to think in our own terms and then to join us in making over our political and social life. And then, we expect that political and moral conflict of this dramatic sort will come to an end as the truth of our ideology is recognized by all.

Now one can deny that ideological conflict is a distinctively modern phenomena. I think that this would be to stretch the notion of ideology too far. Political dispute we shall always have with us. But the kind of dispute that, it seems to all, revolves around deeply conflicting political and moral ideals, is, in its fullest form, a rather new phenomena. Oligarchs and democrats might well seek changes in the polis in which they lived. But neither the rich nor the poor called the polis itself into question. Rather their disputes were over whether political power and the benefits that went with it was rightly distributed given the contributions of each group to the polis as a whole. While compromise between the oligarchs and democrats was sometimes difficult, there were no fundamentally different conceptions of the aims of the polis standing in the way of mutual agreement. And thus Aristotle could point out to the poor that they, too, valued and depended on the wealth of the rich, while telling the rich that their political independence was impossible if the poor did not serve in the military. Thucydides does have Pericles point to the ease and freedom of Athenian life in contrast to the rigors of life under the Spartan regime. But, in doing so, Pericles appeals much more to the customs of the Athenians than to any theory of political and moral life. And, while the Funeral Oration is set at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the Spartan threat to Athens is not understood in ideological terms. If all that separated Athens and Sparta were their different regimes, there is no reason to think that war between them would have been inevitable.

Much the same could be said for the earlier wars between the Greeks and the Persians. Here we do have a more dramatic difference in political and social organization. Still the struggle is not ideological in nature. The Persians do not seek to convert the Greeks to their form of political and social organization but to conquer and extract tribute from them. And the alliance of Greek poleis seek only to defend their independence. Neither Greek nor Persian can imagine themselves adopting the way of life of the other. Thus they do not devote much effort to defending their own way of life and attacking the alternatives to it. They simply assume that their way is best.

So the relatively atheoretical character of the Greek life makes for little ideological conflict between one polis and another. And, together with their insularity, it kept the conflict between Greeks and Persians from becoming ideological in nature. Something akin to ideological conflict, it would seem, develops only in the world of the Biblical religion, not that of Greek philosophy. The Hebrew Bible presents the view of Jews who were distinctly conscious of their difference from the polytheists who lived around them.¹³ Though these differences are not stated in theoretical terms, the difference in the worldview of Jew and non-Jew is apparent to all. And the various stories of intermarriage and broken marriages, of alliance and warfare, between Jews and non-Jews, suggests that a further, necessary condition for ideological conflict had also developed: the contending views exercised some appeal to those from the other shore. Living sometimes together and sometimes apart, Jews and non-Jews came, whether willingly or not, to

13. I shall throughout his section speak of Jews although, I mean to refer to the Israelites who left Egypt, whose descendants were united under Kings David and Solomon and who then were divided into the Kingdoms of Israel and Judea.

learn about, and in some cases, appreciate the religion of the other. Polytheism evidently appealed to some Jews, as no doubt the religion of Israel appealed to some polytheists. So efforts began among Jews, for reasons both religious and political, to speak to and against the other.¹⁴ And, these ideological differences did, at times, get expressed politically both in violent and non-violent struggle.

The tension between Israelites and the other nations in Canaan, like that between Jew and Roman (and later, Christian and Roman), was ideological, but only from the point of view of one of the contestants. Adherents of the more relaxed and open polytheistic religions were not threatened by what were to them the curious practices of a relatively small number of Jews.¹⁵

14. There is reason to believe that these efforts were, in not initiated, then at least taken with greater seriousness after the return from Babylonia. It is the experience of returning from exile, and thus returning to a land that is populated by other people—who, of course, have intermingled with one's own people—that makes drawing lines between one's own group and other groups so important. This, of course, explains the ***'s demand that the Jewish men divorce their non-Jewish wives. The theme of exile and return is so central to the Hebrew Bible because, so far as we know, the Hebrew Bible reached more or less its current form during this period.

15. Until a century or so after Jesus, when Christianity began to win more than a handful of adherents, the Roman pagans were more or less indifferent to Christianity. Later some pagans took note of and condemned the practices of Jews and Christians. But pagans generally did not see Jews or Christians as a *threat* because they practiced a different religion. That a pagan converted to Judaism or Christianity did not, for most pagans, call the pagan religious practices into question. This is true, in part, because Judaism and Christianity appealed to only a small minority of the people. (And Christianity appealed most to the poor, and women.) In addition, while Judaism and Christianity do call the pagan gods into question, these claims were, it seems, not terribly troubling to pagans. The Romans, like the Greeks, were tolerant of disputes about the nature and existence of the various Gods. There were various mythological stories about the Gods. But, there was no pagan creed and one could believe any or all or none of these stories and yet be committed to the pagan rites. The gods were not taken all that seriously by some pagans while others devoted themselves to one or another of the various mystery rites. Diversity in belief and practice was expected. Thus pagans took it for granted that each polis and each people might have and worship their own gods and might not credit the gods of Rome as the Romans did. And, while they would have looked askance at the claim that there is only one God and that the other gods were false, many Roman pagans thought that there might be a supreme god. This god they could identify with the God of the Jews and the Christians while associating their own lesser gods with the angels Christians and some Jews talked about. So long as all these disputes did not call into question the civic rites of Rome itself, no one was especially troubled. Each person and group could believe what he or she wished about the gods or God. And they could practice whatever religious rituals did not conflict with the public order. To fail to sacrifice to the gods of the city, however, did conflict with the public order. For these rites served to protect Rome from the anger of the gods, whoever or whatever they were. And they served as a central means of expressing political allegiance to Rome and to the Emperor. It was the Christian failure to observe these rites that led to their persecution. Unlike the Jews, Christians did not have a long history, rooted in antiquity to support their claim for exemption from these rites. Religious claims of an ancient vintage carried weight with the Romans. Whatever the excessive nature of their claims for their God, the Jews were an old people whose God might be well worth propitiating. Christianity, despite its claims to worship the God of the Jews was a new religion. And the claim of Christians to worship the God of the Jews was undercut by their polemical attack on the Jewish rituals. So Christians seemed doubly disloyal. Still, it was not until Nero looked for scapegoats for the burning of Rome that the empire actively looked to find and persecute Christians. (And even then, Christians could save their lives by eating a piece of meat from a ritual sacrifice.) Nero's action legitimated the persecution of Christians. But subsequent persecutions still remained haphazard and opportunistic. And, the extent of persecution was, to no small extent, determined by the willingness and, in some cases, eagerness of Christians to martyr themselves. Though we should not blame the victim, it is still fair to note that protests against the persecution of Christians dramatically increased the number of Christians who were persecuted.

