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Introduction

PHILOSOPHY TENDS NATURALLY to turn its attention to the nature of philosophy itself. This has been evident ever since Plato, who believed he had to understand how Socrates's way of addressing the key questions of life differed from that of the Sophists if he was to work out his own conceptions of knowledge, virtue, and happiness. The self-reflexivity of philosophy does not stem from a search for certainty. The idea has not been, at least at bottom, that in reflecting on the capacities of mind and guiding interests these questions call upon we will be able to devise appropriate methods for answering them once and for all. That may have been Descartes's hope. But it is surely an illusion. The motivation lies instead in a desire essential to the very enterprise of philosophy.

As both Plato and Aristotle remarked, philosophy begins in wonder. Its starting point is not this or that particular problem that interrupts our everyday routine, but rather the feeling that a whole dimension of our dealings with things, if not indeed the world itself, has ceased to make sense as it once seemed to do. To think philosophically has therefore always meant to stand back from ordinary concerns and seek the larger picture. Its ultimate aim is to arrive at a broad understanding of how

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everything fits together in one way or another. One need not suppose that everything does so without tensions, conflicts, or even discontinuities. Reality may not be all of a piece. But this idea of an encompassing whole does have to include an idea of itself. That means, it has to include an account of the proper way to go about figuring out how the different parts of our experience interrelate. Philosophy aims to bring hidden presuppositions into view, to achieve a fully perspicuous grasp of all that is involved in our thinking about the world and our place in it, not least when we are engaged in precisely this radical kind of reflection. Even if one concludes, as Nietzsche did, that creativity depends on a certain amount of blindness or forgetting, this fact itself will form part of such a comprehensive vision.

Other disciplines of thought, such as the various sciences, are defined by their particular domain of inquiry. They are generally content as well to operate within a framework of settled assumptions and results, except at those rare times when, turning "philosophical," they feel the need to re-examine basic elements of what has hitherto been taken for granted. Of course, philosophy, too, often focuses on specific subjects: there is the philosophy of art, the philosophical study of conditionals or punishment. Yet a sense of an encompassing whole remains on the horizon. It is at work in the common recognition that different philosophical problems invariably interconnect and that the way one approaches a given topic is therefore philosophically as important as the conclusions one happens to draw. In its aspiration to an understanding of the whole of reality, philosophy is alone. Physics, for instance, makes no such pretension. It is physicalism that claims we must look to physics for this sort of understanding, and physicalism is a philosophical doctrine. Because then philosophy seeks in the end to grasp

how everything fits together, it is naturally led, whether its object happens to be some particular topic or reality as a whole, to reflect on how it must itself proceed if it is to accomplish its task. Its primary concern lies accordingly with the core concepts and principles that should shape our thinking about whatever domain it is considering. This ambition is a constant even though philosophy takes, to be sure, different historical forms, depending on the reigning beliefs about the world and ourselves.

The present book is a book in political philosophy. But for the reasons I have mentioned, it is also a book about political philosophy. In fact, reflection about the nature of political philosophy—about what are the central problems it must grapple with and the core concepts it must explore—occupies a large part of the book. Only in the third and final chapter do I turn in any sustained way to first-order questions. There I lay out a conception, a fundamentally liberal conception, of the basic shape political society should take today. Only then do I begin, as it were, to practice what I preach.

I have devoted so much attention to the nature of political philosophy because I believe that, properly understood, it differs from moral philosophy far more deeply than is generally supposed. As a rule, political philosophy is seen, if only implicitly, as part of the broader discipline of moral philosophy. The right and the good, both in themselves and in their various ramifications, form the subject of moral philosophy. Political philosophy, as usually practiced, sets about its work within this framework. It bases itself on those principles of morality it regards as governing, not our individual relationships to others, but instead the functioning of society as a whole in order then to determine, in the light of social realities, the sorts of institutions in which they would be best embodied. In essence,

political philosophy has therefore proceeded by applying what it takes to be moral truths about the makeup of the good society to the exigencies of the real world. A contemporary example is the way that, ever since the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), political philosophy in the Anglo-American world has come to seem devoted primarily to developing one conception of social justice after another.

In recent years, others too have complained about this habit of conceiving of political philosophy as applied moral philosophy. I discuss their views in the course of the first two chapters. Here I want to outline my own basis for rejecting that conception, a basis that is importantly different from theirs.

