

The Conservative Critique of Liberalism

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1. Philosophical Liberalism and Liberal Order

There is a philosophical critique of liberalism that hangs together, can properly be said to be conservative, has a considerable tradition behind it, and is interesting and important. But it takes some effort, historical and philosophical, to locate it.

A first task is to dispel some terminological haze. ‘Liberalism’ has come to mean many, often incompatible, things. American critics of ‘liberalism’ and French critics of ‘(neo-)liberalism’, for example, have quite different things in mind. Critics of ‘liberalism’ in one sense may themselves be ‘liberals’ in another. Likewise with the word ‘conservatism’. It can denote (1) a tough-minded version of liberalism that places emphasis on free exchange, a small but strong state, private initiative and individual responsibility. This, or something in this area, is what people mean by ‘neo-liberalism’. Then (2) there is a practical, down-to-earth attitude which we can call practical conservatism. Practical conservatives see virtue in keeping the show on the road – conserving and when necessary refreshing institutions and habits that work, whatever they are. They know that sometimes ‘If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.’¹ But they may well take pride in having no philosophical view, unless it be an anti-abstract one. Importantly, they make no universal claims; what works is what works *here*. Finally (3) there is conservatism in the sense of an attitude that sees continuity, community, tradition and hierarchy as organic elements of a good society, and gives ethical grounds for doing so. In this chapter we shall be interested mainly in (3), but also in (2) in so far as it incorporates an anti-universalistic attitude.

Distinguished from these two conservative views is another outlook, viscerally hostile to liberalism, but which it is misleading to think of as either ‘conservative’, or ‘left’ – it is too out of sorts with modernity, or the ‘Enlightenment’, to be either. I shall come back to it in section 5.

What then is liberalism? We should distinguish two levels. At an intellectual level liberalism is a set of ideas that hang together as a moral and political philosophy; at the political level it is a political ethos that provides a framework for policy. At both levels it is a broad church with left and right wings. Our concern is with conservative criticisms from outside the broad church, not the debates of left and right within it; and our focus will be on the underlying philosophical issues, that is, on philosophical liberalism.

I shall refer to the policy-framing level of liberalism as the *liberal order*. It comprises (i) equal liberty for all citizens, of which an essential element is the right to act as one chooses subject to a law that protects the equal rights of others; (ii) a distinctive and special protection of liberty of thought and discussion, and (iii) the *entrenchment* of these principles, either in an effective legal framework that codifies them in basic laws or constitutional safeguards guaranteeing equality of every citizen under law, or (perhaps) in a common law tradition that effectively does the same.

¹ Tancredi’s remark to the Prince, in *The Leopard* (Lampedusa, 1960, p. 27). More sententiously: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” Burke, 1967 (1790), p. 19

Behind the liberal order have stood ideas that flow from a long philosophical tradition. They can be traced back to natural law theorists, and philosophers such as Locke or Montesquieu. However, while important elements of liberalism were present in early modern Europe they came together in the specific unified form, which I shall describe as *philosophical liberalism*,² only after the French Revolution. One important feature of this new outlook is that liberals came to recognize dangers on the left as well as on the right, and to seek principled grounds on which to distinguish themselves from both. Another is that they took on board philosophical and romantic critiques of the Enlightenment. By the same token, it was also in the nineteenth century that significant criticisms of philosophical liberalism emerged on the left as well as on the right.

With this context in mind we can set out the philosophical liberalism that conservatives reject. Think of it as comprising three principal tenets, intertwined and all contested by one or another kind of philosophical conservative:

- Individualism in ethics. This is the view that all value and right reduces to value of or for individuals, or to the rights of individuals.
- A doctrine of equal respect for all human beings based on the belief that all are equally capable of self-governance.
- A doctrine of liberty of thought and discussion based on belief in the unrestricted autonomy of reason – that is, the rational capacities of individual people – as the sole and sufficient canon of objective truth.

It is easy to pay lip service to these theses; taken seriously they are strong doctrine. Their shape and strength will become clearer as we consider criticisms. However, before coming to them let me note some other limits that I am placing on the liberalism that critics target.

First, I have not included the right to democratic participation as a defining part of liberal political order. We may think that democratic rights of participation in collective self-government follow from the basic philosophical outlook of liberalism that I have just described; alternatively, that if they do not then they should simply be added to the liberal order on good grounds of their own. Either way we tend to think of ‘liberal democracy’ as a package deal. However the idea that liberalism and democracy are necessarily linked is quite a recent development. It is not obvious that liberalism entails democracy or indeed that democracy entails liberalism.³ Many liberals have worried that democracy might turn out to be incompatible with liberal order, and if it is, they have been ready to prefer liberalism to unrestricted democracy. The view that democracy could be inimical to liberty was influential at least to the end of World War II, deriving, earlier, from the *Federalist Papers*, then Tocqueville’s account of democracy in America and, later and more dramatically, from the experience of political cataclysm in early twentieth-century Europe.

To highlight the conceptual distinction between democracy and liberal order, imagine a meritocracy in which the ruling class is selected on a self-perpetuating basis

² Or ‘classical’ liberalism – where by the word ‘classical’ I refer to the philosophical liberalism that emerged at this time, not to an economic theory of free markets. (See, for example, the distinction Mill makes, in *On Liberty*, ch 5, para. 4, between the liberty principle which he there argues for, and the doctrine of free trade which, as he says, rests on different grounds; compare his nuanced discussion of *laissez-faire* in the *Principles of Political Economy*, Bk V, ch. 11.)