For a very interesting, if somewhat discursive account of the paganism and Christianity, on which I have drawn, see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

(The Canaanites were, of course, threatened by the political aims of the Jews, but that is a different matter.) And the Romans would not have been so exercised by Christians, had the latter not, as a matter of principle, refused even the most minimal acknowledgment of the civic religion of Rome. Two-sided ideological conflict arose with the struggles between Jews and Christians over the inheritance of the religious tradition from which they both grew. More than anything seen in earlier times, this conflict was one waged with intellectual weapons that drew upon systematic, and, for religions that are fundamentally oriented to history rather than theology, surprisingly theoretical thinking. It was a conflict that displayed the characteristic energy and intolerance of ideological politics.¹⁶ The claims Jews and Christians made at this time could not both be true. So, their arguments did call into question the religious practices and beliefs of each other. Moreover, for a member of one religious group to convert to the other not only disrupted the lives of families that were tied to religious practices, but, seemed to threaten the survival of each religion.

At the same time that the intellectual edifice of Christianity was developed in the theology of the Church Fathers, Christianity grew most rapidly amongst the poor and the displaced and, especially, among women. And, thus Christianity began to display another central feature of ideological politics, its capacity to mobilize the masses of people, even, or especially when the people had previously been excluded from political life.

While new elements of what I call ideological politics came to dominate the conflict between Jew and Christian, some of them soon fell away. With the Christian conversion of Rome—an ideological conquest, to be sure—the new institutional resources of the established Church made the mobilization of the people less necessary. And while ideological struggles had to be won by the Church against the various religious beliefs that we call today call heresies, once they were won, Christian unity muted ideological conflict. This unity was never complete. But it was dominant enough that ideological struggle is hard for us to find after it was largely accomplished. In the Middle Ages there were important political differences, most especially, between Emperor and Pope. But, taking place as they did within a framework of thought all accepted, it is hard to see any ideological impetus in these struggles. Only with the collapse of Christian unity does ideology, in the form of the various Protestant movements, arise. And, while Princes often invoked Protestantism for their own purposes, religious commitment carried its own weight—and not just with the Princes. At different times, Protestant sects began to organize those who lived below the noble ranks. And as time went on, and people became ever freer from the fixed ranks of medieval political and social life—and religious conflicts grew more severe—some people became even more dedicated to a way of life that gave them the only fixed points in an otherwise changing and uncertain world. Protestantism, particularly in its puritan form in England and Geneva, became a revolutionary movement.¹⁷ And it was supported—and not just lead—by people whose lives are wholly shaped by the religious beliefs and practices—and conflicts—to which they are dedicated. The last elements, but one, of a distinctively modern ideological politics, have arrived.

16. Intolerance was, of course, much more likely to be virulent on the part of Christians. For Jews who believed in salvation did not hold that one had to be Jewish to enter heaven. All gentiles had to do was keep the basic commandment given to Noah. Most Christians believe, on the other hand, that only belief in Jesus could lead to salvation.

17. I draw on Michael Walzer's *The Revolution of the Saints* here and elsewhere in this section.

The final element is the naturalist conception of reason I discussed in the previous section. Religious conflict can, no doubt, create a sense of certainty greater than even that available to followers of the scientific method. But it would seem to have fewer resources by which to create consensus. It is terribly difficult for the people on one side of a religious dispute to share with those on the other the manifestations of revelation that have left them convinced of their own righteousness. Or, perhaps I should say that each side can find such manifestations as they need to bring about the conviction that they are doing God's work. Yet they cannot both be right. And manifestations of revelation that are, at least to one side, plainly false, need explanation. Christian religious disputants have an explanation at hand in the theory of the devil.¹⁸ This explanation gives a Christian hope of eventual triumph. Yet that triumph might be long delayed and not found in this world. A central contribution of naturalist epistemology and metaphysics, then, is that it presumably gives us a way to reach consensus as well as certainty. Of course, to do so, we must put aside religious disputes. But, however much the teaching of the earliest naturalists were meant to fit with a new understanding of Christianity, developments in naturalism soon gave people philosophical reasons to put religion to one side. And the liberal defense of tolerance and a purely this-worldly politics creates the largely secular political world in which we live today.

This point of this abbreviated sketch of the pre-history of ideology is to help us define ideological politics. As I see it, the key elements of such a politics are

1. Political ideologies hold that political disagreements reflect differing theoretical perspectives on large issues such as the nature of human beings, of morality, of political and social life and of the ends of politics.
2. Political ideologies justify the, perhaps radical, renovation and transformation of political and social life. They call for new forms of government and new leaders in government. Or, where they have already triumphed, they call attention to the radically new features of the current regime and resist alterations in its basic features.
3. Political ideologies come to be embodied in political movements that seek to encourage large numbers of people to accept and act upon the ideological view of political and social life.
4. Political ideologies tend to monopolize the lives of those who are most involved in the political movements that seek to realize them.
5. Political ideologies are exclusive. Their supporters seek a political community in which everyone accepts the ideology and in which all political and social institutions and practices embody the tenets of the ideology. Compromise with other ideologies and the acceptance of pluralism is only accepted with reluctance as a matter of necessity. For, on the one hand, other ideologies threaten the coherence of an ideological political movement and may convert members away from that movement. And, on the other, political and social institutions that embody other views will make it impossible to attain the aims of the ideology.

