

Introduction

The Concept of Political Liberalism

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Contemplating and commenting upon the establishment of a just and stable society is an exercise that for centuries has occupied political theorists. Attempting to identify and clearly articulate the means by which such a society might be secured and sustained is a task that has captured and taxed the imaginations of some of the greatest philosophical minds known to humanity, and generated some of the most engaging and magisterial works within the pantheon of political theory. Beginning most notably in Plato's *Republic* with Socrates' investigation into the characteristics of a just polity, and proliferating with the passage of time, efforts to catalogue and explain the essential elements of a just and stable society have been and remain a fundamental component of political theory.

One of the principal challenges associated with such projects has been the identification of an acceptable demarcation line between those demands that "correctly" should or must be accommodated and those that can justifiably be refused public recognition and its associated privileges. This is, of course, not a new problem; however, certain developments associated with modernity have served to make this task much more onerous than was previously the case. In particular, the now widespread belief that any proposed boundary is legitimate, only to the extent that it is able to secure the voluntary and sustained support of the majority of those who must abide by it, has significantly complicated recent attempts to identify a publicly acceptable boundary. Unlike the

relative homogeneity of beliefs that is believed to have characterized many societies in previous epochs, many existing polities contain an ever-expanding plurality of competing, conflicting, and irreconcilable beliefs and values, and this reality has, not surprisingly, made it significantly more difficult to secure the necessary support for any proposed boundary. At minimum, the increasingly heterogeneous character of many contemporary societies requires that any proposal that is to possess the potential to secure the free and willing support of the majority of the citizenry will necessarily have to be one that can accommodate a wide diversity of competing and often conflicting demands.

This emphasis on consensus has been driven largely by the belief that in order to obtain and sustain the conditions that will enable all individuals to pursue and (hopefully) realize their respective vision of the good life, a certain degree and type of political stability is required. The belief that political stability is a necessary prerequisite for securing the opportunity to realize one's full potential and achieve one's goals has served as the foundation for many (both liberal and illiberal) theories of justice; recently, this belief has emerged as the foundation for a "new" approach to the problem of developing a viable conception of justice for contemporary pluralistic societies.¹

In the latter part of the twentieth century, a number of political theorists began to argue that existing liberal responses to the difficulties generated by pluralism were insufficient to address the problems of justice and stability facing contemporary liberal democracies. The ever-expanding diversity of competing, antagonistic, and often incommensurable views and increasing demands for public recognition and protection of controversial conceptions of the good and their related practices has produced previously unimagined dilemmas. As James Bohman noted in 1995:

If anything, newer forms of cultural diversity have now produced conflicts and disagreements so deep and troubling that even our standard liberal solutions, modeled on religious liberty and tolerance, no longer seem adequate or stable. (Bohman 1995: 253)

Many of those who arrived at a similar conclusion began to suggest that securing genuine justice and political stability in contemporary pluralistic polities would require adopting a conception of liberalism that refrains from engaging those controversial moral, religious, and philosophical questions for which there can never be a universally acceptable answer. Developing such a conception would necessitate redrawing the boundaries of liberal concern in such a manner as to distinguish between

matters of public and private interest—between the *political* and the *non-political*²—and embracing a conception of justice that seeks consensus on a framework for regulating and mediating only the former. The school of thought associated with this argument has come to be known as *political liberalism*.

A purely political liberalism is said to be animated by a “freestanding” conception of justice: that is, a conception of justice that is not derived from any particular metaphysical or epistemological view. Insofar as such a claim is true, a political conception of justice is void of any specifically “private,” or “nonpolitical,” concerns; its values are arrived at independent of such considerations, thereby ensuring that it neither demands nor presupposes a “wider commitment to any other doctrine” (Rawls 1993b: 12–13). Political liberals argue that the plurality of reasonable³ conceptions of the good that characterizes many contemporary societies precludes the possibility of achieving a voluntary public consensus on any conception of justice that seeks to regulate all political and nonpolitical behavior according to the tenets of a single “comprehensive” doctrine. A comprehensive doctrine is “a moral ideal to govern all of life” (Rawls 1985: 245).⁴ Typically, conceptions of justice have assumed and, in effect, demanded endorsement of a particular comprehensive doctrine. Given the inevitable and ineliminable presence of a diversity of conflicting and irreconcilable views, attempting to enforce adherence to a conception of justice guided by the canon of a single comprehensive doctrine would, political liberals contend, require an unacceptable amount of coercion on the part of the state and thereby generate an undesirable, indeed, a dangerous, degree of political instability. The manner by which to avoid this problem is to develop and adopt a conception of justice that restricts its regulatory scope to uncontroversial matters—one that refrains from publicly engaging those comprehensive moral, religious, and philosophical questions for which there can never be a universally acceptable answer.

