Pluralism and Modernity

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I. INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the claim that liberalism offers an impoverished and narrow vision of human association. One of the classic statements of this claim is found in the early Marx. He wrote that the freedom provided by liberalism “is that of a man treated as an isolated monad and withdrawn into himself.”1 This conception of freedom, he continued, “is not based on the union of man with man, but on the separation of man from man.”2 Marx’s critique is echoed in contemporary political philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre writes that “Modern politics is civil war carried on by other means.”3 Michael Sandel suggests that the alternative to the liberal regime is strong community, a form of social arrangement that is “constitutive of the shared self-understandings of the participants.”4 These critics of liberalism share a picture of the liberal regime as a social order that favors a particular conception of the human good: an atomistic, individualistic conception that destroys the social basis for community and solidarity.5

Ronald Beiner, in his paper, The Liberal Regime,6 has developed the critique of liberal political theory from a neo-Aristotelian perspective.7 He offers a powerful elaboration of the claim that liberalism produces an impoverished ethos or way of life and a strong defense of an Aristotelian alternative. I agree with much in this critique. Certainly, Aristotle’s moral and political theory offers insights into contemporary debates in constitutional theory and jurisprudence,8 but there are two aspects of

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2. Id.
7. See generally ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS (W. Ross trans., J. Urmson, revisions) and POLITICS (B. Jowett & J. Barnes trans.) in 2 THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ARISTOTLE (J. Barnes ed. 1984). [Hereinafter all citations to these works will refer to the pagination of the Bekker edition or to book and chapter numbers.]
Beiner's paper with which I will take issue. First, I disagree with the claim that Aristotle's moral and political theory is consistent with the fact of pluralism. Second, I take issue with the charge that liberalism is defective because it entails an impoverished ethos. Before exploring these points of contention, let me introduce the concepts that are fundamental to the debate.

Beiner develops his critique of liberalism in the context of an exposition of Aristotle's political and ethical theory. Four of Aristotle's ideas—virtue, eudaimonia, ethos, and politeia—are fundamental to my discussion of Beiner's paper. My exploration of Beiner's argument relies on the following formulations of these concepts. The first idea is Aristotle's notion of virtue. The virtues are qualities of intellect and character, such as prudence, courage, and wisdom, that are conducive to human flourishing. In particular, Beiner endorses the doctrine of the unity of the virtues—the thesis that one must possess all of the virtues in order truly to flourish. The second Aristotelian concept is eudaimonia, or "the happy life." Beiner defends Aristotle's claim that eudaimonia is the telos or proper end of human life, and rejects the claim that Aristotle's account of eudaimonia is inconsistent with moral disagreement, which he equates with pluralism. The third Aristotelian notion is that "moral life is based upon ethos: that is, character formation according to socially-bred customs and habit." Beiner deploys the notion of ethos as a building block for his critique of liberalism. The fourth and final Aristotelian idea is politeia, usually translated as constitution. Beiner follows Leo Strauss, using "regime" rather than "constitution" as the translation for politeia. This translation, Beiner contends, highlights the notion that political action entails implicit claims to truth, to the moral rightness of certain exemplary ways of life. For Beiner, "[t]he liberal regime is a regime of producers and consumers, not a regime of citizens."

II. ARISTOTLE AND PLURALISM

Let me return to my first disagreement with Beiner. Is Aristotle's
moral and political theory consistent with the fact of pluralism? Beiner answers in the affirmative—my answer is a qualified no. My reasons are advanced in two stages. Initially, I explore what is meant by "the fact of pluralism," and consider objections to it. The second stage is a consideration of the implications of the fact of pluralism for Aristotle’s conception of the good as happiness or eudaimonia.

A. The Fact of Pluralism

By the fact of pluralism, I mean that modern societies are characterized by deep and intractable differences about the nature of the good. These differences, historically rooted in the religious disagreements that gave rise to the religious wars of the sixteenth century, are about what it fundamentally means to live a good life. The American constitutional order encompasses orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Christians, and secular humanists. These diverse groups could not be brought to reach agreement about the nature of the good life without the intolerable use of coercive state power. The contrary position, positing a modern society with a cohesive ethos that binds us together through common bonds of culture and tradition, is a romantic notion. The romantic ideal of communal solidarity and unity of social purpose is unrealistic, given deep disagreements about the nature of the good that have persisted for centuries.