18. See Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* for an useful account of the role of Satan in the explanation of religious division.

These five features are, I think, clearly found in the largely secular ideologies that have so dominated the life of liberal democracy in the last two hundred years and still dominate so many courses introducing students to political theory: the varieties of liberalism left and right, socialism and communism, and fascism.¹⁹

Soon after the end of World War, ideology seemed to be on the verge of becoming a thing of the past. By the late fifties and early sixties, many Western intellectuals thought that the end of ideology was upon us. But the end of ideology, as presented by such thinkers as Daniel Bell, was really a triumph for one ideology, an essentially technocratic liberalism. (The representative man of this whole way of thought is, I suppose, Robert McNamara.) Bell and other proponents of the end of ideology thesis 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 that could be resolved by experts and managers.

Satisfaction with the end of ideology was the result, in no small part, of exhaustion with the ideological debate of the pre-war years.²⁰ 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 France as well). Meanwhile fascism was entirely discredited and the cold war against a communism that had so evidently betrayed all promise of being a progressive movement in human history dramatically diminished the appeal of all socialist alternatives to the liberal consensus.

As has often been noted, the theory of the end of ideology had a deeply ironic end itself. Not long after that theory had reached its apogee of popularity, the first waves of the sixties were upon it. Technocratic liberalism was brought up short by the civil rights movement and powerfully challenged by the counter-culture and by the opponents of that most technocratic of wars, Vietnam. Then feminism, environmentalism, and the gay and lesbian liberation movement—as well as the backlashes against all of these new political tendencies—made it impossible to return to the political quiet of the fifties. And, in the last twenty years, thinking that looks ideological has taken root in what, in America, once would have seemed the unlikeliest of all places, the right. The social conservatism of the Moral Majority and its successors struggled against various liberation movements from the left. The ideology of the market made a decisive return, both in economic theory and in the programs of conservative politicians. Its most extreme formulation, libertarianism, became popular, both on college campuses and, somewhat more quietly, in the halls of Congress. Thatcher, Reagan, and Gingrich have not let the fear of oxymoron stop them from launching one conservative revolution after another against social welfare liberalism. And, as if to certify the return of ideological thinking, many of the writers who defended the end of ideology thesis themselves contributed to what might be an ideology of their own, neo-conservatism.

So, at least at first look, ideological conflict seems very much alive in the contemporary world. But are first looks deceiving? We shall return to this issue below.

19. And I would also argue that the romanticism of Blake and Schiller is another ideology which stands behind, in one way or another, fascism, as well as socialism and communism.

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

§7. *Prophetic Historicism*

I have suggested that the pursuit of theoretical certainty and consensus is one source of the development of ideology in politics. But the existence of ideological division is, in itself, a challenge to the pursuit of certainty and consensus. And, of course, it is a deep challenge to the naturalist account of reason, which tells us that, if we are honest and industrious, debate and division will be but a temporary step on the way to certainty and consensus.

What I shall call prophetic historicism (to distinguish it from Rorty's prosaic historicism) offers us a theory of historical development (while prosaic historicism offers us only an unending series of historical changes.) Among other things, a central aim of prophetic historicism is to explain the persistence of ideological conflict and the development and change in those ideologies that have structured political and social life. Prophetic historicism typically does this by claiming that human history must necessarily pass through a series of developmental stages. Each stage is characterized by a particular ideological struggle. Only at the latest stages, can a study of this development itself reveal the end or telos of history. At this point Reason can, and with certainty, tell us in advance what we shall find at the end of history. But only at the end of history will consensus be reached.

Understood in this way, prophetic historicism is rather different from naturalism. For it does rest on a distinctly different account of metaphysics and epistemology, one I cannot discuss here. It is also a retreat from naturalism. For it holds that, until the end of history, the division of human beings and ideological politics is inevitable. And thus, as many have noted, prophetic historicism re-presents in a new form the religious explanation of human conflict. Only instead of being the locus in which God's plans for us are worked out, history is arena in which the Idea or Geist or human productive activity develops through a series of necessary stages.

While prophetic historicism cannot make the same promise of immediate consensus that naturalism offers, there is some recompense for those who find it a plausible way of understanding the world. (And, of course, since there never was a naturalist political theory to end all political theories, prophetic historicism need not worry about looking bad in comparison to naturalism.) Like naturalism, prophetic historicism promises certain knowledge. But, since it also explains why most people will not accept the truth until the end of history, prophetic historicism allows its followers to hermetically seal off their beliefs from outside criticism. And, in addition, it gives them a guarantee of eventual victory in a struggle that, in its world-historical import, seems so much grander than the naturalist liberal search for a more commodious form of life. Naturalism could promise that ideological conflict would come to an end. It could not promise that all selfish and evil opposition to the truth would be vanquished. That, however, is the promise of prophetic historicism in its most radical form.

II. SOME DIFFICULTIES OF MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

§8. *The Failure of Modern Naturalism*

I have argued that modern political philosophy has a distinctive account of the relationship between theory and practice one that is expressed in an ideological form of politics and that, in some cases in a prophetic historicism. And the pursuit of theoretical certainty and consensus rests, I have claimed, on accounts of reason that explains, for naturalism, how certainty and consensus is possible here and now, and for prophetic historicism, how certainty and consensus will arrive at the end of history.