In order to satisfy such a condition, the conception of justice in question must limit its concern and application to matters of public import; it must, in other words, be a *political* conception of justice. By confining its sphere of jurisdiction to “political” matters—that is, questions concerning constitutional essentials and issues of basic justice such as “who has the right to vote, or what religions are to be tolerated, or who is to be assured fair equality of opportunity, or to hold property” (Rawls 1993b: 214)⁵—such a conception not only removes the most contentious issues from the public agenda but also allows for the public affirmation and pursuit of a wide diversity of conflicting conceptions of the good and remains equally respectful of all (reasonable) comprehen-

sive doctrines. It is claimed that only by adopting such a “bracketed” approach can we hope to develop a conception of justice that can secure and maintain the free and willing support of the majority of the citizenry found in many contemporary societies, and in so doing obtain the political stability needed to establish and sustain a polity within which all (reasonable) individuals will have the opportunity to pursue and realize their chosen vision of the good life. In other words, according to its proponents, the concept of political liberalism represents the only viable means by which we might effectively resolve the problems of modernity and thereby secure the foundation for a just and stable society.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Generally speaking, the concept of political liberalism has been received as an idea that first emerged as a substantive, cohesive doctrine in the post-*A Theory of Justice* writings of John Rawls, unquestionably its most famous proponent. With the publication of “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical” (1985; hereafter, *JAF*), Rawls ushered in a new era in political theory. In *JAF* Rawls provided the first (somewhat) detailed articulation of his conception of political liberalism,⁶ a concept and a term that would soon thereafter become familiar features of contemporary political theory.⁷ Rawls presented his conception as a solution to the problem of political stability in modern constitutional democracies. He argued that doctrinal pluralism is an ineliminable feature of contemporary liberal societies, and such being the case, the only hope of realizing justice and political stability in such societies lay in developing a conception of justice that, unlike other conceptions of justice, neither presumes nor requires the affirmation of a particular comprehensive doctrine. Only by avoiding such “comprehensiveness” and limiting its concern to those matters upon which all citizens can agree is it possible for a conception of justice to obtain the type of voluntary, widespread, public support required to secure the conditions needed to establish and sustain a just and stable liberal democracy—a “well-ordered” society, in Rawlsian terms (Rawls 1985: 247). Rawls concluded that in modern constitutional democracies a conception of justice that restricts its application to questions of political justice (i.e., questions concerning constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice) is alone in its ability to satisfy such a criterion. What is needed, then, is a purely “political” conception of justice.

According to Rawls, a political conception of justice (such as his conception of political liberalism) can secure what other conceptions of

justice based upon comprehensive doctrines cannot: namely, an *overlapping consensus* on a conception of justice that can achieve the political stability needed to establish and sustain a well-ordered society. Simply put, an overlapping consensus is a free and willing agreement among the adherents of the various comprehensive doctrines that are likely to survive in a *just* modern constitutional democracy (Rawls 1985: 226). An overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice means that the adherents of a plurality of competing, conflicting, and often irreconcilable moral, religious, and philosophical beliefs are able to agree upon a conception of justice to regulate “society’s main political, social, and economic institutions”—its *basic structure* (Rawls 1985: 225). Rawls insists that only by securing an overlapping consensus is it possible to achieve and preserve the political stability essential to a just and stable liberal democracy. Not surprisingly, Rawls’s philosophical progeny attracted a significant amount of attention and provoked both favorable and critical responses. Numerous theorists analyzed his new⁸ paradigm, suggesting what was both “right” and “wrong” with it. Subsequent to the publication of *JAF*, Rawls produced a number of essays (e.g., 1987, 1988, 1989) in which he further developed and refined his conception of political liberalism. Rawls’s efforts to clarify and perfect his theory were eventually synthesized to produce *Political Liberalism* (1993b; hereafter, *PL*). With *PL* Rawls believed that he had finally presented a (relatively) complete articulation of his theory.⁹ As had been the case with *A Theory of Justice* (1971; hereafter, *Theory*), theorists—political and otherwise—eagerly consumed and responded to *PL*; and like *Theory*, *PL* has proceeded to provide the focus for a voluminous catalogue of scholarly investigations and served to once again bring Rawls’s work to the forefront of political theory.¹⁰

Yet a revitalized interest in Rawls’s work and the subsequent generation of a multitude of critical analyses of his purely “political” paradigm were not the only offspring of Rawls’s toils. In the wake of Rawls’s post-*Theory* publications, theorists did more than simply rediscover Rawls and analyze his new, provocative position; a few also began to articulate their own conceptions of political liberalism.¹¹ One such individual was Charles Larmore. Larmore’s first substantive examination of the concept of political liberalism took the form of his book *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (1987; hereafter, *PMC*), which had as its goal the development of a viable conception of political liberalism (Larmore 1996: 132). *PMC*, which first appeared in 1987—well before the publication of *PL*—detailed Larmore’s thoughts on what he considered to be the mistakes troubling contemporary moral and, by extension, political theory (Larmore 1987: ix). In particular, Larmore was concerned “to

show why moral philosophy must outgrow the simplifications that have beset its past” (Larmore 1987: 151). According to Larmore, much (indeed, the majority) of contemporary moral theory has been based upon critical misunderstandings of the fundamental characteristics of morality¹² and “the relation between moral philosophy and modernity” (Larmore 1996: 1). Larmore hoped that the arguments expounded in *PMC* would show that once moral theory has been adjusted to reflect accurately the realities of morality and modernity—that is, once moral theory “recovers” the “fundamental and pervasive forms of moral complexity that have too often been neglected by moral and political philosophers” (Larmore 1996: foreword)—it will then become clear that the concept of political liberalism not only offers the most suitable model for a public (which is to say, *common* or *political*) conception of justice for contemporary pluralistic polities, but it also represents the only *viable* solution to the problems of justice and political stability in ethnoculturally, religiously, and morally diverse societies.