³ In the 1920s Carl Schmitt’s aim was to “rescue democracy from its overlay of liberal elements” (quoted in Holmes 1993, p. 49).

by open examination, with no discrimination by class, gender, race etc. It nonetheless runs a liberal state. It honours the tenet of equal liberty by placing no restriction on entry to the examination and promoting strictly according to talent, and it entrenches negative liberty and liberty of thought and discussion. Hegel's conception of the role of the civil servant estate within his ideal constitution is not so far from this. He was highly critical of the philosophical liberal's first tenet – liberal individualism – and of democracy; but he was nonetheless a proponent of liberal order, though a conservative one. An interestingly similar standpoint seems to be evolving in some intellectual circles in China.⁴ So conservatives may approve liberal order without approving either philosophical liberalism or democracy; philosophical liberals may reject democracy in whole or part; and democrats may reject liberalism.

True, one can argue that the liberal's philosophical thesis of equal respect creates at least a *prima facie* case for unconditional equal rights of political participation. And at the empirical level one can argue – contrary to evidence brought up by those who disagree – that once the right social conditions have been reached, democracy is not only a stable long-term setting for liberal order but also a reliable one. I myself find both these arguments quite plausible. Here however we are focusing on the conservative critique of philosophical liberalism itself, and this will not require us to examine its relationship to democracy, except at the very end.⁵

Turning to a second point: I take philosophical liberalism to hold that the three normative theses outlined above are quite simply *correct*, hence in principle universally applicable – relevant to all societies at least in respect of setting goals for social development. Importantly, this epistemological claim is quite compatible with empirical recognition that the historical and social conditions for liberal order must be right. Still the historicism of a liberal like Mill in this regard, however striking, is very different to the standpoint of a practical conservative, who endorses and works to maintain the liberal political order only as 'what works here.' For a philosophical liberal, liberal order is universally the ideally best order; it's just that a process of development must take place for a civil society that can maintain it successfully to emerge. In contrast, a practical conservative may well simply regard the three liberal theses as what *we* have come to accept, *our* historically-arrived-at consensus, the tenets that have come to form the cementing allegiances of *our* society. This anti-universalistic stance will reject or at least eschew the third thesis in its unrestricted liberal version. It is sceptical or agnostic about the claims of natural reason as a canon of truth. In so far as it defends liberal order it will endorse freedom of thought, but not the epistemological underpinnings a philosophical liberal provides for it. Practical conservatism can defend established and continuous liberal traditions; it just does not make any universal claims for them. This is likely to make a difference at the level of policy: a practical conservative might well be against liberal intervention, for example, in cases where even a historically minded liberal favours it.

We could make objectivism about the truth of the three tenets explicit as a fourth tenet of philosophical liberalism; however as just noted it is implicit in the third. Note also that on this account of philosophical liberalism the rather popular idea that liberalism is based on rejection of the objectivity of values is misguided. A better picture is that non-objectivist forms of liberalism are a strategic retreat from classical

⁴ See Daniel Bell and Li Chenyang (eds), 2013. A number of papers in this volume make the case for varying degrees of liberal meritocracy.

⁵ I consider what arguments for and against democracy can be made from a liberal standpoint in Skorupski 2013.

liberalism. Many critics from both right and left have attacked the objectivity of liberal values in sceptical, subjectivist or voluntarist terms, and many liberals, bending to the strength of these epistemological gales, have tried to adapt by finding ways of defending their liberal convictions without committing themselves to their objectivity. We shall come back to this.

Finally, something should be said at this point about the influential ‘political liberalism’ of John Rawls. Seen from the standpoint of the classical liberal tradition Rawls’ liberalism is something of an outlier. In part this is a matter of its content, focused as it is on a strongly egalitarian theory of justice. Rawls fits into the liberal broad church by the priority he gives to liberty in his two principles of justice;⁶ however in so far as his influence has contributed to the impression that a particular theory of justice is a *constituent* of liberal order as such, that impression should be corrected. Beyond the debateable minima already implied by the entrenchment of negative liberty, no further, more committal, theory of justice is *constitutive* of liberal order: indeed this is clearer than the analogous claim that democracy is not *constitutive* of liberal order.

It is also interesting that in so far as Rawls defends his account of justice on the grounds that it makes explicit the overlapping consensus to be found in Western societies, he adopts the methodology of practical conservatives.⁷ Practically conservative, too, is his claim that the very question of whether philosophical (in Rawls’ terms “comprehensive”) liberalism is objectively true should be set aside, i.e. not appealed to in the derivation of ‘political liberalism’. Both these moves distance him from the philosophical liberal.

Two further elements of Rawls’ political liberalism are likely to trouble a philosophical liberal: the doctrine that the state should not support any comprehensive conception of the good, and, even more, the doctrine of ‘public reason,’ according to which citizens and their representatives, when engaged in political deliberation and decision (including voting), should not appeal to ethical ideas with which other citizens cannot reasonably be expected to agree. Both these stances seem unnecessarily limiting from a classical-liberal standpoint, and in the second case, potentially illiberal. At any rate they are not constitutive of liberalism as discussed here, and their plausibility is beyond our remit, since our assessment of the conservative critique of liberalism concerns the powerful criticisms it makes of *philosophical* liberalism, which Rawls’s political liberalism explicitly eschews.