In a moment I will sketch a pragmatic alternative to the modern view of 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, in either of its forms, should be rejected.

There are, to begin with, certain general philosophical reasons to conclude that the modern project in its naturalist form has collapsed.²¹ 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.²²

§9. *The Limits of Political Theory*

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

21. I do not have space to discuss the philosophical collapse of prophetic historicism, although some of the arguments I make in the next section apply to it as well.

22. Many philosophers of action and of the social science have defended this claim. See, among many other works, Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms* and Donald Davidson, *Actions and Other Events*.

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.²³

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.²⁴ For, to predict with certainty 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 limits our ability to control the future development of, not just our theories, our political and social life as a whole.²⁵ In a free country, much that happens is not intended, let alone planned, by anyone. Depressions and world wars, like suburbanization and the decline of the center city were not the product of conspiracy but, rather, have been unintended consequences of human interaction.

§10. *The Failures of Modern Political Theory*

If the problems with modern naturalism in general or in 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 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. Hegel and Marx promised that the truth would be known at the end of history. But Hegel's philosophy has been overtaken by developments in the physical and biological

23. 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.

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

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

sciences that cast doubt specifically on his philosophy of nature and more generally on his assumption that reason expresses itself in the natural world. 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 have led 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, partly 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.²⁶ 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 political theory of the traditional sort survives as a going enterprise because liberal democracy is dominant. We tend to assume that, given the success of liberal political communities some form of liberal political theory *must* be true. For, as we have seen, modern political theory presupposes that theoretical certainty and consensus are necessary for the preservation of peace and stability. But it is simply, and quite evidently, not the case that we have all come to accept the truth of one particular political theory. 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. So, if we are to explain the dominance of liberal democracy in the world today, we will have to look beyond traditional liberal theories.

III. THE CURRENT MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

To this point, I have tried to characterize the modern aspiration to theoretical certainty and consensus and have shown how this aspiration results first, in an ideological form of politics and then, is transformed into prophetic historicism. And I have given some philosophical reasons to think that the modern project is doomed. In a moment I shall sketch a pragmatic alternative to modern philosophy and discuss the practical implications of that philosophy. But, in good pragmatic fashion, I would like to first say something about what we need from political philosophy today. As we shall see, pragmatism rejects the modern assumption that we must first get our metaphysics or epistemology right and then move on to political philosophy. Rather, it holds that the relationship among these disciplines is circular, but no viciously so. That a certain kind of political philosophy is consistent with philosophical pragmatism could be a good recommendation for that philosophy. But, to make that case, would need good reason to believe that kind of political philosophy will help us deal with the problems before us. So the question I wish to address in this part of the paper is what kind of political philosophy do we need? And to answer that question we have to take up two of the loose threads I have left hanging so far. I will first, look again at the basis of stability and consensus in the contemporary liberal democracies. And then I will reconsider the ideological character of our political communities.

26. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. This conclusion is defended in the first half of Fukuyama's book. Towards the end, though, he begins to cast doubt on it.

§11. Stability and Reason in Liberal Political Communities

We saw above in section §5 that Rawls argues that political stability is impossible in the absence of an agreed set of political and moral principles.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 wants to find a framework in which all public political reasoning can take place. But, 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 can 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.

One way to see the difference between what Rawls is aiming for and what a pragmatic conception of political philosophy 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

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

28. 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.

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 Michael Walzer envisions in *Spheres Justice*. 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 defeat, in itself, 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 all kinds hoped to avoid the fact of political conflict by finding an Archimedean point that will lead us to political agreement. But, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, 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.

§12. The End of Ideology?

Such a vision of politics leads, we saw, to ideological conflict. And, our initial conclusion was that ideological conflict remains an important feature of the contemporary life of the liberal democracies. But I shall argue that first looks are deceiving. That there are many kinds of political conflict in the liberal democracies today cannot be doubted. That they are ideological in nature is, however, another question. Let us briefly try to disentangle some of the issues raised by contemporary political debates in order to see the answer to this question.

It was once thought that the political conflict that decisively refuted the end of ideology thesis was the Vietnam War. No doubt there were some ideological elements in the debate about this awful war. Realists and idealist views played some role. And charges of imperialism were bandied about, as were more or less theoretical arguments about the right to self-determination and the evils of intervention in civil wars. But it is by no means clear that the argument over Vietnam truly involved any deep-seated ideological differences, as opposed to differences about the weight to give our various moral ideas, about the nature of the two Vietnams, and about the prospects for victory by the South. Realists and idealists were, after all, on both sides of the debate. Hans Morgenthau, the dean of American realists, opposed the war while Henry Kissinger favored it. Similar differences could be found among idealists. Many people did argue that the United States was acting in an imperialist manner or claimed that intervention in the internal affairs of another country was morally impermissible. But it is not clear that these charges—and the responses to them—reflected any deep divergence about the ends and goals of politics. Indeed, at this very moment, many of us who opposed the Vietnam war on these grounds are defending United States imperialism and interventionism in Kosovo. We argue that the facts are different in Kosovo than in Vietnam. But this just shows that, ultimately, the debate about Vietnam was not deeply ideological in nature.

Is the debate about economic affairs ideological in nature? Here there are important elements of ideology. The left and right do give different emphasis to the importance of equality and the balance between of power between workers and capitalists. But, by the standards of the last half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, the ideological bubble seems to have burst. Nowhere does the left propose radical transformation in the political economy of the liberal democracies. And nowhere does the right seriously try to end the welfare state. Now, one could say that in their heart of hearts—if they had hearts—Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey would like to drastically slash the welfare state. But they know that this is politically impossible. (Would that we could say that Bill Clinton or Tony Blair would like to drastically expand the welfare state in their heart of hearts.) The differences between left and right remain important, especially to those unfortunate enough to rely on welfare programs that have, in recent years, been cut a great deal. But it is hard to see our economic debates as reflecting a deep ideological divide as opposed to a difference of emphasis.

