

## Book Reviews

Richard E. Flathman, *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), vii + 218 pp.

The constellation of issues concerning the relation of pluralism to liberal democracy could not be more deserving of the attention of contemporary political philosophers. Both domestically and globally, we live within increasingly diverse social contexts, where distinct and potentially opposed cultures, communities, moral doctrines, ways of life, and religious systems cannot avoid mutual confrontation. Since liberal democracy is based in the idea that the political legitimacy of the state is rooted in the consent of the governed, theorists of liberal democracy must address the problem of how a regime may win widespread and continuing consent among people who disagree strongly over moral fundamentals. In *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, Richard Flathman addresses this issue by means of an examination of four otherwise disparate thinkers, each of whom espouses some variety of pluralism. In a synthesizing final chapter, Flathman attempts to articulate a vision of liberalism that incorporates the virtues of each thinker's pluralism.

This review proceeds in two parts. In the first, I provide some background and raise a challenge to the thought that pluralism and liberalism make a happy couple. In the second, I turn squarely to Flathman's book and raise some criticisms of Flathman's articulation of pluralist liberalism.

1. Liberalism is the view according to which states exist primarily for the sake of protecting individuals and their rights. That is, on the liberal view, states exist not for the sake of the salvation of individuals, but rather for the sake of creating and maintaining conditions under which each individual can live as he sees fit or according to his own conception of the good life, within the constraint that he respects the right of others to do the same. The liberal holds that the freedom of each to live according to his own conception of the good is, as Mill said, the "only freedom which deserves the name."<sup>1</sup>

Liberals hold that since the state is primarily an instrument for secur-

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<sup>1</sup>John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 17.

ing and maintaining the liberty of each individual, the *legitimacy* of the state depends upon the consent of those who live under its rule. That is, liberals hold that the state must *justify* its authority to those it governs; moreover, this justification must be acceptable “to every last individual,” at least in principle.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of political justification thus lies at the heart of liberalism. Traditionally, the project of articulating a justification for the liberal political order fell to political philosophers. The task was to devise a philosophical account of the liberal state that could win the consent of all citizens. The difficulty of this task derives from the fact that, under a liberal political order, there is no common philosophical, moral, or religious doctrine to which all citizens are required to subscribe. Accordingly, justificatory accounts of the liberal state aspired to draw from allegedly *universal* premises about natural rights, reason, or value. The aim was to design a justification for liberalism that appealed only to facts or principles that could not be rationally denied. Hence the traditional liberal theories of Locke, Kant, Mill, and others share a common logical structure; they begin by identifying a purportedly fundamental or nonnegotiable value or principle of human nature—such as self-preservation, natural right, dignity, rationality, or utility, to name just a few candidates—and then attempt to deduce from this foundation characteristically liberal political commitments.

If successful, a liberal theory hence would justify the liberal political order to “every last individual,” no matter what his particular view of the good life happens to be. More importantly, a successful theory would provide a *universal* justification for the liberal state. That is, since it draws its justification from premises that are alleged to be universally true of all humans, regardless of the important respects in which they may differ, a successful liberal theory would show that the liberal state is *uniquely* legitimate among political regimes.

According to a well-rehearsed narrative among many contemporary political philosophers, the justificatory aspirations of traditional liberal theory are deeply misguided. Following the later work of John Rawls, much of contemporary liberal theory is premised upon the claim that there are no noncontestable premises about fundamental values or human nature from which liberal justification, traditionally conceived, could proceed. The unavailability of such premises is due to the “fact of reasonable pluralism,” which Rawls argued is the “inevitable outcome of free human reason”<sup>3</sup> and “a permanent feature of the public culture of a

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<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Waldron, “Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism,” in *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers 1981-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 35-62, at p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 37.

democracy.”<sup>4</sup> To explain: Rawls held that the best exercise of human practical reason, even under conditions of freedom, does not converge on a single moral, philosophical, or religious view (what Rawls called a “comprehensive doctrine”). Instead, there are several distinct but mutually incompatible comprehensive doctrines to which a reasonable person might subscribe. From this it follows that “a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power”;<sup>5</sup> that is, according to Rawls, any political order that is premised upon the truth of a single comprehensive doctrine—even a decidedly *liberal* one—is ipso facto oppressive and therefore illiberal. As traditional liberal theories attempt to derive a justification for liberal politics from premises drawn explicitly from their favored comprehensive doctrines, they are strangely self-undermining. Rawls concludes that “the question the dominant tradition has tried to answer has no answer: no comprehensive doctrine is appropriate as a political conception for a constitutional regime.”<sup>6</sup>