Before proceeding to consider Beiner’s advocacy of an Aristotelian conception of the good, I pause to note that the fact of pluralism is controversial. Although Beiner does not directly attack the argument for the fact of pluralism, others have done so. For example, Stephen Gardbaum has recently argued that the liberal argument for neutrality relies on unproven premises. He restates the fact of pluralism argument as follows:

The fact of pluralism argument for strong neutrality holds that,

20. See Larmore, Political Liberalism, 18 Political Theory 339, 343-44 (1990) ("Romantic thinkers from Herder to MacIntyre have stressed... the values of belonging and custom.").

Gardbaum's criticism is voiced from the perspective of a comprehensive liberal. That is, Gardbaum advances liberalism as a conception of the good life and not only as a political conception of justice. However, Gardbaum's points could be advanced by a nonliberal critic of Rawls, e.g., a communitarian or an advocate of a religious state.
given the fact of pluralism . . . , only two options are available to the state: either neutrality among the conflicting ideals, or coercive imposition on those who do not share the one or ones promoted. And, given this choice, a liberal state must opt for neutrality. 22

Thus, Gardbaum’s version of the fact of pluralism argument assumes that the modern state is faced with a dilemma: either intolerable coercion or neutrality with respect to comprehensive conceptions of the good. Call this the coercion or neutrality dilemma.

Gardbaum argues that the coercion or neutrality dilemma is a false one for two reasons. First, the state can promote conceptions of the good in noncoercive ways, for example through tax breaks, financial aid or education. 23 Second, the conclusion of the fact of pluralism argument—that state coercion is unacceptable—is unwarranted. Gardbaum bases this second reason on two further considerations: (a) coercive state action is accepted as justified in a variety of contexts, e.g., criminal prohibitions against theft, murder, etc., and (b) the advocates of the fact of pluralism argument have not provided a reason for rejecting coercion to gain general agreement on a conception of the good, while accepting it in other contexts. 24

If Gardbaum’s characterization of the fact of pluralism argument were accurate, then his criticism would be a telling one. But the argument that Gardbaum refutes is not the one that Rawls advanced. 25 Four points of clarification are required in order to reconstruct the fact of pluralism argument.

The first clarification is this: Rawls’ argument is not that coercion is the only means by which the state could promote particular comprehensive conceptions of the good. Rather, his contention was that unacceptable levels of coercion are the only means for reaching society-wide agreement on a particular moral or religious conception. 26 This abstract point becomes clear through illustration. If the fact of pluralism claim is correct, then it would require intolerable levels of state coercion to produce agreement in the United States on fundamentalist Christianity or Millian liberalism, as the single, correct conception of the good. On

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22. Id. at 1364.
23. See id. at 1367.
24. See id. at 1367-68.
25. I believe that it is very clear that Rawls does not make the claim that Gardbaum attributes to him. But even if I am wrong about this, the discussion that follows is important, because the arguments that I advanced would be available to political liberals, even if Rawls had not already made them.
26. See Rawls, The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus, 64 N.Y.U.L. Rev. 233, 235 (1989) ("[O]nly the oppressive use of state power can maintain a common affirmation of one comprehensive, religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine.").
Gardbaum's interpretation, Rawls would have made a much stronger claim—that it would be impossible for a government to promote a particular comprehensive moral or religious conception, such as Catholicism or consumerist materialism, by noncoercive tax breaks or promotion in the public schools. That claim is clearly false, but it is a much stronger claim than the one that Rawls actually advanced. The lesson of the first clarification is that the fact of pluralism argument does not assume the coercion or neutrality dilemma.

The second clarification is an elaboration of the fact of pluralism argument: pluralism will persist absent intolerable state coercion because of a variety of factors that make it extraordinarily difficult, even for reasonable people, to reach agreement on a comprehensive conception of the good. Rawls refers to these factors as the "burdens of reason." The factors include the difficulty of assessing, evaluating, and weighing complex evidence, the presence of hard cases to which our moral concepts have indeterminate application, and value conflicts that cannot be eliminated or reduced to a single metric. To my mind, the most fundamental source of disagreement is expressed by Rawls as follows:

To some unknown extent, our total experience, our whole course of life up to now, shapes the way we assess evidence and weigh moral and political values, and our total experiences surely differ. Thus, in a modern society with its numerous offices and positions, its various divisions of labor, its many social groups and often their ethnic variety, the total experiences of citizens are disparate enough for their judgments to diverge, at least to some degree, on many if not most cases of sufficient complexity.

The burdens of reason explain why noncoercive measures are unlikely to produce agreement on a single comprehensive religious or moral conception of the good.