Like Rawls, Larmore continued to develop and refine his initial arguments and produce additional material that further detailed and clarified the propositions put forth in *PMC*. Perhaps most noteworthy in this respect are Larmore’s articles “Political Liberalism” (1990a), “Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement” (1994), and “The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism” (1999) and his 1996 book *The Morals of Modernity* (hereafter, *MM*). In all of these texts, Larmore revises and expands upon the arguments he presented in *PMC*. However, the primary focus and purpose of these texts remained consistent with the goal of *PMC* (Larmore 1996: 1)—namely, to show that “the dominant forms of modern philosophy have themselves been blind to important dimensions of the moral life”¹³ (Larmore 1996: 1), and once theory has recovered these dimensions, the appropriateness and indeed the necessity of political liberalism will become evident.

In his 1990 article “Political Liberalism,” Larmore states that while “in agreement with a great deal of what . . . [Rawls] has written about political liberalism” (Larmore 1990a: 354), there are certain features of Rawls’s conception that are problematic. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is Rawls’s portrayal of the role of reason(ableness) in political liberalism. Whereas Rawls clearly believes that reason(ableness) can and will effectively guide and temper individuals’ behavior to the extent that it makes it possible for the adherents of a wide diversity of competing, conflicting, and often irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines to all agree on a single conception of justice to regulate society’s basic structure, Larmore explicitly argues that in an atmosphere of doctrinal diversity such as that present in many contemporary societies, reason(ableness)

alone cannot provide, at least not to the degree suggested by Rawls, the basis for such an overlapping consensus (Larmore 1990a: 342).

Larmore also criticizes Rawls for his unwillingness to “be more explicit” about the moral “correctness” of political liberalism as a system of justice for polities confronted with the problem of “reasonable disagreement.” (Larmore 1990a: 354–56). Whereas Rawls goes to great lengths to avoid proclaiming political liberalism as the “correct” or “true” regulatory framework for modern constitutional democracies, instead identifying it only as a conception that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons (Rawls 1985: 230), Larmore insists that political liberalism is not *merely* “an object of consensus;” rather, it is the “correct” moral conception of justice for contemporary liberal societies (Larmore 1990a: 354). Though Larmore believes that, contrary to popular opinion, Rawls’s refusal to proclaim his conception “true” is not akin to his “withdraw[ing] the claim that it is correct” (Larmore 1990a: 354), Larmore argues that Rawls could and should be clearer about the moral “correctness” of political liberalism as a paradigm of justice for modern constitutional democracies.¹⁴ Larmore suggests that Rawls’s failure to be more explicit in regard to this matter prevents Rawls from making as strong a case as is possible for the adoption of political liberalism. By incorporating the above-noted distinctions into his conception and explaining their significance, Larmore believes that he can better demonstrate the appropriateness, acceptability and necessity of political liberalism.

Bruce Ackerman has also justifiably been identified as a political liberal. Arguably, Ackerman’s *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (1980; hereafter, *The Liberal State*) was the first substantive articulation of a (notably) political conception of liberal justice, appearing well before any comparable text by Rawls or other now-prominent political liberals. In *The Liberal State*, Ackerman suggests that the challenge confronting political theorists is to “design a doctrine that, as much as possible, ‘does not depend on the truth of any single metaphysical or epistemological system’” (Ackerman 1994: 365)—that is, a “freestanding” doctrine. According to Ackerman, the concept of political liberalism represents the realization of this design; however, “there are many different paths to political liberalism” (Ackerman 1994: 365). In his 1994 article “Political Liberalisms,” Ackerman provides an overview of some important similarities and differences between his understanding of the appropriate character of political liberalism and Rawls’s.

While acknowledging that his work shares “many of the aims” that animate Rawls’s project, Ackerman identifies what he considers a number of problematic features of Rawls’s conception of political liberalism. In

particular, Ackerman takes issue with Rawls's model of public reason and his use of analytical devices such as the veil of ignorance and the notion of a "closed society," and he criticizes the weak egalitarianism and "parasitic" character of Rawls's conception (Ackerman 1994: 367–75). And whereas Rawls only grudgingly and somewhat belatedly acknowledges the utopian character of his project (Rawls 1999: 4, 11), Ackerman openly and willingly embraces and unashamedly defends "the emphatically utopian tone" of his own conception. Indeed, Ackerman declares that he is "entirely unrepentant" about the utopian nature of his conception (Ackerman 1994: 378). According to Ackerman, "we urgently require utopian speculation" if we are to "make some genuine steps" toward realizing a just society and avoid having politics become the pawn of "power hungry cynics:" "Given the world as it is, the promise of liberal politics can only be made evident through acts of imagination" (Ackerman 1994: 377).

Ackerman concludes that despite his disagreements with Rawls, "there can be no denying the crucial importance of Rawls's fundamental question": namely, "How are we to build a viable sense of political community amidst all this bewildering, and profound, diversity?" (Ackerman 1994: 365) Like Rawls, Ackerman believes that the concept of political liberalism offers the best answer to this question and "remains humanity's best hope in a world where cultural diversity is not only a fact of life, but a joy of living" (Ackerman 1994: 386). For Ackerman, however, the "dialogic" model of political liberalism developed in *The Liberal State* avoids a number of unnecessary and problematic methodological complications present in Rawls's conception and thus offers a model preferable to the one proposed by Rawls.

With *Constructing Community: Moral Pluralism and Tragic Conflicts* (1993), J. Donald Moon added his voice to the project of developing a viable conception of political liberalism. Like Rawls, Larmore, and Ackerman, Moon understands the concept of political liberalism as providing a vision of political and moral community in which the principles that govern our relationship with others are principles that all who are party to those relationships can fully and freely accept (Moon 1993: ix). Political liberalism so understood "does not offer a comprehensive view of the human good or a particular ideal of human excellence"; rather, it seeks only to provide "justifiable rules" to govern "the public aspects of our lives, and to define the scope of liberty within which individuals can pursue their different visions [of the good life]" (Moon 1993: 9).