Pervasive conflict about what should count as the terms of social cooperation and thus the need for authoritative, enforceable rules constitute the elementary facts of political life. Yet among the most enduring and polarizing sources of social discord is disagreement about the nature of the right and the good, about more specific moral questions, and in particular about the features of the good or just society. One of the roles of a conception of justice is to show how to adjudicate conflicts among the members of society, yet the nature of justice is itself an abiding object of controversy. Disagreements of this sort, moreover, often consist in more than people merely holding different views. They can result when reasonable people—that is, people reasoning in good faith and to the best of their abilities—reflect about what it is to live well. It is a common experience, at least in those parts of the world in which people enjoy freedom of thought and expression, that reasoning about ethical matters, once it goes beyond platitudes and seeks some precision, is as likely to drive us apart as to bring us together. Sometimes these conflicts are between individuals (we can even turn out to be at odds with ourselves). But sometimes they

arise between groups following different moral or religious traditions, and though these traditions generally have their own internal controversies, such conflicts in the absence of laws to handle them can render social cooperation difficult or even impossible.

This, then, is why political philosophy is not properly a province of moral philosophy. If its fundamental task is to determine the kind of political order that can justifiably impose authoritative rules for handling the major conflicts in society, then it must reckon with the fact that such conflicts include precisely those arising from reasonable disagreement about the elements of morality itself. It follows, as I explain in this book, that legitimacy, not distributive justice as typically supposed today, ought to be the primary object of political philosophy. For legitimacy has to do with the conditions under which enforceable rules may be justifiably imposed on the members of a society. Only if a system of political rule is more or less legitimate should it make sense to ask what principles of justice it ought to establish. Though others as well have rejected the idea of political philosophy as applied moral philosophy, they have not relied on the sort of argument just summarized or given it the prominence it deserves.

The phenomenon of reasonable disagreement is a constant theme in this book. The idea can seem paradoxical, and not only because the philosophical tradition has so frequently assumed that reason, if exercised well, leads inevitably to convergence of opinion. It can also seem that reasonable people, if they discover that other people, whom they consider equally reasonable, disagree with them about some issue, would backtrack and cease to hold their belief, so that reasonable disagreement would vanish. That this is not so is one of the things I show in the detailed analysis of the phenomenon given in

chapter 3. Disagreement can persist among reasonable people because being reasonable is a matter of how we go on from our respective starting points, which may be very different.

Before the modern era, reasonable disagreement about moral questions was rarely acknowledged as something to be expected. Disagreement itself was, of course, all too familiar. But the general presumption was that it came about through faulty inference or inadequate evidence on the part of some or all of those involved. As I indicated, the dominant idea was that the exercise of reason leads, here as elsewhere, ultimately to unanimity. Not even the various forms of ancient skepticism posed a real challenge to this view. For they generally supposed that reason is at one in determining what is dubitable (and so warranting suspension of judgment) or what is merely probable (and so warranting tentative endorsement). There was, moreover, in societies under the sway of religious orthodoxies a limited experience of feeling free in discussion or even in one's own reflection to follow an ethical line of thought wherever it might lead, including into conflict with accepted opinion. Tradition and oppression kept the phenomenon submerged.

Things began to change in early modern times. The Renaissance brought the rediscovery of the unsuspected diversity of Greek and Roman thought. (Dante could so confidently call Aristotle "il maestro di color che sanno" because he was like all his contemporaries largely ignorant of the range of ancient philosophy.[1]) Later with the Reformation came the exalting of individual conscience and, as a result, the fragmentation of religious unity. As the ability of the Church to impose discipline began to wane and people felt more and more able to reason for themselves about what a Christian life requires, they also

1. Dante, *Inferno*, IV.131 ("the master of those who know").

grew to realize that others are apt to arrive at convictions opposed to their own. Innovative thinkers such as Montaigne and Hobbes, neither of them religiously inclined themselves, saw the phenomenon more broadly. They pointed out how easily reasoning about the right and the good in general can lead to disagreement not only with others but even with oneself, "reasons having," as Montaigne observed, "hardly any other foundation than experience, and the diversity of human events presenting us with innumerable examples of every possible import [*à toute sorte de formes*]."[2] Their generalization anticipated later developments. For as ethical thinking in much of society has gradually abandoned the framework of religious belief, the extent to which moral questions can be expected to provoke reasonable disagreement has become ever more far-reaching.

Though this expectation is a pervasive feature of our culture, its significance for the self-understanding of political philosophy has not, I have suggested, been rightly appreciated. For it ought to be seen as signaling that political philosophy should enjoy a far greater autonomy from moral philosophy than it has usually been given. Disagreement about moral questions is a principal source of social conflict and indeed one that can tear societies apart. This is immediately evident from the religious wars that devastated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, wars fueled by opposing conceptions of what it is to live a Christian life.[3] But examples also abound in later times. The nineteenth-century social revolutions in France

2. Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. M. Villey (Paris: PUF, 1999), II.17 ("De la présomption"), 655.