To Rawls' exposition, I add the following point. The existence of a variety of comprehensive moral and political conceptions reinforces the divergence of total experiences. One's comprehensive moral or religious view shapes the way that one assesses evidence and weighs values. Participation in a religious or moral tradition is sometimes participation in a form of life, and the distinctive language games in different forms of life may vary in what they count as evidence, as a good argument, and so

27. Indeed, because the claim that Gardbaum attributes to Rawls is so clearly false, the principle of charity in interpretation should make us leery of casually accepting the claim that this claim is what Rawls intended.
29. See id. at 237.
30. Rawls does not make the argument that follows, and it could be that he would view it as inconsistent with his approach to the burdens of reason.
Thus, fundamentalist Christians and secular humanists have very different starting points; they have divergent systems of reference. They would not leave these differences behind if they sought to reason together about the nature of the good life. Given the burdens of reason, it would be difficult, even for citizens with similar life histories, to reach complete agreement about the good. Hence, it is hardly surprising that modern history confirms the fact of pluralism: a society composed of citizens with different religious or moral conceptions of the good will not reach voluntary agreement on a single conception.

The third point of clarification focuses on the reasons for the claim that the coercion required to produce consensus on the good would be intolerable. Rawls claims that the level of state coercion required to produce agreement about agreement on a single conception of the good would be intolerable. The reason is not that all coercion is intolerable. Indeed, state coercion to enforce rules against certain crimes is not only tolerable, it is required by corrective justice. Rather, the reason is that an enormous and oppressive amount of coercion would be required to force agreement on a single comprehensive religious or moral conception of the good. This is a lesson of history. People will fight and die for the liberty of conscience. Gaining consensus on any comprehensive conception, be it fundamentalist Christianity or secular humanism, would require a totalitarian state. In such a state, liberty of speech and thought would perish. This price is too high, even if what could be bought would

31. Cf. L. WITTGENSTEIN, CULTURE AND VALUE 64e (P. Winch ed. 1980) ("It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.").

32. At this point, Gardbaum might offer the following query: if modern societies cannot reach agreement on a conception of the good, how will they reach a stable agreement on a conception of justice? Surely, there are deep persistent disagreements about justice, just as there are about the good.

Briefly, there are two reasons to believe that agreement on a conception of justice is possible. First, although we (the citizens of modern, democratic societies) do not share a single conception of the good, we do share a public political culture. This culture contains ideas, such as toleration, liberty of conscience, equality, and respect for personhood, from which one can reason to a conception of justice. When it comes to political justice, we have much more in the way of common tradition and heritage than we do when it comes to the nature of the good life.

Second, there are reasons to believe that it may be possible to form an overlapping consensus, between different comprehensive moral and religious perspectives, on the subject of justice. Of course, the reasons for affirming a liberal conception of justice may vary. When Christians give justifications to other Christians, the reasons may differ from those that Jews give to other Jews. Cf. Weithman, Basic Ideas and Moral Ideas: The Political Justification of Justice as Fairness (unpublished manuscript 1990) (on file with the author) ("Catholic theologians could argue that Rawls's two principles guarantee that each individual will have the social bases of the dignity to which she is entitled as a creature made in God's image and likeness."); Beckley, A Christian Affirmation of Rawls' Idea of Justice as Fairness—Part I, 13 J. OF RELIGIOUS ETHICS 210-11 (1985).
be a society in consensus on the one conception of the good life that will produce the greatest human happiness.

The fourth point of clarification concerns the reason that the state should not promote particular comprehensive conceptions even if the means are limited to those which are noncoercive or minimally coercive. Why shouldn’t the state use tax breaks, subsidies, or the public schools to promote particular religious or moral conceptions of the good? The question gains urgency because the conception to be promoted would be chosen democratically; we are not considering the possibility of a dictator promoting her conception against the will of a majority. As an initial step toward an answer, recall that such noncoercive measures will not succeed in producing consensus. For example, many citizens would continue to believe in secular humanism, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism, even if Christianity were taught in the schools and subsidized by the state. Noncoercive state promotion of particular comprehensive conceptions will take place in a society where many will never be persuaded.

There are two reasons for rejecting noncoercive state promotion of a particular conception of the good given the fact of pluralism. First, such state action, even if noncoercive, fails to give full and equal respect to the citizens who reject the majority conception. The underlying principle is that the state should act in a way that can be justified to its citizens. Citizens are respected when the state acts in ways they can accept as having reasonable justification. But promotion of particular religions or moral philosophies cannot be justified to all citizens. For example, state promotion of atheism could not be justified to citizens who are believers. From the perspective of theist citizens, a state that acts to promote atheism is treating them as means and not as ends.