As does Ackerman, Moon promotes an expressly dialogic approach to political liberalism. Moon conceives of political liberalism as a discourse-based theory that envisions citizens as engaging in discussions with the aim of discovering norms they can accept (Moon 2003: 140).

More specifically, political liberalism incorporates a model of generalized discourse, in which participants seek to abstract from their particular and conflicting identities and aspirations, in order to discover bases of agreement with others that bracket the particular issues that divide them (Moon 2003: 140). However, given that actual agreements generally have little to do with the philosophical conversations envisioned by discourse theories, an effective conception of political liberalism “must go beyond the abstract notion of a generalized model of discourse to identify the practices and institutions that could be legitimated through discourse, and which most closely approximate the ideal of discursive validation” (Moon 2003: 140–41). Such an approach, Moon argues, requires that “[t]he transcendent aspirations of Rawls’s original position or Habermas’s ideal speech situation . . . be abandoned” (Moon 2003: 142). The abstract notion of discourse envisioned and championed by Rawls and Habermas fails to allow for questioning of the appropriateness of the proposed framework for responding to “tragic conflicts”—that is, situations in which “whatever decision is taken, some will experience the outcome as unjust, but will be constrained to abide by its terms,” and thus will experience the action as an imposition (Moon 2003: 139). Only by “remain[ing] open to the ways in which its own construction may exclude some voices even as a result of its efforts to be inclusive” can political liberalism offer equal “voice” to all citizens (Moon 1993: ix) and achieve its desired ends. Securing such an outcome requires that “our ‘generalized discourses’ . . . be contextualized to specific social and historical settings in such a way as to allow the basic framework to be challenged” (Moon 1993: 100; see also Moon 2003: 142).

Moon also contends that, despite Larmore’s claims to the contrary, the conception of political liberalism championed by Larmore “cannot be defended on the grounds that it is ‘neutral,’ for there is a sense in which the shared values it discovers may not be genuinely shared” (Moon 1993: 62). Moon suggests that Larmore presents a distorted view of the potentially controversial (i.e., comprehensive) character of the values supporting the latter’s conception (Moon 1993: 62) and in so doing belittles the possible conflict associated with their adoption. Concomitantly, Moon believes that Larmore problematically underestimates the pervasiveness of irresolvable conflicts in moral life (Moon 1993: 62). Indeed, according to Moon, Larmore’s belief regarding the possibility of securing a widespread, public commitment to state neutrality (as understood by Larmore) with respect to controversial questions about the good—a fundamental component of Larmore’s conception—is premised upon the untenable assumption “that our political and moral lives can be conducted in such a way that we never face tragic conflicts” (Moon 1993: 63).

Despite such differences of opinion, Moon agrees that the concept of political liberalism “provides the best way to structure public life in a multicultural, morally pluralist society” (Moon 1993: ix). Beyond this, though, he contends that the “contextualized,” discourse-based conception of political liberalism that he proposes avoids the above-noted problems and thereby represents a model of political liberalism preferable to those articulated by fellow political liberals such as Rawls, Habermas, and Larmore.

George Klosko has developed a conception of political liberalism that he has labeled the “liberal consensus” (Klosko 2000: 8) or “method of convergence” (Klosko 2003: 184) model. As is done by many, Klosko credits Rawls with articulating the basic question that animates the project of political liberalism: namely, “how is just moral and political union possible in pluralistic, contemporary societies” (Klosko 2000: vii; see also Klosko 2003: 175). However, Klosko “do[es] not believe that Rawls’s approach to his own question is the most appropriate” (Klosko 2000: vii). Klosko argues that the “major questions of political liberalism have a deeply empirical dimension” (Klosko 2000: vii; see also Klosko 2003: 175, 179) that must be effectively addressed by any proposed conception if it is to offer a framework capable of securing a “just moral and political union” in contemporary pluralistic societies. Though Rawls’s earlier work on political liberalism claims to be cognizant of the “empirical implications” of his project (e.g., Klosko 2003: 177), Klosko finds Rawls’s “views about contemporary liberal societies . . . improbable” (Klosko 2000: vii); and, insofar as Rawls’s arguments have failed to reflect existing empirical realities, his proposed conception inadequately responds to the “empirical dimension” of political liberalism. According to Klosko, had Rawls genuinely acknowledged and seriously attempted to respond to the empirical realities of contemporary liberal societies, he would have developed a discernibly different conception.

Klosko contends that an explanation for this disjuncture is available in some of Rawls’s later work, which suggests that he basically chose to abandon the “practical and empirical side” of political liberalism for fear that to do otherwise would require that he make his conception “‘political in the wrong way’” (Klosko 2000: vii), which is to say it would render the validity and viability of his conception vulnerable to the whim of political power and bargaining, and, subsequently, unacceptably unstable (e.g., Klosko 2000: 199). Klosko believes that in abandoning the “empirical dimension” of political liberalism, Rawls critically undermined the potential success of his project. In essence, Klosko maintains that political liberalism can provide a just and stable governance framework for contemporary liberal democracies only if its claims

concerning the existence of both an ineliminable pluralism and a general support for certain “fundamental ideas” are valid (e.g., Klosko 2000: 8–9). Obviously, to make such a determination one must possess a detailed knowledge of the character and beliefs of the citizens of such societies. Thus the ability of political liberalism to achieve its stated goals is a measure of its cognizance of existing beliefs: “If the end is to discover principles that people can accept, then a great deal depends on their existing moral and political values, with which liberal principles must cohere” (Klosko 2003: 179). Subsequently, a “careful assessment of empirical evidence is necessary in order to develop the most defensible account of the principles of [political liberalism]” (Klosko 2000: 9). A “close attention to the facts of modern societies,” Klosko contends, reveals that theorists such as Rawls and Larmore present liberal principles “that are indefensibly broad” (Klosko 2000: 9).