2. The critique of philosophical liberalism (i) individualism

So let us turn to liberal individualism. This is the doctrine that attracts the greatest and most widely-shared hostility, on the left as well as the right – in both cases on behalf of an alternative conception which has come to be labelled ‘communitarian’. In its conservative version it is more precisely described as the rejection of liberals’ ethical individualism in favour of an ethics of conservative holism.

To get to the core of this debate we must eliminate some red herrings. The first of these identifies ethical individualism with egoism and perhaps an egoistically based contractarianism about the state, or about morality. Well, holding this kind of

⁶ Rawls, 1971, §§39, 82.

⁷ However some question how much justificatory weight he places on that defence. See Mulhall and Swift, 2003, pp 478 – 81,

view does not disqualify you as a liberal, but as a matter of fact no notable philosopher of liberalism has held it. Hobbes, who did hold this view of the state, is sometimes described as a liberal, but it is unclear why. Locke, in contrast, can surely be described as at least a liberal ancestor, or proto-liberal; however his version of the social contract does not rest on egoistic foundations but on a substantial theory of natural rights. True, some liberal philosophers, such as T. H Green, have founded their liberalism on a kind of ethical egoism, in the formal sense of the word ‘egoism’, but their conception of the true interests of the self is very far from the picture of selfish self-interest – and their metaphysics has been hostile to contractarianism. In fact contractarianism was treated on all sides with a good deal of hostility in liberalism’s nineteenth-century heyday.

Another red herring is the idea that liberalism favours ‘negative’ as against ‘positive’ liberty. Two points here. In the first place, though negative liberty is unquestionably crucial to liberal order, the negative liberty that a liberal order institutes is not a liberty to do as one likes, without any external constraint. To refer again to Locke:

Freedom is not, as we are told, *A Liberty for every Man to do what he lists ...*
 But a *Liberty* to dispose, and order, as he lists, his Person, Actions,
 Possessions, and his whole Property, within the Allowance of those Laws
 under which he is; and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary Will of
 another, but freely follow his own.⁸

This Lockean, as against Hobbesian, conception of negative liberty is the very essence of liberal law.

But second, it is a mistake to think that liberal individualism is necessarily concerned with negative *rather* than positive liberty. Classically, it is concerned with both. In Kant’s original formulation of this contrast⁹ ‘positive liberty’ refers to autonomy – where by autonomy Kant means acting from recognition of how reason requires one to act. Some subsequent liberal philosophers, starting with Schiller and going on through Mill, wanted to enrich or supplement Kantian autonomy in their ideal of a fully developed individual, but they didn’t want to give it up. Autonomy in Kant’s sense is central to the classical liberal ideal of the person. If a conflict emerges within liberalism between negative and positive liberty, the former understood as a property of liberal order, the latter as an ideal of the person, it centres on the idea that negative liberty may legitimately be constrained by law in order to foster the development of the capacity for autonomy – as argued against Mill by T. H. Green.

We arrive at the real issue when we turn to the characteristic holist claim that individuals abstracted from community are *mere* abstractions. This claim can be ‘metaphysical’¹⁰ but its core is normative and psychological. It is at this point that conservative criticism of liberal individualism demands to be taken seriously.

Human beings are social animals. They gain their actuality and satisfaction from social identities which confer obligation, standing and fullness of life. Communal obligations arise from the collectivities to which a human being belongs – family, church, corporation, ‘platoon’ – certainly nation and state. Crucially, they are inherently and essentially *agent-relative* – you have obligations to your family, or

⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, §57.

⁹ *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV 446-7.

¹⁰ As it was for both idealist and positivist critics of liberal individualism. See Skorupski 2012.

your state, I have obligations to mine. So to know what communal obligations you have you need to know who you are, in the sense of where and how you belong.

These are the obligations Hegel has in mind when he asserts that “The individual ... finds his liberation in duty.”¹¹ If we unpack this we find first the Kantian point about morality and positive freedom: you are free when you act from reason, and obligations are requirements of reason. Liberals can and should agree, since they can and should accept the Kantian connections between morality, reason and positive freedom. But now comes a difference. Unlike Kant, Hegel does not think that the abstract reason of individuals can deliver duty. Rationality consists in understanding and immanent critique of a particular social morality; to achieve freedom is to be at home in a community with whose structure of obligations you can be rationally at one. Furthermore those obligations remain *irreducibly* communal, hence, agent-relative. There is no agent-neutral, impartial, universal ethical standpoint from which they can be derived.

In contrast, such agent-neutral, impartial, universal ethical individualism is what the philosophical liberal posits as the only foundation for ethics. It is well stated by Green:

Our ultimate standard of worth is an ideal of *personal* worth. All other values are relative to value for, of, or in a person.¹²

That is a nice disjunction: various ethical bases of liberalism – natural law, Kantianism, utilitarianism, perfectionism (of a certain kind), can all agree with it. It is an agent-neutral standard of worth: absolute value resides in individuals, their excellence, or their well-being, and it resides in all individuals alike, irrespective of their group membership.