Second, putting the promotion of comprehensive conceptions on the political agenda would threaten the stability of modern democratic societies. Gardbaum rejects this argument on the ground that it is not supported by evidence:

[T]here is little reason to believe that the depth of controversy surrounding state promotion of policies in such noncomprehensive moral-

33. What counts as coercion is open to debate. Even subsidies and education have coercive elements. Unless the subsidy is paid out of a special fund into which payment is voluntary, then participation in the subsidy is coerced by the criminal penalties that ultimately back up the tax laws. Similarly, coerced contributions pay for education. Given mandatory attendance laws, participation in public schooling is also coerced for those who cannot afford to pay for private schooling.

34. Gardbaum notes this argument, but seems to believe that it relies on the coercion or neutrality dilemma. See Gardbaum, supra note 21, at 1364-65.

35. This requirement does not mean that every citizen must accept the justifications that are offered. It does mean that the justifications that are offered must be such that a reasonable citizen could accept them, given her conception of the good.
ity areas as war and foreign policy, substantive equality of opportunity, direct taxation, or the distribution of income and wealth would be significantly less threatening to the stability of the political order.36

Of course, Gardbaum is right that conflicts over justice can also threaten basic stability: slavery is a good example. But modern history does provide a very good reason to believe that political conflict over comprehensive conceptions, particularly conflict over religion, is more likely to generate serious instability than other conflict. The past half-millennium of European history and the reality of contemporary Beirut remind us that people are willing to fight and to die for their religious faith. Indeed, Hobbes's contribution to political philosophy was to call our attention to this, the dark side of the fact of pluralism.37

Given the fact of pluralism, the question becomes whether the state endorsement of Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia or happiness would run afoul of the liberal commitment to respect for citizens or the danger of political instability.

B. Eudaimonia as a Particular Conception of the Good

How is Aristotle's theory inconsistent with the fact of pluralism? Let me begin to answer this question by drawing a distinction and introducing a qualification. The distinction, made by liberal political theory, is between the right and the good.38 I have been assuming this distinction, and now I will state it explicitly. A conception of the good is a conception of what an individual or community should aim for; such a conception will specify both plans of life for individuals and forms of communal life for groups.40 By way of contrast, a conception of the right

36. Gardbaum, supra note 21, at 1370.
39. Importantly, a conception of the good need not be selfish or materialistic. For example, a conception of the good might be self-regarding but not materialistic: for some the good life may consist in contemplation and prayer. On the other hand, a conception of the good might be other-regarding but materialistic: the good life may consist in works of charity aimed at improving the material life of others.
40. Thus, liberal political theory does not require individualistic, as opposed to communitarian, conceptions of the good. Indeed, most conceptions of the good contain both individual and communal elements. Nothing in liberalism rules out conceptions of the good that specify a form of life for a community of voluntary association. Such a conception of the good could include strong community, i.e., a form of association that is constitutive of the identities and ends of its members. The liberal conception of the right does, however, rule out, at least as forms of life, those conceptions of the good that require either coercive state power or official state endorsement. Cf. M. SANDEL, supra note 4, at 147-54. In opposition to Sandel, I contend that the liberal requirement that communities of ends be voluntary does not entail that they must be chosen in a sense that is inconsistent
deals with only a subset of the good. In particular, the right defines the limits that justice or fairness imposes on our pursuit of the good.41

The distinction between the right and the good is the basis for an important qualification of my claim that Aristotle's theory is in some ways inconsistent with the fact of pluralism. The qualification can be expressed abstractly: an Aristotelian conception of the good is not inconsistent with the fact of pluralism, except insofar as it becomes incorporated in an Aristotelian conception of the right. The qualification can be expressed another way: it is Aristotle's political theory and not his ethical theory that is inconsistent with the fact of pluralism.

Indeed, I am very attracted to Aristotle's moral theory. Of course, some parts of his moral theory would be ruled out by a liberal theory of justice. Aristotle was a sexist and a racist.42 Nevertheless, I am in agreement with Beiner about the attractiveness of Aristotle's naturalistic conception of the good as human flourishing—faring well and doing well. I also agree with Beiner about the value of Aristotle's emphasis on the development of character. Aristotle's theory of the virtues is an important counter to the tendency of some liberal moral theories (utilitarianism, Kantian ethics) to emphasize moral rules.