Klosko argues that decades of empirical research provide evidence that “high percentages” of the citizens of liberal societies do not faithfully act in a manner consistent with the particular values championed by Rawls (Klosko 2003: 188–90). More specifically, “The evidence shows that many liberal citizens are markedly intolerant and would not endorse a strong conception of rights,” such as the one advocated by Rawls (Klosko 2000: vii). Klosko concludes that “in both approach and on substantive grounds Rawls’s arguments cannot withstand critical scrutiny” (Klosko 2000: 238). Given the pluralism that characterizes contemporary liberal societies, the only viable approach is one that focuses upon “democratic institutions, rather than a specific conception of rights or principles of distributive justice” (Klosko 2000: vii; see also Klosko 2003: 192). Klosko believes that his conception of “liberal consensus” developed via his “method of convergence” not only effectively satisfies such a condition, but, indeed, embodies “the most defensible account” of political liberalism currently available (Klosko 2000: 8). Klosko declares that, “even though the principles . . . [he identifies] would not be universally accepted, it is unlikely that other liberal principles could be justified to a higher percentage of the population” (Klosko 2000: 242), and thus his conception is to be preferred to that of Rawls (and, presumably, other political liberals).

Judith Shklar is another individual whose work has earned her the label of “political liberal.” In particular, Shklar’s now famous essay “The Liberalism of Fear” (1989) has, for good reason, been cited as a paradigmatic example of political liberalism.¹⁵ Shklar, too, argues that liberalism should be understood as a political doctrine, “not a philosophy of life such as has traditionally been provided by various forms of revealed religion and other comprehensive *Weltanschauungen*” (Shklar 1989: 21).¹⁶

For Shklar, liberalism “is a political notion, because the fear and favor that have always inhibited freedom are overwhelmingly generated by governments, both formal and informal” (21). According to Shklar, a liberal political conception of justice is the best means by which to protect individuals from the tyranny of abusive governments and the injustices that are made possible by (the inevitable) unequal distributions of sociopolitical power. As is done by Rawls, Larmore, Ackerman, and others, Shklar contends that her conception, the “political liberalism of fear,” offers a neutral paradigm¹⁷ in that it is not specifically or necessarily “linked to any religious or scientific doctrine” (24).

Shklar’s conception, like those of her fellow political liberals, demands the separation of the “personal and the public” (24).¹⁸ Only by ensuring such a separation, Shklar argues, can a conception of justice “remove the fear of burden and favor from the shoulders of adult men and women” and in so doing enable them to “conduct their lives in accordance with their own beliefs and preferences” (31). By allowing citizens to follow “their own beliefs and preferences” publicly and without undue qualification or reservation, the political liberalism of fear is said to provide a paradigm that can secure the conditions needed to establish and sustain a just liberal democracy.

Though there are, as already noted, obvious similarities between Shklar’s liberalism of fear and other prominent conceptions of political liberalism, Shklar’s conception distances itself from the others in one very important way: namely, it presents political liberalism as a “negative” doctrine. For Shklar, a properly designed political liberalism “does not have any particular positive doctrines about how people are to conduct their lives or what personal choices they are to make” (21). The purpose of a political conception of justice is to protect citizens from the “negative” potential of humankind—that is, the ineradicable willingness of humans to inflict unspeakable pain and misery upon one another. This approach represents a significant divergence between Shklar’s conception and those of other political liberals in the following sense: whereas other political liberals champion a purely political conception of liberalism as a means by which to produce and sustain the type of environmental conditions needed to secure and preserve an ideally well-ordered society, Shklar’s conception promotes a “political” conception because it offers the best defense against humanity’s “negative” inclinations. More specifically, Shklar maintains that a political conception of liberalism provides the most effective protection against the greatest threat to individual freedom: namely, the cruelty and fear produced by the intentional abuse of political power.

The motivation behind Shklar’s approach generates a number of differences between her conception and those of many of her fellow politi-

cal liberals. Perhaps most notable in this respect are the absence of any explicit reference to or reliance upon the moderating and unifying effect of reason(ableness) in Shklar's conception and her rejection of the search for or possibility of an overlapping consensus on a single conception of justice to regulate the basic structure of society. Whereas the success of both Rawlsian and Larmorean political liberalism, for example, is conditional upon the ability of reason(ableness) to secure the framework for the establishment and preservation of an overlapping consensus on a single political conception of justice, Shklar argues that such an expectation and goal are unrealistic and must be avoided if one hopes to secure the conditions needed to protect individual freedom and in so doing offer the basis for a truly just liberal society. Shklar's conclusion reflects her belief that Rawls and most other liberal theorists are too optimistic regarding the possibilities of humanity; despite overwhelming historical evidence suggesting the folly of such optimism, they nevertheless remain members of the "party of hope" (Shklar 1989: 26), and this is a fundamental and extremely dangerous flaw that cannot be countenanced. Ackerman's call for "utopian speculation" (Ackerman 1994: 377) is, for Shklar, an invitation to public cruelty, terror, and oppression. Only by abandoning such utopian theorizing can we hope to develop a conception of justice that can effectively protect citizens from the abuse of public power and its associated miseries and in so doing secure the conditions for a just liberal democracy.