So can liberals, as ethical individualists, accept that there are community-relative obligations? They can attempt to do so in various ways, depending on their wider ethical position. If they are consequentialists, they can do so in the manner of indirect consequentialism (people in general are better off if people in general act according to agent-relative rules), if rights theorists, by basing communal obligations on implicit agreement.

From the liberal standpoint, the remaining debate is psychological rather than ethical. It is a question of what satisfies human beings. Human beings are social animals in that they get great satisfactions from various forms of bonding. A liberal can agree with that – while arguing that human beings are also territorial animals that value individual property rights, and animals that like to walk alone as well as bond. At this level the dispute between conservative and liberal is an empirical dispute about human nature that does not raise an underlying purely ethical disagreement. Many forms of conservatism could agree that the psychological question about human nature is what is essentially at stake.

However this analysis of the issue is not likely to satisfy the more ethically-minded conservative anti-individualist. The important thing to reject, from that point of view, is individualism as a *purely ethical* doctrine. Agent-relative communal obligation arises from the value of the collectivities to which the individual belongs. The crucial thing to see is that their value is both agent-relative *and* unconditional, irreducible, non-instrumental. The demands placed on me by my membership of a family are agent-relative – yet at the same time they are unconditional (they do not arise from a promise on my part, for example) and non-instrumental (they do not

¹¹ *Philosophy of Right*, §149.

¹² Green, 1906, p. 210

arise, for example, because if everyone fulfils such duties general well-being will be served).

It is this combination of unconditionality and agent-relativity that is crucial. It cannot be reconciled with ethical individualism; it is one of the conservative's strongest ethical convictions, whether or not made explicit. From this point of view value is *not* all "relative to value for, of, or in a person". There are collectivities – church, family, nation, state – that have intrinsic and non-instrumental value relative to their members; "value for, of, or in a person" is relative to *them*.¹³

Ethical holism, as against individualism, does not deny the ethical significance of individual *eudaimonia* (well-being, individual self-realisation). But it holds that individuals achieve *eudaimonia* through playing their part in these agent-relatively valuable collectivities, and only do so because they rightly see them as *unconditionally* good. If liberal individualism is correct, they are labouring under an illusion. In this way, for the ethical holist, liberal individualism undermines or ironises even when it tries to preserve.

Conservatives are thus likely to see the efforts of liberal individualists to take account of the importance of community as unstable: the natural tendency of liberalism is towards cosmopolitanism. To be clear: it is not that conservatives must regard *all* obligation as communal and thus agent-relative. They can recognise that obligations of justice are non-communal, agent-neutral obligations. If you recklessly harm the legitimate interests of another, then you have an obligation to give just compensation, irrespective of whether that person is a fellow member of any collectivity to which you belong, including the state. Moreover these agent-neutral duties of justice trump communal obligations.

But what a conservative may say is that because liberal individualism cannot recognise the unconditional and non-instrumental basis of communal obligation, it inevitably concludes that duties of agent-neutral justice are not just trumps in those specific contexts in which they do obtain, but that they are the *only* fundamental duties. And there will then be a tendency to fill the vacuum by producing ever stronger cosmopolitan theories of justice (for example ever stronger theories of human rights). This is the high road from liberal individualism to cosmopolitanism. A conservative who takes this view is likely to be particularly dismissive of left-liberal communitarianism: he will see it as a feeble and wishful politics that tries to combine recognition of the importance of community with an egalitarian cosmopolitanism that undermines the irreducibly agent-relative moral values to which true community gives rise. As to attempts to develop a liberal outlook with a less inflamed theory of justice, and a better psychological sense of the importance of belonging, such a conservative will hold that within a liberal individualist framework these are bound to be overwhelmed by a pure cosmopolitan egalitarianism.

3. The critique of philosophical liberalism (ii) equal respect and free thought

The issue of individualism in ethics focuses the difference between philosophical liberals and conservative holists in a particularly sharp way. In contrast, the other two tenets of philosophical liberalism have been troubling not just to conservatives but to

¹³ One can take Hegel's view of marriage on the one hand, and Harriet and J. S. Mill's view on the other, as exemplifying the difference between a holist and an individualist view.

liberals themselves. Many people in today's liberal democracies think and act as happy-go-lucky unreflective ethical individualists. Like Moliere's *bourgeois gentilhomme* they speak the prose of ethical individualism without knowing it. The doctrine of equal respect is not so happily placed. It has assumed a neuralgic kind of importance. It is constantly affirmed, yet there is uneasy awareness that it is open to obvious objection. As to belief in the normative authority of autonomous reason: that has virtually collapsed across large parts of the intellectual and political world. The ideal of free speech remains, but if defended it is defended as a kind of individual right of self-expression, rather than as the fundamental public good, like free air, that it is on a classical liberal's conception of free thought. These two points, about respect and objectivity, are connected.

We must distinguish between equal concern and equal respect. As already noted, in contexts of justice a requirement of equal concern, that is, impartial consideration of the claims of any and every affected person, is incontestable on any reasonable view. Of course this leaves open what the contexts, and how strong the requirements, of justice are. But whatever the answer, in those contexts your children and mine (say) are equally 'important', even though they are not equally important to me or to you – in those contexts their claims must be given equal and impartial consideration by everyone, including me and you.