3. It is generally believed that at least five million people (20 percent of the population) died as a result of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) in the German Empire alone. See Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 787.

(1830, 1848, 1871) and elsewhere were fueled by conflicting ideas about property rights and about the meaning and relative importance of freedom and equality. And today, clashing views about what it is for a nation to maintain a sense of its own identity, about whether its chief concern should be to protect itself from foreign influences that undermine its accustomed way of life or instead to change inherited traditions as it engages with other nations in relations of mutual benefit, are putting the Western democracies under terrible strain.

Precisely because controversies of this sort involve positions that appear reasonable to their adherents, the social conflicts they generate cannot be adjudicated simply by appealing to supposed truths of morality. Each side is already doing just that. Instead, an answer has to be devised to an essentially political question that forms no part of moral philosophy. It is this: Given disagreement about the morally appropriate response to some social problem demanding an *authoritative* solution, that is, a solution that will receive widespread acceptance, under what conditions may *enforceable* rules to handle the problem be *legitimately* imposed on the members of a society? It can turn out that the rules imposed are those favored by one of the contending positions. Yet this does not mean that the moral views it embodies have been "applied" to the case at hand. The rules are authoritative, not because they are widely believed to be morally valid, but because they have been instituted by a political system that is widely held to be (more or less) legitimate. Political, as opposed to moral, questions are questions having to do with power and its legitimate exercise.

Now although the phenomenon of reasonable disagreement has not shaped as it should the self-understanding of political philosophy in general, it has in fact played a significant role in the formation of modern liberalism. One need only think

of the prominent place that ideas of toleration have always occupied in liberal thought. These ideas emerged in early modern times as the realization took hold that people thinking sincerely and carefully about matters of faith but also more generally about the makeup of the human good are prone to disagree, often in virtue of differing about what it is in such cases to reason well. Taming the passions and settling conflicts among discordant interests had long been seen as the key problems political rule must solve if it is to secure the conditions of social cooperation. It had also been believed that this is possible only if the members of society by and large share a common conception of the ultimate ends of life. Yet now there had emerged a more profound problem, which called into question not only the latter belief but the very basis of political rule. If there is disagreement among reasonable people about religious and ethical matters and about their implications for the organization of society, it seemed unclear what system of rule a political regime can justifiably exercise over them, a justification having to be offered if it is to claim to be legitimate.

Such is the problem that stands at the origin of the liberal tradition. Though the term "liberalism" appeared only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the roots of this tradition reach several centuries further back. Indeed, I should note incidentally that in this book I use the term, not in the partisan sense it often assumes in contemporary politics, but rather to designate a broader political orientation that gives primacy to individual freedom and equality. Thus, among the sources of the liberal tradition in this sense were early modern conceptions of religious toleration, and they often involved, as in the writings of thinkers such as Bodin, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle, the effort to look beyond deep religious and ethical disagreements and find in more abstract concerns such as self-interest,

a regard for the favorable opinion of others, or a basic sense of what is right and fair the source of political principles by which people can, despite such differences, live and work together to their mutual advantage. Certainly, the most influential of these early figures was Locke. But liberal thought did not culminate with him. The project of working out a common basis of political association amid reasonable disagreement about the human good went on to take new forms in subsequent centuries.

Along with Kant and Mill, the two preeminent figures in later times, Locke shares nonetheless two distinctive assumptions, which typify what in this book I call "classical liberalism." Not only did they regard reasonable disagreement about the good as the cardinal problem facing the possibility of legitimate rule, but they also sought a solution to this problem in different versions of what is effectively an ethics of individualism. By that I mean an ethics that gives paramount value to thinking for oneself and to working out on one's own how one will live. Their common thought was that since any substantial conception of the good, any particular religion or cultural tradition, is thus valuable only if it was or would be chosen from a standpoint of open-minded and critical reflection, political legitimacy should no longer be based, as in the past, on inevitably controversial conceptions of this sort. Political rule should instead be justified by appeal to this individualist ethic itself, to—as Locke, Kant, and Mill would have said respectively—the fallibilist, autonomous, or experimental attitude toward life that ought to form people's deepest self-understanding. For it will move people to endorse principles of political life that, without relying on specific conceptions of the human good, endow them with the freedoms, powers, and protections necessary to exercise this individualist approach to life. Whence such principles as liberty of conscience, freedom of associa-

tion, equality of opportunity, political equality, and even the right to a social minimum that have become characteristic of liberal thought. Much of the subsequent liberal tradition has proceeded along these lines.