Some of our debates in the liberal democracies involve the extension of human rights to groups that previously had been denied these rights. The civil rights movement, parts of the

feminist movement, and parts of the gay and lesbian liberation movement have this character. I do not see any ideological differences in these debates at all. Everyone takes for granted the central liberal ideals of human rights. And, given that they accept those ideals as well, the opponents of extending rights and liberties to African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians have little room for maneuver. They can raise religious objection to, say, the independence of women or homosexual sex. To think that politics in a liberal community should reflect, say, a Christian view of homosexuality is, I would argue, to have a very different view of the ends of politics than that found in the liberal tradition. The problem, however, is that opponents of feminism and gays and lesbians cannot consistently uphold this view. They do not think that, by and large, the state should be in the business of enacting legislation that punishes people for violating religious precepts that are not also precepts of liberalism. I don't think that even Jerry Falwell wants to bring back prosecutions for blasphemy.

These civil rights and liberties issues, then, strike me as fundamentally a debate about how more or less agreed principles of civil liberties and rights should be extended to oppressed groups. There is room for debate here, as there is, say, in the abortion debate. But a debate between those who favor legalized abortion and those who oppose it is not an ideological dispute, at least not about the nature of our rights. At least on one level, everyone in this debate is concerned with protecting the rights of individuals. We just differ about whose rights should take precedence in certain cases.

Now one might argue that there is more to the abortion debate than the question of rights. For, as Kristin Luker has argued, at a deeper level, the abortion debate involves fundamental questions about the relationship between individual and family and between men and women.²⁹ Similarly, the question of feminism involves much more than the extension of rights and liberties to women. The deeper issue here involves the appropriate roles for men and women in work, in the family, and in the care of children. As many feminists argue, the goals of feminism will not be attained when men and women both have careers but women carry most of the burden of, and sacrifice their careers for, the care of children. For some radical feminists, a good life for both men and women requires that sex roles and expectations be radically transformed. They argue that the psychological underpinnings of sexual difference will never be overcome unless both men and women "mother" their children.³⁰ On the other side, an opponent of feminism might argue that it is fine for men and women to have the same legal rights, yet it is still best for all concerned if women defer to men and take care of the kids.

This struggle over the roles of men and women is but one of a series of political and moral debates that I would group under the general title of the *politics of the good*. For this is one issue in which fundamental questions are raised about what a good and fulfilling life would be in our day and age and what kind of political and social arrangements would help us live such a life.

There are a number of issues that have become prominent in the politics of liberal democracy that I would include under this category. For example, our broader debates about the environment—especially when these are understood to involve questions about city and regional

29. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*.

30. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*; Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*; Isaac D. Balbus, *Marxism and Domination*; A recent, brilliant work that discusses these issues in both theoretical and personal terms is Balbus's, *Emotional Rescue*.

planning and technology—raise the deepest questions about what sort of life would enable us, as individuals and members of a community, to be fulfilled. To take another example, the fundamental issues raised by the gay and lesbian liberation movement are not about such things as discrimination in the workplace. Rather they are about the meaning and place of sexuality in our lives. Similarly communitarians and civic republicans have raised deep questions about whether the individualism of contemporary liberal democracy undermines any prospect for a good and fulfilling life or a sound political community. Defenders of traditionalist religious views call into question the state of not just our political and social life but our souls, in both this life and the next. They argue—or, if they wished to extend their influence into new precincts—could argue that the fundamental questions they raise do not involve our right to have non-traditional sexual relationships or family relationships but, rather, whether our lives would go best if we follow the path laid down in the Bible or not. Recent disputes about education are another example of the politics of the good. These debates raise broad questions about what kind of education we believe is best for all citizens. Different ideas have been put forward about how to balance the various ends that might be sought in public education such as that between academic instruction and civic education; between parochial and cosmopolitan orientations in education; and between intellectual and practical subjects. And, finally, there are debates about participatory management and worker's control. This issue has never had been of great concern in the United States. But it has been a subject of controversy in other liberal democracies. Where they take place, these debates raise questions about the importance of work in our lives; about the alienating character of so much work today; and about the impact of different forms of work on our ability and willingness to take part in political life more generally. Thus the issue of control over the work process and workplace raise fundamental questions about the good life for human beings both as individual and as members of a community.

I would not say that the politics of the good is central to the political life of the liberal democracies. War and peace and, even more, the economy, capture the lion's share of our attention. Yet, the range of policy issues that, to one extent or another, revolve around questions of the human good are quite large. It is sometimes hard to see how much our conception of human nature and the human good shapes our view of many political and policy issues. For liberalism tends to minimize the importance of human nature and the human good in political thought. Liberalism is a political philosophy that does not rest on a particular conception of the human good. And, most philosophies of liberalism either deny the possibility of reasoning about the human good or say that claims about the human good have no justifiable place in public debate or policy.³¹ Yet our public policies, and the arguments we make about them, still reflect our view of the human good.

31. This is quite evident in contemporary political philosophy. In recent years, deontological liberals like Rawls have practically made a fetish of the notion that liberalism rests on no particular account of a good or fulfilling human life. When some notions of the human good become necessary in deontological moral thought, theorists adopt some view, such as Rawls's notion of the primary goods, that places the focus on instrumental goods that are a means to our ends, such life, liberty, and income and wealth rather than those final goods we seek for their own sake. And, while utilitarian versions of liberalism are more concerned about final goods than instrumental goods, utilitarians think of the final good as of the satisfaction of our desires, whatever they happen to be. Neither deontological nor utilitarian liberalism offers an account of a good polity and society in the sense of a political community that best allows human beings to live a good or fulfilling life.