It is also in the context of justice that the liberal doctrine of equal respect historically arose. It amounted, first and foremost, to rejection of any presumed authority, privilege or discrimination that was based on class or status – then on gender, then race, then sexual orientation. It was and is a negative doctrine of the irrelevance of such distinctions, with some underlying conception of justice determining the contexts in which they are irrelevant. However classical liberalism also harboured the liberal disposition to a more far-reaching, positive doctrine of equal respect, founded on the claim that all human beings have an equal potential for autonomy. This more far-reaching doctrine is impossible to defend without either going metaphysical or making very implausible psychological assumptions about nature and nurture. Kant took the first route; Mill took the second. Kant appeals to the idea that reason is equally, though transcendently, present in every human being; Mill appeals to an associationist psychology that gives everyone equal rational potential.

However if these assumptions seem heroically optimistic then a way to guarantee equal respect a priori is to deny the objectivity of the normative, and to subjectivise the ideal of autonomy. Individuals deserve equal respect because there are no grounds for giving them unequal respect. Since there is no objective hierarchy of ends or values, the ultimate ends and values of individuals are unappraisable and incomparable. Liberals who go this way put in question the idea of objective reason, and thus the third tenet of philosophical liberalism. As a matter of logic, their standpoint gives no basis for the positive doctrine that everyone deserves equal respect, as against the negative conclusion that no one deserves any more respect than anyone else. Nonetheless, as a matter of powerful psychological fact, or need, the negative doctrine somehow transmutes into a positive one. The twentieth century saw a liberal stampede in this direction, to the point that subjectivism (nihilism, relativism, etc.) is thought of by some critics as nothing less than a constitutive liberal tenet. It is not. It is, rather, a historically fateful concession to populism.

Some account of what I take to be the true liberal doctrine of free thought is appropriate here. Thought that is genuinely free, that is, autonomous, is both spontaneous and open to dialogue. It is ruled by its own norms: by reason relations

that it discovers through reflection on its own spontaneous activity. Furthermore free thought is the only canon of truth. Equally important, for philosophical liberalism, is that first-person insight into truth requires unconstrained discussion with other seekers for truth, people who are responding not out of dogma but out of their own spontaneous normative dispositions. Of course it is possible for one person to be right and all others wrong. Equally however no-one can know that that they are right without engaging in dialogue with others and reflecting on the others' responses. Thus while the doctrine says that you should decide *for* yourself what is true, it does not say that you should or in any way could decide *by* yourself.¹⁴

Especially in ultimate questions of value, free debate that is thoroughly non-exclusive is essential – as a matter of the epistemology of the normative, not just of the ethics of democratic respect. Unsurprisingly, therefore, robust open-mindedness, as against dogmatic and stubborn, or weak and credulous, assessment of the responses of others is a prime liberal virtue. But it is at best a liberal illusion to think that everyone has it equally. Not every voice carries equal weight: in free and inclusive debate more and less authoritative voices inevitably emerge. It is *important* that they should – that authoritative voices should not be muffled, or hesitant in taking the lead. Putting it the other way round, one's personal independence or dignity is not diminished by free recognition of genuine authority in the common pursuit of truth, wherever one finds it. On the contrary, to recognise it is a mark of inward freedom.

This, one may say, is the elitism in liberalism.¹⁵ Its epistemological rationale is that warrant ('for human beings') is dialogical and defeasible. Furthermore, just because warrant is dialogical, ancestral voices that have maintained authority over time still count. Dialogue inherently involves tradition and immanent critique.

Now there is a conservative critique of liberal elitism that agrees with its dialogical epistemology, as just summarised, but regards its historical sociology as naïve. This is the position of Hegelian or Thomist conservatives, at least insofar as their epistemological view is in line with that of their philosophical masters. To take the case of Hegel, the doctrine that reason is active in history is the doctrine that free thought is history's endogenous causal factor, through the thinking of individuals. Likewise, the epistemology of Aquinas is that natural human reason is capable of reaching truth by its own exercise. Natural reason arrives at ethical and spiritual truths which revelation reworks and transforms. Both these doctrines, whatever else they involve, accept that freely exercised natural reason leads to truth (at least some truth).

Call conservatives of this kind 'rational conservatives.' What they emphasise, against liberals, is that if free thought, or natural reason, is to have its due influence among the people it must be mediated by tradition and authority: for Aquinas, that of the Church, for Hegel, that of a tradition of communal ethical life.¹⁶ This, such conservatives say, is what mere liberal elitism lacks; in its absence it cannot help

¹⁴ Defence of this underlying epistemology leads into basic questions of philosophy. My own view of how to defend it is set out in Skorupski 2010, Part IV.

¹⁵ It is elitist, as against the populism of subjectivist liberalism; it is liberal, as against the illiberal idea that any doctrine can legitimately be imposed on people by authority (of state, church or party). For further discussion see Skorupski 1999.

¹⁶ This is not to ignore Hegel's affirmation that 'the right of the subjective will', the freedom of the moral subject, is an inherent aspect of modern ethical life (for discussion of this see e.g. Knowles 2002, Neuhaus 2008). It signals Hegel's acceptance of the epistemic grounding of reason in free thought, but does not cancel the conservative holism implicit in his overall treatment of ethical life.

collapsing into arbitrariness and endless controversy, or domination by charismatic populists and charlatans, or utter anarchy.