However, this individualist ethic in its various forms has itself turned out to be an object of reasonable disagreement. Ever since the Romantic era's rehabilitation of the importance of tradition and belonging, the idea that we should always maintain a distanced, questioning stance toward inherited ways of life has come to seem to many, and not without reason, to be too one-sided a demand. Not all our commitments can be elective, since our choices depend ultimately on a sense of what is good and right that is taken for granted. Critical reflection is in reality but one value among many, and giving it supreme authority can blind us to the role of shared customs, ties of language and place, and religious faith in shaping the very understanding of good and ill through which we make the choices we do. This is the core of the frequent complaint of the last two centuries that liberalism's individualist ethic dissolves social bonds and impoverishes our moral thinking. Such an ethic is not itself a substantial conception of the human good, but instead an attitude purporting to govern the acceptance of any such conception. Yet it is no less apt to prove a subject of dispute and conflict among people reasoning in good faith and to the best of their abilities about what it is to live well.

In response to this situation, liberal thought has gone in two separate directions. One current has continued to rely on some version of an individualist view of life. Seeking now more explicitly than before to ground basic liberal principles on a comprehensive, if also controversial, idea of human flourishing, this form of liberalism has thus become what its defenders themselves often call a "perfectionist" doctrine. An opposing

current, commonly called "political liberalism"—it is the approach I myself favor—takes more seriously the persistence of reasonable disagreement about individualist values. It seeks a basis of political association that is independent of them as well as of religious beliefs and ethical ideals. It does so because it believes that the guiding conviction of liberal thinking really lies at a deeper level. This conviction has to do, in my view, not so much with the way we should live our own lives, as with how we should treat others. It turns upon a particular idea of respect for persons, having to do with the use or threat of force. The conception of political legitimacy it serves to justify will be formulated as follows. The fundamental principles of political society ought, precisely because they are coercive in nature, also to be such that those subject to them should be able to see from their perspective reason to endorse them, assuming a commitment—which some may in fact not have—to basing political association on principles that can meet with the reasonable agreement of all citizens.

Since I discuss this idea of respect at length in chapter 3, I will not go further into it now except to note one obvious point. The idea is clearly moral in character. Thus, the liberal conception of legitimacy it defines rests on moral grounds. This fact may appear to belie my rejection of the view of political philosophy as applied moral philosophy. Yet as I explain in the first two chapters, every conception of political legitimacy has to have some moral foundation, since it aims to identify the conditions under which a system of political rule may justifiably wield power over those it governs. The question is whether this moral foundation consists in a broad religious or ethical vision of the human good and the just society or whether instead it focuses strictly on the problem of justifying the exercise of coercive power. For this is an essentially political problem. It

has no place in moral philosophy, which is concerned with the nature of the good and the right, with our means of grasping and acting on them, but not with the social conflicts that arise when reasonable people disagree about such matters. A political philosophy that regards the solution of this problem as the basis of the rest it proposes is not therefore in any meaningful sense "applied moral philosophy." Liberalism, particularly when it takes the form of "political liberalism," proceeds in just that way and precisely because it recognizes how socially divisive, in the absence of state authority, following one's moral convictions can prove.

It is true, as these remarks suggest, that liberal thinkers have always been eager to find fundamental political principles on which people can agree. But nothing could be more wrong than to suppose that the liberal vision of society is one essentially of moral consensus.[4] That would be to miss the problem to which consensus is the intended solution as well as to misunderstand the nature of the consensus in question. Liberals have looked for bases of agreement precisely because they have been so keenly aware of the persistent disagreements about religious and ethical questions that make for extensive and sometimes destructive social conflict. The basic principles on which liberalism seeks agreement are not, moreover, principles people are presumed to share already, but rather principles it holds that there is reason for them to accept. Classical liberals knew

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4. The misconception is all too frequent. See, for instance, Raymond Geuss in "Liberalism and Its Discontents," *Political Theory* 30, no. 3 (June 2002): 326: "One sometimes hears the claim that liberalism differs from other political philosophies through its recognition of the plurality of potentially valuable modes of life. This is a highly misleading assertion.... The multiple forms of life that liberalism recognizes are always assumed to be embedded in an overriding consensus that has a latent moral significance."

full well that many members of society were not antecedently disposed to endorse an individualist view of life. The same goes for the principle of respect for persons, as will become apparent when I present my version of political liberalism later in this book. No doubt, liberal thinkers have often been too sanguine about the extent to which people who do not yet accept the basis of a liberal political order could come to be able to see, from their perspective, reason to adopt it. This was clearly the case with the representatives of classical liberalism. I, by contrast, acknowledge the point at length in chapters 2 and 3 of this book. Every conception of political legitimacy, however inclusive it may seek to be, also excludes by virtue of resting on moral and factual beliefs that some people from their point of view are bound to see reason to reject.