So the politics of the good is extremely important in the contemporary liberal democracies. And, precisely because these various political conflicts invoke different conceptions of a good or fulfilling life, of all policy issues today, they are most likely to be understood in ideological terms. Feminists, environmentalists, traditionalists, participatory democrats and the like do meet the first condition of ideological conflict. They press their demands in terms of theoretical accounts of the good for individuals and for the political community. And they also meet the third condition of ideological conflict, they do seek to mobilize people and convert them to their understanding of the good. Yet, despite these elements of ideological politics, I would suggest that these political disputes are *not* fully ideological in nature, at least as I have defined ideology.

To see this, consider that none of the political views I have mentioned call liberal democracy into question.³² For all their complaints about the contemporary world, the vast majority of feminists, communitarians, environmentalists, traditionalists, and participatory democrats support the basic civil liberties, representative democracy and a free market economy subject to government regulation. What kind of ideological division can we have, when the proponents of the most radical views agree on so much? The second element of ideological politics is not found in the liberal democracies today.

Nor are the fourth and fifth elements. Traditionalists, feminists, environmentalists and the like would like to dominate the lives of their followers, but they do not and are not likely to do so. Recent talk of the culture wars in the United States is a case in point. These culture wars remind me of a public service television commercial from my childhood. In it, the middle-aged, balding political leaders of two countries are shown going to war. But, in the age-old dream of the common citizen, the war consists in these leaders themselves taking off their suit jackets and coming to blows. With a few exceptions, the culture war has been fought almost entirely in Washington and on print or the airwaves. Whether we are liberals or conservatives, all that the rest of us do, in so far as national politics is concerned, is grumble at our opponents, call them names, and, every once in a while, go listen to and applaud one of our field generals. We are not burning the books or buildings of those who disagree with us. We are not engaging them in battle. Our greatest weapon, the op-ed piece, goes the neutron bomb one better: it neither destroys buildings nor kills people.³³ Only trees suffer needlessly.

I do not mean to say that politics of the good involves no conflict or struggle or that the leaders in these conflicts have no followers. For many of us, there is probably no more important political struggle these days than to work out new relationships between men and women and new forms of family life. And, in the process of doing this, we will gradually change patterns of urban and suburban development and probably transform schooling as well. Similarly, those who are born again and rededicate their lives to God and the church find that much has changed throughout their lives.

So the struggles involved in the politics of the good are real and serious. And they draw on or create mass political movements. But these movements are not primarily expressed in our

32. More precisely, they do not need to call liberal democracy into question. Some radical feminists, environmentalists, civic republicans, and traditionalists do call liberalism or liberal democracy into question. But they speak to and for the tiniest number of people and have no impact on our politics today.

33. This weapon does, however, ruin the minds of those who take claims of a culture war seriously.

national politics but, rather, in our everyday lives and in local and regional politics and in what are frequently called the intermediate organizations of civil society. Legislation is sometimes an aim of these movements. But more often, and more importantly, the politics of the good focuses on not on the center but on the periphery, not on Congress and the President but on particular families, communities, schools, work places, and religious institutions.³⁴ And our ideals are expressed not just in these explicitly communal settings but in also how we interact with others on the street and in the mall, in the stores we choose to shop in, in what we read and write, and in the music we listen to and the films we watch.

Because the politics of the good has its greatest impact on us in daily life and in local, regional, and intermediate associations, the fourth and fifth elements of ideological politics are not found in the contemporary liberal democracies. Many of us are committed to the ideals of one or another of the movements I have been discussing. But precisely because these movements call on us to change the institutions and practices we are involved in every day, we cannot be wholly identified with any of them. We can be committed feminists, environmentalists, defenders of progressive education, and participatory democrats. But we cannot—or perhaps I should say most of us cannot—identify wholly with one or another of those movements. This is true for two reasons.

First, there is no necessary relationship between our position on one of these issues and another. One can be a defender of traditional marriage or a feminist and still support environmentalism. One can be a lesbian supporter of (more or less) traditional religious commitments. And one can be a feminist defender of traditional education. And so on. As a result, we often work on some issues or problems with people who disagree with us on other issues or problems. The days when anyone of us can identify our political commitments by saying we are part of the “the movement” has long gone.³⁵

Second, and more importantly, the commitments we make in our daily lives have to respond to the many different ideals and responsibilities we have adopted. As Aristotle pointed out long ago, any conception of the good life must find the proper place for a wide range of partial goods. And the fundamental choices we make often involve balancing these different goods. Thus the arrangements we make with our spouses and children, with our work and

34. Perhaps the most obvious exception to this statement involves the environmental movement. Legislation and regulation is very important to the control of pollution. But environmentalism also has an impact on (some of) us every day as it shapes what we purchase and eat and what we do with our refuse. While legislation will remain important, I do not think that our environmental problems can be solved short of more dramatic changes in our every day lives. These changes can be encouraged by legislation but they cannot be carried out if there is no common will to do so.

35. I do not mean to say that one can't give a theoretical account of these various movements that sees them as parts of a whole. For example, in *Marxism and Domination* Isaac Balbus gives a powerful and enlightening argument for environmentalism, feminism, and participatory democracy in terms of a psychoanalytically inspired conception of human nature and the human good. There is much I agree with in this dazzling work, including its account of the political and social sources of these movements. It would do some good would if this work and others like it came to influence these three movements and if the members of each movement came to see the interrelationships between them. But, one point of my argument is that it is highly unlikely that these three political tendencies will come together into one mass movement that is theoretically inspired by a set of canonical texts, however dazzling. And a second point of my argument is that, all things considered, it to the good that the day of ideologically inspired mass movements is over.

schooling, with recreational and religious activities have to answer to a wide range of our aims and ends. We could I suppose, put the environment first in everything we do. But our spouses and children might feel cheated if we drastically lower our standard of living to avoid purchasing any environmentally unfriendly products. A husband and wife might decide never to compromise with feminism. But this might make it impossible for one of them to meet her goals at work and the other to contribute to the local school. Even a commitment to a certain religious tradition must take into account our other commitments. And that is why, in trying to overcome the centripetal forces of contemporary life, so many religious institutions provide a range of services—from pre-schools to social action centers—for their members. Yet, even here, the commitments of every day life cannot be contained within one way of life and belief. For members of religiously based organizations—such as a social action group in a church—must work with people outside that religious fellowship in order to be effective.