This is a moderate conservatism. It says that without entrenched institutions of intellectual and spiritual authority free thought simply leads to normative crisis ('anomie'). It does not deny the autonomy of human reason, it just denies that a liberal elitism of Mill's kind can be sufficiently effective to enable and ensure the role reason has to play in a good society (in Hegel's terms, make it 'actual'). It was a debate that Mill well knew – in which he grasped the force of the conservative side, without acceding to it. Witness his carefully modulated sympathy with Coleridge, Comte, the Oxford Tractarians.

But, as already noted, to defend the underlying epistemology of reason as free thought is to put pressure on the liberal doctrine of equal respect, since it seems altogether evident that people differ as much in their sensitivity to reason as in any other competence. The fact that Kant and Mill resorted to implausible doctrines in defending the liberal conception of equal respect that they did so much to form is grist to the mill of rational conservatives. Just because they agree with the underlying epistemology, they fear that combining it with an unrealistic conception of equal respect and an outright liberal individualism is socially toxic.

4. The critique of philosophical liberalism (iii) the autonomy of reason

What then of the other liberal response noted above – the denial, contrary to classical liberals and rational conservatives, that free thought can attain and be guided by objective norms of reason? We should at once note that there is a conservative version of that thought too. This kind of conservative thinks that the notion that free thought crystallises a naturally authoritative human reason is nothing but arrogant self-delusion. Human thinking cannot have a self-authorising normative objectivity; it cannot pull itself up by its bootstraps. If, therefore, it is to avoid scepticism it must find rest in some non-rational stabilisation of belief. Options here are various. They include the Humean or Burkean¹⁷ appeal to stabilisation by habit or 'prejudice', and Newman's appeal to the extra-rational authority of Christian doctrine. However, if we are most concerned with conservative attitudes after the emergence of classical liberalism in the 19th century, then various kinds of *voluntarism* – divine, collectivist, charismatic – are particularly relevant.¹⁸

What we must grasp, in order to appreciate the increasing cultural weakness of philosophical liberalism as it moved into the twentieth century, is that from about the time of Nietzsche (though by no means just because of him) the denial of rational objectivity in favour of various mixes of nihilism and voluntarism has grown into a cultural tsunami. Liberals can either resist it or try to flow with it without sinking. For those who flow with it, there have been – during the heyday of modernism – some not very coherent elite-existentialist options on offer; but in the end the biggest flow by

¹⁷ As Hampsher-Monk nicely puts it (1992, ch. VI 'Edmund Burke'. p. 304), "Although he in some ways anticipates the far more rationalist Hegel, Burke's fear of the inadequacies of individual reason has only an obscure counterpart in his belief in collective wisdom."

¹⁸ Voluntarism, the view that normativity is founded on will (of God, or of the individual or collective subject) is an ancient tradition in philosophy and theology. Irwin 2007 – 9 traces the conflict of voluntarism and naturalism (the appeal to natural reason) from the mediaeval period.

far has been towards market-driven populism, which at least offers a kind of ‘equal respect’ and ‘freedom of choice’ – though to a classical liberal the words ‘respect’, ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ can only be sad caricatures here.

In the first half of the twentieth century populism did not work the liberal’s way. Its ideal, rather, was the triumph of the will of the people, identified with the charismatic will of the leader. But in the century’s second half both liberal order and democracy, powered by capitalism, made a stunning comeback. And that in turn has come to allow for defences of liberal democracy that are practical-conservative in their rejection of foundations and reliance on the stability of opinion. Richard Rorty’s ‘post-modernist bourgeois liberalism’ is a philosophically sophisticated (or over-sophisticated) version of this kind of defence.¹⁹

Both rational conservatives and classical liberals will object that these tactics are unhistorical and complacent. Yes, we have the good fortune to live in a prosperous liberal order that has seen off totalitarian challenges. But can we rely on that? If affluence, freedom from pain, and consumer ‘choice’ came to seem better guaranteed by an illiberal brave new world, would anything be wrong with that? And if so, what and why? It is interesting that post-modern bourgeois liberalism came to the fore only at the apparent apogee of Western affluence and power. And tempting to see it as a symptom of decline – the vehicle runs on because its acquired momentum hasn’t yet encountered a sufficiently adverse slope.

But before we step back to a final comparison of the positions of rational conservatives and philosophical liberals (both less enervating than this one) there is a very striking historical phenomenon we should take into account: anti-liberal rage.

5. Sources of anti-liberal rage

Confining attention to cool and rational discussion between philosophical conservatives and philosophical liberals would ignore a social fact of first importance: namely, that liberalism in all its aspects has given rise not only to sober criticism but also to lava flows of hatred and disgust, from its first philosophical formulations in the 19th Century.²⁰

Rage distorts – we have touched on some of the distortions. Liberalism is neither a charter for selfishness nor a recipe for unlimited, arbitrary or terroristic freedom. It is not a reductionist or instrumentalist view of reason. None of these criticisms can be fairly made of philosophical liberalism. Yet even when fully understood philosophical liberalism has the power to provoke a reaction of existential outrage. The outrage is directed in part at the doctrine itself – at the dimensions of life it closes off or denies – and in part at complacent obtuseness or denial, on the part of liberals, as to what it closes off or denies.