My disagreement with Beiner takes two forms. First, I disagree with the claim that Aristotle's ethical theory accepts and incorporates the radical pluralism about the nature of the good that characterizes modernity. Second, I disagree with the notion that Aristotle's political theory could provide a stable social order without repressive state coercion, given the fact of pluralism.

Consider first Beiner's claim that Aristotle's moral theory is not monistic—that it recognizes and allows for pluralism in a way that will satisfy liberal critics of Aristotle. Many of Beiner's specific points are on the mark. He is correct in observing that Aristotle recognized a variety of conceptions of the good.43 Moreover, his contention that

with their being constitutive. Membership in a constitutive community can be "voluntary" in the sense required by liberalism so long as it is not coerced. Moreover, membership can in a constitutive community can be voluntary even though it is not not perceived as chosen by its members. Thus, someone who is Amish may see their Amishness as constitutive of their identity and thus not "chosen" in Sandel's sense. Yet, at the same time, participation in the Amish way of life is voluntary, in that it is not the product of state coercion or endorsement.

41. These limits are not deduced, however, from the nature of the person. The priority of the right over the good is the result of a principled political choice. There is no metaphysical guarantee of this priority. From within our separate conceptions of the good, we choose to distinguish justice that limits our right to pursue the good because this is a good thing, given the fact of pluralism.

42. See Solum, Virtues and Voices, supra note 8, at 127-28.

43. See Beiner, supra note 6, at 75-76.
Aristotle acknowledges the consistency of more than one plan of life with the greatest good, with happiness, is plausible. There are, however, passages in Aristotle that seem inconsistent with this interpretation. Another plausible reading of Aristotle is that he sees the life of a philosopher as the only truly good life and a life in politics as the only meaningful alternative. But the question should not be what Aristotle himself thought; we ought to ask whether Beiner can develop a version of Aristotle's moral theory that retains its power and also accounts for the fact of pluralism.

Recall that the fact of pluralism is not simply that people differ in their choices of occupations or hobbies. The pluralism at issue is the radical disagreement about the good that characterizes modernity. Consider a variation on Beiner's example of the middle class violinist and the missionary priest. I may believe that playing the violin is a worthy activity that gives my life its central meaning, and you may believe that my devoting my life to music is frivolous, vain, and sinful. You may even believe that you have a moral duty to attempt to bring me to see the error of my ways. Beiner says that you and I are hunting the same fox, eudaimonia, and that we are merely off after different scents—I am riding through the woods, you are galloping by the brook.

Beiner's metaphor fails to do justice to the substantive content of Aristotle's theory. Aristotle did not limit himself to the formal claim that the label "happiness" should be applied to the point for which we ultimately aim, although Aristotle did start with that claim. Aristotle's full theory includes the further and substantive claim that there is a particular point at which we ought to aim. That point is eudaimonia, faring well and doing well, or flourishing. Aristotle's full account of eudaimonia is more than merely formal; it is substantive, rich and textured. Aristotle gives a naturalistic account on which happiness requires living a successful and prosperous life, perhaps a political life or a philosophical life. In other words, Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, when understood in light of his whole theory, is sufficiently thick that we can

45. See Beiner, supra note 6, at 80.
46. This example raises a more general point. Beiner is, I believe, correct in contending that Aristotle's moral theory is consistent with a diversity of human goods: you play the violin, and I do missionary work. But liberalism addresses the problem of inconsistent, other-regarding conceptions of the good: you play the violin, and I try to save your soul by stopping you.
47. See Beiner, supra note 6, at 76.
48. Aristotle does make a point like this in the Nicomachean Ethics, but that is the beginning and not the end of his argument. See AristotelE, Nicomachean Ethics, bk. I.
49. See B. Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy 129 (1985) (distinguishing
confidently say that, given the fact of pluralism, a society whose *ethos* attempted to habituate its citizens to aim only at this point would have grave problems.

This point can be expressed with a variation of Aristotle's own metaphor. Aristotle compared the citizens of the *polis* to the sailors on a ship. Each member of the crew has a different function. The pilot aims to be excellent at navigation and command, whereas the cook strives to be excellent at cooking. But every member of the crew shares the common goal of arriving at the destination safely. From time to time, there may even be disagreement among the crew as to what the destination is, but such disagreements must be resolved if the ship is to function well. A diversity of individual functions and opinions in the *polis* is consistent with a unity of purpose or common *telos* for the city as a whole. But a modern liberal state is more like a busy harbor than a single vessel. Communities of voluntary association may join together for a voyage united by a common vision of the good life. Individuals may strike out on their own. There is still common ground; all who sail may agree upon the rules of navigation. But this agreement takes place within a context of pluralism; different vessels have different destinations.