Reasonable disagreement about the good and the right, in all its depth and breadth, has therefore always stood at the center of liberalism's attention. I could not agree more with Edmund Fawcett, who recounts the history of the liberal tradition as the development of four cardinal ideas—"acknowledgement of inescapable material and ethical conflict within society, distrust of power, faith in human progress, and respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are"—though I am increasingly skeptical about the validity of the third.[5] At the same time, I would caution against supposing that liberalism has an essence in any substantial sense. Like all intellectual traditions, it has developed and undergone profound changes over time. One such change that I have not touched on is liberalism's only gradual acceptance of democracy. Another change that I have

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5. Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xix. Some of my reasons for skepticism about human progress can be found at the end of chapter 3.

mentioned lies in the critique of classical liberalism at the hands of political liberalism.

However, the tendency to reasonable disagreement about ethical questions has not, I have already observed, been integrated into the self-understanding of political philosophy itself. All too often, political philosophy has taken its point of departure to be the moral principles that should determine the workings of society as a whole. One example is the reliance of classical liberalism upon an individualist view of life. Another is the extent to which political philosophy in our day threatens to become synonymous with the theory of social justice. What this ethics-centered approach has missed is the fact that the social conflicts that political philosophy must explore the ways of solving can stem in great part from moral disputes about how society should be best organized, disputes in which each side can from its point of view claim to have good reasons for its position. To an important extent, moral views are not so much the solution as the problem. This means that the fundamental political question, as well as the fundamental question for political philosophy, has to be the conditions under which authoritative, enforceable rules for handling such conflicts can justifiably be instituted. Legitimacy should be political philosophy's primary concern, justice figuring only derivatively.

It may seem that I am in effect presenting liberalism, particularly in the more careful form of political liberalism, as the only political conception compatible with the real nature of political philosophy. This is not so. True, a distinctive feature of liberal thought has been its concern with how widespread reasonable disagreement can be about various aspects of the human good. But its defining principles constitute a response to this problem, a response that is itself moral in character. It affirms in effect the value of people exercising their reason by

their own best lights (individualist or not) even at the price of deep and widespread differences of opinion, since it holds that basic political principles ought to be such that citizens committed to mutual respect can, despite their disagreements, all see reason to endorse them. But different sorts of responses, drawing on different moral premises, are also possible. One might, for instance, conclude that if reasonable people differ so greatly about the nature of the right and the good, then this is a sign of man's fallen state and political rule should therefore be based, not on respect for individual reason, but instead on conformity to God's will. Liberal thought stands out from other traditions by its vivid sense of the fundamental political *problem* posed by reasonable disagreement about the good and the right. But the *solution* it proposes cannot claim to rise above all such disagreement.

If liberalism has seen more clearly than past conceptions the true task of political philosophy, that is because, as part of a reflective culture imbued with historical self-awareness, it has acquired a clearer view of the fundamental problems confronting political society. It has, as I explain in chapter 3, the character of a latecomer, having learned from the failings of earlier efforts to organize political life around some single core notion of a life lived well. However, its greater lucidity is not its justification. Its justification lies ultimately in the principle of respect for persons. And this principle, as I have just noted, is one that some people will see from their perspective reason to reject. Far from serving to legitimate a liberal political order, appreciation of the extent of reasonable disagreement entails recognizing that reasonable people can disagree about its legitimacy as well. As this book aims to show, there is indeed an intimate connection between the nature of political philosophy, properly understood, and the essential motivations of liberal thought.

Liberalism has played an important role in drawing attention to the way that moral convictions, however well thought out they may appear to their adherents, can easily diverge and lead to deep social conflict. Yet this tendency, though it shows why political and moral philosophy must be very different enterprises, extends more broadly than any particular conception of political society can fully accommodate.

If the final chapter of this book, whose theme is the nature of political philosophy, focuses on modern liberalism, it is in order to explain what is exactly the principle of political legitimacy it should be understood as propounding and why, even though some may see reason to reject it, it is the one that at least until now has best fit the modern world.

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