The force and depth of these anti-liberal reactions cannot be conveyed in a couple of pages. Still, some points in the indictment recur in many versions and places. They are: irreverence, glib rationalism, anomie, self-delusion. Further, it will help to keep in mind two kinds of outrage – the heroic and the religious. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, respectively, provide examples. In each case the attitude of rejection is radical: an existential insurrection against the liberal iron cage.²¹

¹⁹ Rorty 1983.

²⁰ Holmes (1993) is a very good review of a range of anti-liberals, from de Maistre to Roberto Unger.

²¹ Not that Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are on a par. Nietzsche is an example, Dostoevsky provides examples. The former’s assault on liberalism is all-out and

Irreverence is the first and foremost thing that causes anti-liberals pain. It is implicit in the liberal humanist combination of individualism and equal ‘respect’. Not merely is this combination tinny and banal; it is transgressive. For heroic anti-liberalism in the Nietzschean mould, it is a slave revolt against everything truly great, a denial and mockery of the ‘pathos of distance’ that great things should inspire. For religious anti-liberalism it is blasphemy against the sacred. In this respect the two can come curiously close to each other, even though the first is aristocratic and naturalistic, while the second is religious and mystical.

The aristocratic attitude is nauseated by liberal destruction of an order of rank and a social structure of authority that true ordering of values demands. In their absence, immense spiritual distances between the great and the mediocre disappear from view: ‘The honourable term for *mediocre* is, of course, the word "*liberal*"'.²² Religious criticism of equal respect is different: it is that liberal equality of respect is hubristic, that it elbows out the Christian virtues of humility and love, that it makes individual humans into lonely gods, cut off from God and nature.

Connected to irreverence is glib rationalism (or ‘humanism’). This criticism goes further than the criticism of the enlightenment that its conservative and liberal critics shared. That criticism – Tocqueville on the French Revolution, Mill on Bentham and Coleridge – did not deny the objectivity and authority of reason. The outrage of anti-liberals is more extreme. It is outrage at the very idea that mere humans can achieve any kind of objectivity, any kind of detached superior standpoint, just by their own thinking: that there exists or could exist anything like the liberal’s false idol of objective free thought.

On this view the liberal conception of free thought and reason can only achieve its own destruction in nihilism – bleak normlessness. The anti-liberal response is in one way or another voluntaristic. For Nietzsche, the path out of nihilism requires the imposition of value by strong spirits. For religious anti-liberals the guiding idea is that meaning, moral depth, normativity itself depend on divine will, and require on the part of human beings an existential choice or leap of faith.²³

The sheer *difficulty* of achieving meaning in the modern world is implicit in either view. Modernity and liberalism fuse: the difficulty lies in the arduousness of achieving an affirmative attitude to life and world in the face of liberal modernity – of finding any greatness in it that can give meaning to life, or achieving in it a redemptive affirmation of the sacredness of the world.

It is this sense of difficulty that leads to the picture of glib liberal self-delusion. Liberals who think at all delude themselves about the tenability of their own doctrines, about the consequences of their general acceptance, and not least about the realities of human nature. From the heroic standpoint these realities require the harsh

direct; the latter’s treatment of secular rationalism, and religious faith or trust, is that of a great novelist: it is dialectical and proceeds by indirection, particularly impressively in *The Brothers Karamozov*. (Ansell-Pearson 1994 is a fine treatment of the political aspects of Nietzsche, though it rather underplays the inherent extremism of his view. Williams 2008 captures the Dostoevskian dialectical relation to faith with subtlety, yet strongly presents him as on the side of faith.)

²² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §864.

²³ These two points are separate and can each be refined. Williams gives a convincing picture of how in Dostoevsky the ‘choice’ of faith is not a matter of ‘mere’ will. However the idea that if God is dead everything is permitted, or less dramatically, all value is instrumentalised, seems to be assumed by both author and commentator.

aristocratic imposition of order. From the religious side what they call for is sorrow at the fallenness of humanity, yet pure joy that it is redeemable – a spiritual insight that is indispensable for true love of one’s neighbour, but that “facile humanist cosmopolitanism”, “the restless concerns of secular and instrumentalist thinking”,²⁴ cannot conceive.

In short, even if liberal *order* overcomes, by venal economic means, the worst dangers of totalitarianism, liberal *philosophy* can never give meaning. It contains no cause or object that justifies heroic virtue, and it closes any path towards redemption from fallenness. At most it entrenches the excruciating mediocrity of populist consumerism, the economist’s ignoble calculations of benefit and cost, and interminable, self-indulgent debate about ‘values’.

6. Towards an assessment

Our object has been to examine conservative critiques of liberalism rather than liberal responses to them. However, to measure the force of these critiques we should at least consider how answers might go. Philosophical liberals, it would seem, face challenges from three directions: there is the threat of a transmutation of liberalism into populism, there is the existential rejection, heroic or religious, of liberals’ most basic convictions as meaningless, and there is the rational conservative’s critique of liberal individualism and the ideal of universal autonomy, discussed in sections 2 and 3.