Hence the basic insight underlying the work of the later Rawls, and much subsequent political philosophy, is this: the traditional aspirations of liberal theory are undermined by pluralism. As is well known, Rawls’s reaction to this was to propose a “political not metaphysical” version of liberal theory, one which would abandon the universalist aspiration of traditional liberal theory for a more modest justificatory structure based in what Rawls called an “overlapping consensus” among reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

Suffice it to say that Rawls’s political liberalism has been the focus of intense criticism from a variety of quarters within liberal theory. Some reject pluralism and defend the traditional liberal project. Brian Barry, for example, argues that “there is nothing straightforwardly absurd about the idea that there is a single best way for human beings to live”;<sup>7</sup> similarly, Ronald Dworkin contends that his theory of liberalism is “continuous with the best personal ethics, with the right philosophical view of the good life.”<sup>8</sup> Others, such as John Gray, adopt a pluralism more radical than Rawls’s; they reject the very idea of consensus as “a species of anti-political legalism” and replace it with agonistic politics of peaceful co-existence that denies that only liberal regimes are legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>7</sup>Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 263.

<sup>8</sup>Ronald Dworkin, “Foundations of Liberal Equality,” in Stephen Darwall (ed.) *Equal Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 190-306, at p. 193.

<sup>9</sup>John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 16.

The most promising alternative to Rawlsian political liberalism, however, is the species of pluralist liberalism found in the work of William Galston.<sup>10</sup> Galston adopts a concept of pluralism that is more robust than Rawls's, and then employs that pluralism as the fundamental premise in the justification of liberal politics. Galston begins with the value pluralism of Isaiah Berlin,<sup>11</sup> which holds that "while the distinction between good and evil is objective, there are multiple goods that differ qualitatively from one another and that cannot be rank-ordered"; from this fact about values it follows that "there is no single way of life, based on a singular ordering of values, that is the highest and best for all individuals."<sup>12</sup> Galston argues that value pluralism entails a politics based in what Berlin called negative liberty, but what Galston calls "expressive liberty," which is the "presumption in favor of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit."<sup>13</sup> In this way, Galston believes that liberal political commitments can be derived from value pluralist premises.

Galston's pluralist liberalism hence retains the traditional justificatory project of liberal theory while avoiding the value monism implicit in the liberalisms of Locke, Kant, and Mill. However, the Galstonian program faces a difficulty. Roughly, Galston's argument is this: value pluralism shows that hard choices among conflicting and non-rank-orderable goods is inevitable; therefore, the state must provide and protect the political space in which each individual can make such choices as she sees fit. But this is a non sequitur: the fact of the inevitability of choice among incommensurable goods does not directly entail the claim that individuals must be accorded the liberty to make such choices without hindrance.<sup>14</sup> More generally, it seems that the entailment from value pluralism to liberal politics might be irreparably doomed, for it attempts to derive a prescriptive conclusion from a descriptive account of the metaphysics of value.

Hence it appears that the liberal theorist who is committed to pluralism confronts the following dilemma: either abandon liberalism's tradi-

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<sup>10</sup>William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>To be sure, Galston's argument is more sophisticated than this; he contends that the "value pluralist argument for negative liberty rests on the insufficiency of the reasons typically invoked in favor of restricting it" (*Liberal Pluralism*, p. 58). I have argued elsewhere that Galston's argument nonetheless does not avoid the above non sequitur. See Robert Talisse, "Can Value Pluralists be Comprehensive Liberals?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 3 (2004): 127-39, and *Democracy After Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2005). For Galston's reply, see William Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3 (2004): 140-47, and *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, pp. 190 ff.

tional justificatory aspirations (in either the manner of Gray or the later Rawls) or try to make valid the inference from a value pluralist “is” to a liberal “ought.” Taking the first horn requires us to concede that, within a specified range, certain illiberal regimes, and perhaps certain illiberal cultural practices, are fully legitimate. As I have already mentioned, the project specified in the second horn seems unlikely to succeed. However, it is hard to follow Dworkin and Barry in simply *denying* pluralism. There is, after all, something *compelling* about the pluralist thesis that no single life can manifest all of the goods available to human beings because there is a multiplicity, an overabundance, of valuable lifestyles and pursuits that are impossible and inherently in conflict with other worthy lifestyles and pursuits. The reconciliation of pluralism with liberalism is worth pursuing, but the prospects of such a project remain uncertain.