Though the models of political liberalism outlined earlier may differ in their respective understandings of the specific characteristics of a viable conception of political liberalism, they all embrace one fundamental belief: given the ineliminable and ever-increasing diversity confronting contemporary pluralistic polities, only a conception of justice that embodies the principles of political liberalism can plausibly hope to secure the conditions necessary to establish and sustain a just and (relatively) stable liberal democracy. From this perspective, the idea of a purely political liberalism represents one of the most engaging and provocative developments in modern political theory. The importance of the concept of political liberalism can (perhaps) best be demonstrated by recognizing that if it can achieve its stated goal, "it will have accomplished what no previous theory of justice, liberal or otherwise, has: it will have provided a conception of political justice that has overcome the impediments posed by controversial philosophical questions (e.g., what constitutes the *good life*?) and removed the paradoxical tension, extant since Plato, between political justice and justice for the individual" (Young 1999: 174–75). In so doing, political liberalism will have secured the conditions necessary to establish and sustain a truly just and stable liberal polity.

Not surprisingly, then, the concept of political liberalism has attracted a great deal of attention; and, like all such proposals, it has acquired its fair share of supporters and critics and provided fertile ground for discussion and analysis. Indeed, debate concerning its theoretical and practical viability and attractiveness has been directly responsible for a significant amount of recent theorizing.

EXISTING EXAMINATIONS

Though the viability and attractiveness of the concept of political liberalism has been the subject of a great deal of analysis, the preponderance of analyses has focused almost exclusively (or, at least, primarily) on Rawls's conception.¹⁹ Certainly the most prevalent and commented upon analyses are those that have adopted just such an approach. Nowhere has this myopia been more pervasive than in the "communitarian" critiques of the concept of political liberalism. The now "famous" liberal-communitarian debate of the 1980s (and, to a lesser extent, the 1990s) was in large part stimulated and fuelled by Rawls's work surrounding the concept of political liberalism. Many so-called "communitarians" (whether by personal choice or misapplied attribution)—theorists such as Benjamin Barber (1984), Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Michael Sandel (1982), Charles Taylor (1985), and Michael Walzer (1983)²⁰—are among the harshest and best-known critics of the concept of political liberalism as represented by Rawls's paradigm.

In essence, the principal complaint of communitarians has been that the concept of political liberalism fails to acknowledge adequately the unavoidable presence, influence, and importance of "constitutive" attachments,²¹ such as family, religion, and culture, and in so doing effectively negates the possibility of establishing and sustaining a "true" community. According to communitarians, all individuals are, in various ways, inextricably tied to and a product of both their "public" and "private" communities, and this fact generates certain demands that the governance framework of a society must recognize and accommodate if its subjects are to live personally fulfilling lives. Moreover, individuals are not able to, nor should they want to, ignore or suspend such commitments when making decisions about matters of justice, political or otherwise. For communitarians, the concept of political liberalism is premised upon the existence of what Sandel has referred to as an "unencumbered" self (Sandel 1982: 94)—a self free from constitutive attachments and influences—the realization of which is neither possible nor desirable.

A number of theorists known as “perfectionist” liberals have also been prominent critics of the concept of political liberalism. Individuals such as William Galston (1992), Stephen Macedo (1990), Joseph Raz (1986), George Sher (1997), and Steven Wall (1998) have argued that the establishment and preservation of a just and stable liberal society, a society that will provide the opportunity for all of its citizens to realize their full potential and achieve their freely chosen goals, requires the inculcation, continued affirmation, and purposeful “elevation” of specific virtues and values—namely, liberal virtues and values such as toleration and autonomy. This conclusion is premised upon the belief that when given little direction and left largely to their own devices (in essence, the approach attributed to political liberalism), citizens cannot be relied upon to develop naturally the personal qualities and beliefs that will convince them to support the type of public policies and programs that are necessary to establish and sustain a just and stable liberal society. Human behavior is considered too unpredictable and mistake-ridden a basis upon which to premise such an expectation.

Accordingly, *contra* political liberalism, the public conception of justice should not seek to remain “neutral” in relation to judgments concerning the value and desirability of certain conceptions of the good. Rather, it should publicly support, protect, and promote those conceptions of the good that affirm and assign primacy to liberal values and virtues. In other words, the government has a duty to “act with discrimination to encourage the good and the valuable [i.e., the liberal] and to discourage the worthless and the bad [i.e., the illiberal]” (Raz 1989: 785). From this perspective, political liberalism is not nearly aggressive enough in its public endorsement, elevation, and defense of liberal values and virtues; it is deficient to the extent that it refuses to “‘take . . . [its] own side in an argument’” (Neal 1994b: 26).