I am not accusing Aristotle of "failing to perceive moral conflict." Rather, my point is that the sort of moral conflict for which Aristotle's theory accounts, moral conflict within the "moral space" or *ethos* of Greek city states, is radically different from the conflict that characterizes the moral space of modernity. The Greeks, despite their real and significant moral disagreements, seem to agree on quite a lot if their ethical life is contrasted with ours. Aristotle's political theory accounts for the facts of classical life; liberalism is a political theory for modernity.

This leads me to my second point: Aristotle's political theory is not consistent with the fact of pluralism. His conception of the *polis* is not designed to account for radical disagreement about the nature of the good life. For example, Aristotle believed that the state should inculcate virtue in the citizenry. Aristotle could acknowledge that there may be disagreements at the margins about the precise nature of virtue. Indeed,
his theory is certainly consistent with even more substantial disagreements about the best method of education. But Aristotle's theory does not account for modernity. At least since the Renaissance, some have seen virtue as faith, hope, humility, and charity, while others have conceived of virtue as courage, prudence, and nobility.

Let me be clear: I am not now claiming that the fact of pluralism is a good thing, although it may be. Rather, my claim is that given the fact of pluralism, those who adhere to any comprehensive moral or political view, be it Aristotelian or Evangelical, cannot realistically expect that any democratic society in the late twentieth century could adopt their comprehensive moral or religious doctrine as the foundation for an ethos. This is a practical truth, based on the realities of modern culture, and not a truth of a priori moral theory.

To summarize: (1) Aristotle's moral theory offers an attractive conception of the good; (2) his full moral theory does not provide a strongly pluralist conception of the good, because it includes thick substantive notions of what constitutes a good life; (3) with proper qualifications, Aristotle's moral theory, as a conception of the good, could flourish as one ideal among many in a liberal society; but (4) Aristotle's political theory, insofar as it incorporates his moral theory as a specification of the end or telos of the polis as a whole, is inconsistent with the fact of pluralism.

III. MODERNITY AND THE LIBERAL REGIME

My second point is to deny that liberalism has an impoverished ethos. In particular, I disagree with an implicit premise in the thesis that liberalism should be blamed for the ills of late twentieth century capitalism. This thesis equates liberalism with American capitalism, and attributes the ills of the latter to the former: "there is a distinctive liberal way of life: a way of life characterized by the aspiration to increase and enhance the prerogatives of the individual . . . a way of life based on progress, growth, and technological dynamism."

There is an ambiguity in the use of the terms "liberal" and "liberalism" that I want to explore. Liberalism can refer to a political theory or to an ideology. On the one hand, liberalism is a family of political theories—of theoretical reflection about the desirable forms of social organization. Even so understood, the term liberalism remains ambiguous because of the wide variety of liberal political theories. When I discuss

52. See id. at 83.
53. Id.
liberalism in this first sense, I refer to a particular strand of liberal thought. The liberal political theory that I defend is rooted in the thought of John Locke and exemplified by the ongoing work of John Rawls and others.

There is a second sense in which the term liberalism can be used. Liberalism could be taken to refer to the dominant ideology of western political culture. In this sense, liberalism refers to the political discourse that is characteristic of capitalist societies. The distinction between the two senses of liberalism is important, because according to some liberal political theories western culture is far from living up to liberal ideals.

Beiner’s critique is primarily aimed at liberal ideology rather than at liberal political theory. Moreover, it seems to me that even as a criticism of liberal ideology, Beiner has made some enormous (and unsubstantiated) assumptions about the relationship between liberal ideology and the impoverishment of culture in the late twentieth century. How can liberal ideology be blamed for the world-wide proliferation of McDonalds?

Beiner’s critique of liberalism is based on his notion that because liberalism is a regime, it must endorse a set of ends. Therefore, liberalism can be held to account for its ethos, for the way in which it habituates citizens. Liberal ideology, therefore, is responsible for the characters of citizens in liberal societies.