Thus life is too complicated and there are too many aspects to a good life—and too many particular ways of living such a life—to be guided one set of theoretical ideals or one political movement in everything we do. At one time, I suppose, one could live one's life in an entirely puritan or Jacobin or liberal or socialist milieu. But that kind of universal commitment is no longer attractive to most of us. The politics of the good draws on too many different aspects of our lives, and concerns too many of our goals, for any ideological conception to satisfy us entirely. And of course, there are other elements of politics besides the politics of the good. We are also concerned about economic matters and foreign policy. And, here too, there is no guarantee the stand people take on one issue will be highly correlated with the stand they take on other issues. So the fourth aspect of ideological politics is, thus, not an option for most of us. No ideology is going to satisfy all the people all of the time.

Nor is the fifth feature of ideological politics found in the politics of the good. Precisely because this sort of politics is primarily expressed in daily life and in local settings such as the home, the school, and the work place, none of the movements involved in the politics of the good are or can be exclusive in nature. For one thing, the obvious solution to conflicting conceptions of the family, or the school, or the work place is pluralism. We can argue with each other about sex roles and the right kind of relationship between men and women. But we do not all have to make the same choice in our own lives. Similarly we make our own choices about our religious identity. And many of us are fortunate enough to be able to make our own choices about the kinds of schools to which we would like to send our children, and the kinds of communities in which we would like to live. So conflict that reflects, to one degree or another, different theoretical conceptions of the good can certainly be found in the liberal democracies. But these conflicts do not need to be settled for everyone, in the same way, once and for all. Instead, in good pluralist fashion, different groups of people can make fundamental different choices and adopt a wide variety of different ways of life.

For various political and economic reasons, there are limits to the kinds of choices we make with regard to schools, communities and, most of all, workplaces. But one could certainly imagine political structures and public policies that would aim to maximize the opportunity for individuals, families and groups to pursue their own vision of the good for themselves and their

local community. (I shall mention some below.)³⁶ And the result would be an even greater pluralism than we have today. Different groups of people would have and express divergent ideas about the good life in their personal lives and in a wide variety of political, social, and economic institutions. A variety of debates would be found as each of these groups challenged the ideas of others. And many political and social experiments aimed at realizing these different conceptions of the good would be undertaken. Some would seek compromises between different ideals. Others would uncompromisingly try to realize a particular vision of the good (or God.) The overall result would be a conflict of ideas coupled with a pluralistic acceptance of difference.³⁷

And so I do not think that the politics of the good is fated to be an ideological politics. It will have some of the characteristics of ideological politics. Theories of human nature and political and social life may are likely to play a important role in this kind of politics. And groups of people will struggle with one another to win adherents to their own way of thought and life. But in a pluralistic liberal community, no one will be punished for their views. And there will be no legislation demanding that everyone pursue the same conception of a good life or adopt the same institutions and practices. Politics in the country as a whole will thus not be a zero sum struggle between different ideological tendencies.

If my view of the politics of the good is correct, we can give a limited endorsement of the notion of an end of ideology. Ideological politics in the fullest sense is, at least for now, over. But political struggle and conflict, of the most important kind, will continue after the end of ideology.

§13. The End of History?

And it will continue after the end of history as well. Given the account of liberalism and ideology, I have presented, we have some reason to think that that Francis Fukuyama is partly right. We may well have reached an end of history, in two different senses.

First, we have reached the end of the period in which ideological conflict defines political life. We know that, at least for now, the end of this period of history results in the triumph of liberal democracy. I do not want to particularly endorse Fukuyama's analysis of why liberal democracy has triumphed, although there is much that I agree with, particularly in his analysis of the economic and military benefits of liberalism. But, his conclusion that liberal democracy will remain unchallenged in the foreseeable future seems sound to me.

And, second, we have good reason to believe that we have reached the end of prophetic historicism. The various problems that stand in the way of even modest attempts to predict the future certainly undermine prophetic history. Fukuyama may have the better of Hegel and Marx. But it was easier to predict the end of history after it arrived than before. Prediction is always hard. But it is harder about the future.

36. And I have tried to give a brief sketch of such structures and policies in "How Much of Communitarianism is Left (and Right)?"

37. Again, we cannot have pluralism about all matters. We can't for example, allow communities in the Midwest to choose to pollute more than communities in the East. But there are some matters of environmental politics that do allow for local option. Communities, for example, can vary a great deal in their tolerance for dirt and disorder.

Where Fukuyama goes wrong, I think, in his expectation that the triumph of liberalism and the end of history, in this sense, brings the end of radical political and social change. It may well be that the end of history, like the end of ideology opens the way for a politics of the good that will lead to political and social renovation of a dramatic, if not ideological kind.

§14. What Do We Want From Political Philosophy?

So we may well have reached the end of modern notions of theory, ideology and history. But we are left with a possibly invigorated politics. For ideological politics is politics with blinders on. Whether we accept one or another radical political theory, or whether we are just liberals who flee from the politics of the good, ideological limits our vision. For ideological politics prevents us from recognizing the individual or communal problems that have no place in our accustomed way of thought. It makes it hard for us to recognize solutions that vary from our usual nostrums. And it keeps us from finding potentially allies on some issues among our adversaries on others.