Both communitarians and perfectionist liberals, then, fault political liberals for, in effect, failing to acknowledge the importance and necessity of commitments, and they argue that political liberalism offers an inadequate solution to the problems of justice and stability confronting contemporary liberal democracies. The similarity between communitarianism and perfectionism is such that the former has been identified as a type of the latter (e.g., Sher 1997: 156). Of course, communitarians and perfectionist liberals are not the only critics of the concept of political liberalism. Neo-Marxists, feminists, and postmodernists, for example, have also been extremely critical of the concept of political liberalism. Within the context of the various criticisms that have surfaced, what has commonly been neglected is a recognition that a number of different formulations of political liberalism have emerged. This oversight, acci-

dental or otherwise, has left many existing analyses deficient insofar as they fail to consider how the proposals contained in non-Rawlsian conceptions of political liberalism might alleviate the problems attributed to Rawls's conception.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS COLLECTION

The aim of this text is to provide a selection of the different prominent conceptions of political liberalism and in so doing offer the basis for a comprehensive exploration and analysis of the character and content of the *concept*—as opposed to a single conception—of political liberalism. Though the question of the viability and attractiveness of the concept of political liberalism has for years been the topic of extended discourse and debate, there has yet to surface a text that directly and satisfactorily engages the idea of a purely political liberalism as represented both by Rawlsian and non-Rawlsian paradigms.²² Given the prominence and (some would say unavoidable) influence of Rawls's work, one might be tempted to argue that there is no such thing as a “non-Rawlsian” conception of political liberalism; however, such a claim is clearly false. Rawls himself contends that Larmore and Shklar, for example, developed their conceptions “entirely independently” of his (Rawls 1995: 133n1). Thus though it may be difficult to deny completely Rawls's influence, it is, nevertheless, possible to argue credibly that “non-Rawlsian” conceptions of political liberalism have been produced.

Since its emergence the concept of political liberalism has become one of the most commented upon developments in contemporary political theory; it has been both deified and vilified; presented as a solution to the “modern political problematic”—the problem of developing a conception of justice that will (or even can) be freely and willingly endorsed by the adherents of a plurality of conflicting and irreconcilable conceptions of the good (Gamwell 1996: 74)—and an exemplar of all that is wrong with contemporary political theory. The multifaceted and lively debate that persists between supporters and critics of the idea of a purely political liberalism is one that is likely to continue for some time.²³ What is now beyond debate, I believe, is the significance of the concept of political liberalism: it represents one of the most engaging and influential contributions to modern political theory; and it has, quite literally, rearranged the landscape and the vernacular of contemporary political theory. Arguably, the concept of political liberalism has become the model against which all new formulations of liberalism will be compared. Perhaps most importantly, political liberalism seems to offer the

foundation for a promising response to the problems of justice and political stability in contemporary “multicultural, morally pluralist” societies (Moon 1993: ix).

As divisive ethnocultural and religious conflict and the violent disintegration of nation-states become more commonplace, identifying the means by which to secure justice and political stability in societies characterized by a plurality of competing and often conflicting and irreconcilable beliefs becomes increasingly pressing. Indeed, given the sociopolitical tensions and instability that trouble the new world (dis)order, and the potential consequences of these tensions and instability, it is difficult to imagine a more important or worthy project. With this divination in mind, the value of the project of political liberalism is clear. The purpose of this text is to contribute meaningfully to the project of political liberalism by providing the basis for a thorough examination and understanding of the *concept* of political liberalism and, in so doing, helping to answer a question that has been at the forefront of political theory for thousands of years: namely, how is it possible to secure the conditions needed to establish and sustain a just and stable society?

The preceding nineteen years have been a very active and productive period for political liberals and their critics. Rawls’s architectonic arguments have been augmented by the writings of other political liberals, and all have been subjected to (varying degrees of) critical scrutiny. This interchange between proponents of political liberalism and their critics has generated a significant amount of extremely interesting and thought-provoking literature that has served to reinvigorate and, in certain respects, reorient contemporary political theory; this has surely been an extremely positive development, and something for which all political theorists should be grateful. The fundamental goal of political liberalism—the establishment and preservation of a just and stable society—is one that justifiably continues to attract greater attention with each passing day. If we are fortunate, this trend will persist not out of necessity but, rather, out of desire.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hampshire has referred to the “new twist” in liberal political theory (Hampshire 1993: 43–47).

2. The distinction between and corresponding call for the separation of the “public” and the “private” is certainly not unique either to “political” or con-

temporary liberals. As Joseph Raz has noted, “At least since Mill propounded the harm principle, liberal political thought has been familiar with arguments that certain true beliefs that individuals are justified in relying upon in the conduct of their private affairs may not be relied upon by governments” (Raz 1990: 4). Nevertheless, it is in the concept of political liberalism that this argument achieves its most powerful and demanding expression and greatest significance (thus far).

3. The importance of this qualification will become apparent throughout the text.

4. Rawls offers Utilitarianism, the theories of John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant, and the belief systems associated with most organized religions as examples of “fully comprehensive” doctrines (Rawls 1988: 252). A more detailed explanation of the difference between a *comprehensive doctrine* and a *political conception* will be provided in chapter 1.

5. For a detailed account of exactly what types of issues represent “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice,” see Rawls (1993b: 227–30).

6. This is not to suggest that previous articles by Rawls had not also introduced various aspects of his conception of political liberalism; however, I believe that it is with *JAF* that Rawls offers the first substantive description and explanation of the purely political character of his conception of justice as fairness.

7. The term *political liberalism* was actually first introduced by Rawls in his 1987 article “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus” (Rawls 1987: 1–25).