I must confess that I am somewhat confused about the nature of Beiner’s claim. Consider an idealist and Hegelian interpretation of what he says. Hegel believed that the dialectic of ideas was the engine of social

58. Beiner’s argument, which points to the cultural impoverishment of contemporary America, could not be directed at a liberal political theory, the ideals of which have not yet been satisfied by American institutions. Thus, for example, it could not be directed at Rawls’s theory.
59. See Beiner, supra note 6, at 84.
60. Id. at 84.
change; he was an idealist. If idealism were the correct and fundamental explanation of history, then it would be natural to assume that liberal ideology is responsible for the consumerism and materialism that mark capitalist culture. The difficulty is that Hegelian idealism is radically implausible as a theory of social change. Liberal ideology does not explain the rise of capitalism. We should not, therefore, assume that Beiner intends to endorse Hegelian idealism.

Suppose that Beiner does not intend to rely on idealism when he claims that liberalism is responsible for the ills of American culture. His claim could then be interpreted in two ways. Beiner might be claiming that liberal ideology causes cultural impoverishment (the causation claim), or he might be claiming that liberalism is a symptom, that the forces which cause cultural impoverishment also give rise to liberal ideology (the symptom claim).

Consider the first possibility, that liberalism causes cultural impoverishment. The nature of this claim is still ambiguous. There are at least two possible causal relationships between liberalism and modern culture. First, as a historical matter, the introduction of liberal ideology may have started a causal sequence which gave rise to the specific features of modern culture which Beiner abhors. Call this the etiological version. Some of Beiner's remarks could be read to suggest the etiological version. For example, he observes the tendency of the liberal way of life "to turn all areas of human activity into matters of consumer preference."

The difficulty is that the etiological version of the causation claim seems implausible. One difficulty is the lack of causal mechanisms or microfoundations for the thesis that liberal ideology causes materialism. It may be true that citizens in liberal societies are consumerist and lack virtue. It may also be true that "[t]he great majority of individuals in any society are simply socialized to given roles." But how did the introduction of liberal ideology cause the patterns of socialization that characterize modern capitalism? This same question could be asked about the relationship between Aristotle's moral and political theory and his society. Greek sexism and racism should not casually or easily be attributed to the causal influence of Greek political and ethical thought.

The lack of microfoundations for the claim that liberal ideology is

61. For a sympathetic account of Hegel's theory of history, see S. SMITH, HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM 194-231 (1989). I do not claim that the text which accompanies and follows this note presents a full or adequate treatment of Hegel's views.
62. Beiner, supra note 6, at 83 (emphasis added).
64. Beiner, supra note 6, at 85.
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the cause of the cultural impoverishment of modernity can be contrasted with more plausible accounts of the etiology of the cultural and moral ills of modernity. For example, we might want to consider the possibility that the impoverished values of consumerism result, not from liberal ideology, but from what Habermas calls the colonization of the "lifeworld" by the system—the subjugation of ever greater portions of human life to the steering mechanisms of the market economy and institutionalized bureaucratic power. To put it another way, it seems more plausible to assume that capitalism caused liberal ideology, than to assume that liberal ideology caused capitalism.

The etiological version of the causation claim does not offer the only account of a causal relationship between liberal ideology and the ills of modern culture. Even if these features were initially caused by other factors, the retention of liberal ideology may be efficacious in reinforcing these features or preventing their elimination. Call this the reinforcement version of the causation claim. This version of a causation claim is more plausible than the etiological version. The notion that ideologies operate to reinforce existing social arrangements is familiar from Marxism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Some of Beiner's remarks could be read as endorsing the reinforcement version: "the liberal social and political order offers an ideology of pluralism... to mask its organization of social life according to a distinct and overarching vision of communal life." Or "the rhetoric of liberalism serves to squelch a concrete examination of social practices that would validate or invalidate the claim of wondrous diversity [in liberal society]."

Thus, the reinforcement version of the causation claim might rest on the further claim that liberalism is ideology "in the pejorative sense," that members of liberal societies are deluded about their true interests and the real conditions of social life. But what delusion does liberal ideology foster with respect to the fact of pluralism? Beiner's answer must be that the appearance of radical disagreement about the nature of the good is all smoke and mirrors—that if we made citizens aware of the nature of their true interests, religious and moral disagreement would

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66. Of course, these are complex questions. See generally J. ELSTER, supra note 63, at 459-510.

67. Beiner, supra note 6, at 85.

68. Id. at 91.

dissolve. But pluralism is a fact and not a delusion. It may be that Beiner does not agree, that he believes that liberalism rests on a "phony pluralism."\textsuperscript{70} If so, then the disagreement between Beiner and myself is in part an empirical one.