Politics in the contemporary liberal democracies today involves a whole range of issues in which cross-cutting conflicts of all kinds are likely to be found. Central to those conflicts may well be what I have called the politics of the good. And, the background against which these the politics of the good will be enacted is a broad commitment to liberal ideals, if not to any particular liberal theory. Moreover, it may well be that, if we jettison our ideological understand of politics, our politics will be more exciting and invigorating as well as more fruitful than we have so far imagined it could be.

What, in these circumstances, do we want from political philosophy? I think there are two answers, one much more important than the other.

First, it would be nice to have a theoretical defense of liberal democracy. For reasons I have already given, this is not necessary. But while liberal democracies look enormously strong—and we have seen reasons to think that the conflicts within the liberal democracies do not threaten our regime—we do not know exactly how strong or fragile liberal democracy is. So a theory of liberal democracy that is broadly acceptable perhaps, in a Rawlsian way, to an overlapping consensus of first order political and moral theories, might be nice to have. But, to be acceptable, such a theory would have to be minimal in nature. It must make room for the very conflicts that define the politics of the good and our other disagreements. A theoretical defense of liberal rights and representative democracy that aims to settle these other conflicts, once and for all, will not win broad support. Thus, it strikes me that any acceptable theory of liberal democracy will have to be much more modest than Rawls's two principles of justice.

I shall say little more about this first task for political philosophy here as it is, I think, the less important task. The much more important task for political philosophy is to contribute to the politics of the good by providing robust and vigorous theoretical conceptions of the good life and the good political community. The aim of such political philosophy would *not* be to settle our disputes. We shall never reach that goal. For one thing, no theoretical conception of, human nature or, say, the proper relationships between men and women can be entirely convincing. What we human beings are like, and what kind of life will best satisfy us is, if anything, an empirical matter. Theories can help direct our attention and point out possibilities. But they have

to be tested in the living of them. For another thing, given the differences in political and moral traditions we already have—and the differences in the kinds of human characters they create—it is highly unlikely that consensus about the good life will every be reached.

But we don't need it. Indeed, consensus would only get in our way. For what we really need is debate and discussion, experiment and trial of the most far reaching and radical sort. For only that will help us develop new forms of family life, education, work, religion and technology—or decide, with reason, to keep the old ones. Theory can best contribute to these debate, discussions, trials, and experiments—and the agonistic politics of which they are apart—by stimulating new approaches and perspectives or reviving old ones in a way that makes their virtues more readily apparent.

This vision may be appealing. But don't we know that there is nothing to be said about human nature and the human good? Haven't we learned from the naturalists and liberals that human happiness is the satisfaction of our desires, whatever they happen to be and that there is no reasoning about these desires. Or, if we reject naturalism, doesn't contemporary historicism teach that we are interpretation all the way down? And, doesn't that force us to conclude that, as Shakespeare put it, "There be no good nor bad but that thinking makes it so?"

It is time to see why a pragmatic philosophy can give us the kind of robust political philosophy we need.

IV. PRAGMATISM

§15. Pragmatism as Philosophy

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 without falling into irrationalism or historicism. I will begin by listing nine distinctive features of the pragmatic conception of rationality.³⁸ 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

38. 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.

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 reflexive 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.³⁹ As we have seen, naturalists argue that we 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. 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—presupposes that we have been trained in a social practice of inquiry.⁴⁰ 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

39. 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.

40. 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.

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."⁴¹ 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 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

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

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.⁴² 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 pragmatists 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 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.⁴³

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 historicists 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

42. Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man".

43. 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.

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.⁴⁴ Such a theory of human nature might be very useful, both in helping us understand the varieties of and transformation in 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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ Thus pragmatism and historicism emphasize the centrality of what we might

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

45. 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*.

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

47. 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

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.⁴⁸ So our broadest understanding of our place in the world must reach what John Rawls calls a “reflective equilibrium” on all of these matters.⁴⁹

§16. 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.

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.

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

48. 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.

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

Second, we have seen that the pragmatic account of rationality supports an interpretative understanding of political and social knowledge. Theories 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.

We have already seen some reasons to think that, at least at the present moment in the life of the liberal democracies, it is hard to imagine any theory, let alone any political movement, that can guide us in all aspects of our lives. In addition, there are some more general reasons to have doubts about the easy transition between theory and practice. We have no guarantee that our model is realizable or, if realized, likely to result in either a stable or satisfactory political community. Moreover, 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 it is likely that different groups of people will find particular ways of doing this that is appropriate for themselves but not for others. 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.

§17. A Model of Pragmatic Liberalism

My aim in this paper has been to draw out the implications of pragmatism for political and social life. In carrying out this project, I have criticized 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 be 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.

As we have seen, there are many such critiques. Traditionalists 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 some liberal defenses of civil liberty and freedom. But it also supports the liberal tendency to denigrate the importance of the human good in our political life. As a result, liberalism tends 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—if only active government at local and regional levels—is necessary if human well being is to be supported.

The goals of feminism will not be obtained unless government at some level helps provide day care or insures that men and women have the resources they need to take care of

their own children. And it would be useful, too, if we challenged 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 along 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 be reestablished if public institutions cannot be used to express and teach a common morality.

None of these policies settle the questions raised by the politics of the good. Rather, their aim is to allow these questions to be settled temporarily and for different groups of people, at the local level and in different ways. And, 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 politics 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 under 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 individual and collective 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 some rightists and some 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 an active involvement in politics on the part of the citizenry, pragmatic liberalism asserts that counsels of prudence should not be inflated into fixed moral principles. Political activity can, under some circumstances, create political tension and division. But our failure 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 led 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 liberal democratic 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 patriarchy, 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 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 and that were due, in part, 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 diverse 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 and practice 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 to grasp the possibility of reasoning about the human good and our own good within the context of a our liberal 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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