8. I have placed the word “new” in scare quotation marks in order to acknowledge that it remains a source of debate as to what extent Rawls’s conception of political liberalism represents a “new” theory or merely a modification (however slight or significant) of the conception of justice that he proposes in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls contends that though there are important differences between the texts of *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, the theory expounded in the latter is totally consistent with the “spirit and content” of the former (1993b: xiv). On the other hand, Patrick Neal has noted that “[m]any maintain that . . . [*Political Liberalism*] does mark a significant change in doctrine in a number of respects,” and “most commentators have understood . . . [Rawls’s] practical turn [as presented in *Political Liberalism*] to have resulted in a less ambitious and less provocative theory than had been advanced in *A Theory of Justice* (1994a: 77, 79; for a similar interpretation, see Davion and Wolf 2000b: 3–4).

9. I include the term *relatively* in order to acknowledge that at certain junctures within the text of *PL* Rawls concedes that while further elaboration on specific points would be desirable, he is (if only due to constraints of space) unable at that time to provide such elaboration. Furthermore, the publication of *PL* did not signal the end of Rawls’s writings on the subject. Rawls continued to pro-

duce additional material in an attempt to further clarify and strengthen his arguments. For example, see Rawls (1995, 1997).

10. I do not mean to imply that in the period between the publication of *Theory* and the appearance of *PL* that Rawls's work was no longer the focus of a significant amount of theorizing.

11. This is not to suggest that such work had not begun (or, in certain instances, been completed—e.g., Bruce Ackerman's 1980 publication *Social Justice in the Liberal State*) prior to the completion of the bulk of Rawls's work on the subject.

12. It is, perhaps, worth noting that Larmore is quick to state that he is, at least at the beginning of *PMC*, "reluctant to define . . . just what . . . [he] mean[s] by 'morality,' since such definitions have usually turned out to be nothing less than theories that deny . . . [the] very forms of [moral] complexity" that he hopes to "recover" (Larmore 1987: ix).

13. According to Larmore, "moral theory in general and political theory in particular have been burdened, from their Greek beginnings through modern times, with unnecessarily simplistic notions of the overall order that they can expect to discover. As a result the genuine problems confronting moral philosophy have too often gone not merely unsolved, but also unperceived" (Larmore 1987: ix). In order to rectify this deficiency, Larmore contends that theorists must "recover" the following "important dimensions" of moral theory: (1) "the central role of moral judgement" when trying to answer moral questions (Larmore 1987: ix); (2) the recognition that "what may be a decisive moral consideration in one area of social life . . . [need not] carry an equal weight in other areas" (Larmore 1987: ix); and (3) the understanding that "morality need not be exclusively deontological or consequentialist, or in any way monolithic, and . . . the ultimate sources of moral value are diverse" (Larmore 1987: frontispiece).

14. This argument receives its fullest expression to date in Larmore's 1999 article "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism."

15. Indeed, no less an authority than Rawls has made such a declaration (Rawls 1995: 133n1).

16. Henceforth, unless specifically noted otherwise, all parenthetical page references to Shklar in this chapter refer to Shklar (1989).

17. Because it "can be defined in quite different ways" and "some of its connotations are highly misleading," Rawls is extremely reluctant to use the term *neutrality* in reference to his political conception of justice as fairness, and he does so only after taking "due precautions and using it only as a stage piece" (Rawls 1993b: 191). Even given these qualifications, Rawls prefers to refer to the notion of the "priority of right over the good" to describe the "freestanding" (a.k.a. "neutral") character of his conception. However, as Will Kymlicka has

argued, Rawls's usage of the notion of the "priority of right over the good" also allows for "multiple and misleading meanings, since it is used by Rawls to describe both the affirming of neutrality over perfectionism, and the affirming of deontology over teleology" (Kymlicka 1989: 886n6). Hence, as Kymlicka does, I will use the term *neutrality* to refer to Rawls's notion of the "priority of right over the good."

18. Rawls refers to this dichotomy as one between the "public" and the "nonpublic" (Rawls 1993b: 220n7).

19. A good example of this phenomenon is a recently published book, *The Idea of a Political Liberalism: Essays on Rawls* (Davion and Wolf 2000a). The title and content of this text imply that the concept of political liberalism is strictly a Rawlsian invention and project. Of course, given Rawls's personal currency and his significant part in introducing, developing, and publicizing the notion of political liberalism, such a singular focus is understandable, if, in certain respects, problematic.

20. Daniel Bell has cautioned: "Those typically put forward as communitarian critics of liberal political theory—Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer—have yet to identify themselves with the 'communitarian movement'" (Bell 1993: 4). Indeed, all of the above-noted theorists have, to varying degrees, expressed discomfort at being labeled a "communitarian" (Etzioni 1998: ix).

21. Admittedly, this criticism has manifested itself in a variety of ways. For a description of some of the different types of communitarian criticisms, see Mulhall and Swift (1992); Bell (1993); Gutmann (1984); Wallach (1987); Neal and Paris (1990); and Buchanan (1989).

22. I have included the term *satisfactorily* to acknowledge existing studies (few though they may be) that some might argue have satisfied such a demand. A notable candidate in this respect is Michael White's *Partisan or Neutral? The Futility of Public Political Theory* (1997). Though White's study engages the work of a number of prominent political liberals, it is neither equally attentive to each of the paradigmatic conceptions that he discusses nor is its breadth of examination sufficient to assess effectively the similarities and differences between the conceptions in question and, subsequently, the viability of the *concept* of political liberalism. To the extent that such is the case, White's study can be labeled "unsatisfactory."

23. This prediction is based upon the knowledge that the debate that stimulated the development of the concept of political liberalism—the debate surrounding the characteristics of a just society—is one that has already lasted more than two millennia.

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