Finally, Beiner may not be making the claim that liberal ideology causes the ills of modern culture at all. It is possible that he sees liberalism as a symptom of cultural fragmentation and not its cause, \textit{i.e.}, that he espouses what I call the symptom claim. In a sense, I agree with this claim. As I see it, both liberal ideology and liberal political theory are responses to the fact of pluralism. But that does not imply that liberalism is to blame for the fact of pluralism or its negative consequences for modern culture. If Beiner believes the liberal ideology is the symptom, then his critique should not be directed at liberalism. Rather Beiner ought to focus on the underlying forces that cause the social conditions of which he complains.

Finally, Beiner levies a criticism that is clearly directed at liberal political theory rather than liberal ideology. He argues that political judgments must be made about the ordering of ends in whole societies. He contends that liberal political theory puts significant questions off-limits—that liberals can only make judgments about the state and not about civil society.

The "state/society dichotomy," which Beiner contends places "intolerable constraints on the exercise of political judgment"\textsuperscript{71} may be a feature of some forms of liberal political theory. For example, certain libertarian strands of liberal political theory have a robust conception of the private realm that removes almost all of private economic activity from the political agenda. But this is not true of the best version of liberalism. To put the point in Rawlsian terms, the system of economic organization is part of the basic structure.\textsuperscript{72} To put it more colloquially, liberals have for the past several decades been complaining loudly about private power. Indeed, they have complained so loudly that the ideology of laissez faire no longer counts as liberal in contemporary political discourse.

A point similar to Beiner's is on the mark: liberal political theory removes some questions from the social agenda. In a liberal society, the state cannot force individuals to choose any particular conception of the good life, nor can the state endorse any comprehensive religious or philo-

\textsuperscript{70} Beiner, \textit{supra} note 6, at 90-91.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Id.} at 90.
\textsuperscript{72} J. RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE, \textit{supra} note 38, at 7 (positing that economic institutions are part of the basic structure, subject to constraints of a liberal theory of justice).
philosophical doctrine, be it Aristotelian or Kantian, Catholic or Protestant, secular or religious. Beiner is right to say that this aspect of liberalism is not neutral. Liberalism does not give every conception of the good an equal chance of gaining adherents. Conceptions of the good which require injustice are ruled out altogether, at least as ways of life. Other conceptions of the good will not flourish, perhaps because they require state reinforcement in order to gain adherents, or perhaps because they cannot survive in a pluralistic society.

What grounds are there for believing that liberal political philosophy rule out forms of life that are both filled with meaning and consistent with justice? Consider one possibility. It might be that the fact of pluralism rules out certain forms of social change. It could be postulated that unity of social purpose, basic agreement about what constitutes a good life, is a prerequisite for the emancipation of the oppressed and powerless or the enrichment of modern culture. The only way to counter consumerism and materialism, the argument might continue, is through social agreement on some particular ideal of human association. The conclusion would be that pluralism is inconsistent with desirable social transformation.

I am not persuaded, however, that liberalism as a political theory requires an atomistic or materialistic conception of the good. This is not to say that an illiberal society couldn’t stamp out materialism; perhaps it could. But Beiner’s argument requires him to make the stronger claim that a liberal society could not support a pluralism in which materialist consumerism did not dominate public culture. To put it another way, Beiner must demonstrate that there is no possible world in which both (a) liberal political theory is satisfied and (b) public culture is not dominated by atomistic and materialist conceptions of the good. Liberal political theories cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of actual societies that espouse liberal ideologies. The evaluation of any political theory requires an act of imagination—a vision of the possible political worlds that the theory opens up. The observation that in our society liberal ideology coexists with materialism and cultural impoverishment does not demonstrate that liberal political theories necessarily will engender such ills.

73. To be more precise, the requirement is for a demonstration that there is no historically and nomologically accessible possible world in which these conditions are satisfied. Historically and nomologically accessible possible worlds share the history of the actual world through the present and are subject to the same causal laws. See generally D. LEWIS, ON THE PLURALITY OF WORLDS (1986).
IV. CONCLUSION

Liberalism acknowledges a tragic fact of modern life. Given the fact of pluralism, we cannot have a public culture that will satisfy any one conception of the good life. The ideal of human association that I would endorse, if the fact of pluralism did not hold, might well be a more egalitarian version of Aristotle's *polis*. It would be a community whose members shared a concept of the good life that included active political involvement and serious reflection. But it would be a secular community and not a sacred one. It would be an intellectual community and not a materialistic one. Given the fact of pluralism, I would be naive to think that a modern polity will reach consensus on my vision of the good life. What I can hope for is more modest. I can hope for a tolerant community. I can hope for a community in which everyone has a reasonable chance to flourish and prosper. I can hope for justice.