It is striking how much turns out to hang on the liberal conception of rational objectivity, that is, the idea that truth is attainable, and best attainable (not least on normative questions) by unrestricted free debate. What may seem an abstruse topic in epistemology is really the heart of liberalism.²⁵

On the one hand, it is because existential lines of thought take this conception of rational objectivity to be bankrupt that they predict the collapse of liberalism into populism. But an act of will or leap of faith towards heroic or redemptive values is a criticism of modernity itself, and a desperate one. Those values depend on pre-modern social forms that no longer exist.

On the other hand, rational conservatives agree with philosophical liberals about natural reason’s potential for objectivity. This puts the debate on more tractable ground. Their disagreement is about what social conditions must be in place for reason to be actualised. If natural reason is to have its necessary social and not merely philosophical authority, these conservatives say, there must be institutions and moral and intellectual hierarchies that stabilise it.

Rational conservatives who take that view, against the liberal model of unrestricted free debate, take it because they consider the philosophical liberal’s belief in the equal potential autonomy of all human beings to be grossly optimistic, even delusional. This (if not short-circuited by metaphysics or terminology) is a question of evidence and interpretation. Nonetheless, a realistic liberal should consider a strategic retreat. It is not a good idea to base liberal principles of liberty and civic equality on the doctrine that all human beings have an equal potential for autonomy. Such a claim may be rhetorically effective, but it is also widely misleading. It distorts what people really think about each other, and provides a false foundation for concern for others

²⁴ The phrases are from Williams, pp 181, 238

²⁵ A critique of liberalism which insightfully focuses on it is MacIntyre 1988 (although it does not seem to me to give a fair-minded picture of what liberalism is).

and for justice and rights. (Consider for example the rights of people with mental disabilities, and the bases of our concern for them.)

What is really basic to liberal order is juridical equality, and beyond that a crucial civic, not metaphysical, ethos of respect. The latter is expressed in part by an attitude that presumes – even though defeasibly – that the other person’s opinions and attitudes are freely and honestly formed, and should be heeded as such – further, that one’s opinions and choices should be formed in the same way, and expressed as such. This attitude ramifies in wide and subtle ways that have a deep effect on politics and society. It becomes stable, of course, only if it is not constantly defeated, and hence it depends on the active reasonableness and common sense of most citizens. It is this stability, however, established by experience, that provides the empirical anchor for the liberal model of free discussion – not the dogma of equal potential autonomy.

The liberal response can also note that in practice modern liberal democracies already have strong structures of moral and epistemic authority in place. For example, modern universities in liberal democracies are in part functional equivalents of mediaeval monasteries (for good and ill). True, they do not replace the central authority and powers of excommunication of the mediaeval Church. But few rational conservatives take their analysis to the extreme of arguing for a guardian council of philosopher-scientists (in the manner of Auguste Comte) let alone of clerics (as in the Iranian constitution) – however much they reprobate the moral uncertainties and conflicts of liberal democracy.

Nineteenth century liberals feared populist authoritarianism, but took it to be a danger of democracy, not of liberalism. Conceptually, as noted earlier, a liberal order can be combined with a pure political meritocracy. But if, as I believe, liberal premises lead, from a combination of practical and philosophical reasons, to some form of democracy, the question is what kind? Representative forms of democracy as they currently exist in the West mediate the popular vote through the activity of moral and intellectual elites. This may be objectionable to radical democrats but it need not be objectionable to liberals, even to liberals who are well aware of the danger of vested interests, and the need to take precautions against these.

There is, finally, an important ethical issue at stake: that of individualism, as discussed in section 2. An ethical holist says that communal obligations have their source in the unconditional, agent-relative worth of supra-individual social entities to which any individual belongs (if he or she is lucky): family, neighbourhood, corporation, nation. This complex of overlapping social wholes, taken itself as a whole, is the ‘common good.’ It is not reducible to any function of individual goods – yet it is communal obligation that actualises the individual. So individual good depends on the common good, not vice versa.

Liberals, it seems to me, must deny this doctrine of ethical holism. Their individualism is not negotiable. Against the conservative argument that liberal individualism collapses into thin, merely abstract, cosmopolitanism, they can appeal to powerful human sentiments of allegiance, solidarity and identity (though they may also fear them). True, that raises a significant question: how do these sentiments translate into practical reasons and ethical commitments? Must a liberal hold that they do so only by sophisticated derivation from an abstract, agent-neutral and individualist standpoint? Contrary to the conservative line of argument considered in section 2, liberals can accept that they are immediate – but not in the holist way. Human sentiments of solidarity towards other people who stand in various relations to oneself provide the firm base of agent-relative commitments towards them, commitments which are immediately reasonable. They constitute a normative source

that is *neither* based on any agent-neutral principle, *nor* dependent on the intrinsic agent-relative value of any supra-individual collectivity.

This response raises further questions which cannot be pursued here. But, finally, we should also note that, on the positive side, liberals can set the great liberation of ordinary people that liberal democracy has produced, and the space for stable and truthful communal life opened up by liberal institutions. To be sure, institutions can only ‘open it up’ – the task of maintaining a truly liberal ethical vision, as against a populist surrogate, requires continuing effort, both in politics and in civil society.²⁶

²⁶ Thanks to Andy Hamilton and Dudley Knowles for helpful discussion and advice.

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