2. In *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, Richard Flathman explores the possibility of a pluralist liberalism by means of engagements with four pluralist thinkers: William James, Hannah Arendt, Stuart Hampshire, and Michael Oakeshott. Flathman devotes a full chapter to each figure, and in each chapter he explores his subject’s views about the nature, causes, and extent of diversity (what Flathman calls “pluralities”). Accordingly, Flathman’s treatments are not restricted to what each figure has said explicitly about politics; that is, in his attempt to consider “philosophical accounts and explanations of how and why pluralities develop, sustain themselves, meld into others, disaggregate, or disappear” (2), Flathman surveys the full breadth of each thinker’s pluralism. This leads him to examine a wide range of philosophical topics, from William James’s psychology and Arendt’s philosophical anthropology to Oakeshott’s metaphysics and Hampshire’s perspectivalism.

The breadth of Flathman’s intellectual reach is especially impressive and anyone concerned with pluralism will read his book with profit. Indeed, one of the virtues of *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* is that Flathman has chosen to engage with thinkers not frequently discussed in the context of contemporary liberal theory, such as William James and Michael Oakeshott. However, the ambitious scope of Flathman’s project, combined with the complexity of the thought of his subjects, creates a lack of focus in the whole. Furthermore, any attempt to treat in chapter-length discussions the multiple facets of thinkers as sophisticated as these is fraught with hazards. For one thing, Flathman does not have the space to engage in any sustained way the secondary literature on any of the figures he discusses. In the cases of James and Arendt in particular, the secondary literature is massive and important. His analyses consequently contain much with which one would want to take issue, but Flathman neither anticipates likely criticisms nor gives the reader any indication of

the respects in which his interpretations might be controversial or in conflict with standing scholarly opinion.

Having said this, it must be emphasized that, in describing his project, Flathman claims that his primary objective is not historical, but philosophical; ultimately he aims to “contribute to pluralist and liberal theory” (17). Thus one must read *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* not as a genealogy of pluralism or an attempt to accurately summarize the ideas of great pluralist thinkers, but rather as transcripts of ongoing and lively conversations between one of our most imaginative political philosophers and a quartet of distinguished interlocutors. I turn now to some critical comments on the position that Flathman develops in his own voice.

In his final and synthesizing chapter, “Whether, Which, and Whither Pluralism?” Flathman contends that, since the “fact of pluralism” needs “no elaborate documentation” and thus is beyond dispute, “[t]he question, then, is not ‘whether’ pluralism but rather which pluralist theory and how much and why plurality should be promoted” (163). Here Flathman forges unflinchingly into the breach described above. He naturally rejects the denial of pluralism found in Dworkin and Barry, but then gestures towards some *prescription* that the “fact of pluralism” is supposed to entail. That is, Flathman thinks that once we acknowledge the fact of pluralism, there is a normative question about which forms of diversity, which “pluralities,” should be “promoted.” He goes further to claim that “all liberalisms worthy of the name” must be concerned with “celebrating an abundant pluralism” (183).

Hence Flathman makes the same move from “is” to “ought” that Galston attempts: the truth of pluralism is supposed to entail a certain view of how politics ought to be organized. However, Flathman gives us no indication of how the inference is to proceed. If pluralism involves the idea that there are many ways of individual and collective life in which bona fide human goods are manifest, then pluralism seems to suggest that there very likely will be several political regimes—not all of them liberal—that are legitimate. It is not clear why Flathman thinks that pluralism singularly entails a liberal political order.

Moreover, we are told that in a properly ordered society, diversity is “celebrated.” But exactly what does it mean for a society to “celebrate” pluralism? What are the institutional and policy entailments of such an attitude? Must a society that celebrates pluralism attempt to foster in its citizens a celebratory attitude towards diversity? If so, by what means may it do this? Prima facie it seems odd to identify pluralism with a view that prescribes a single moral attitude towards diversity, especially when one can readily name a variety of other arguably unobjectionable attitudes that one might take, such as, for example, *toleration* or *benign neglect*.

Finally, we are not told what it would mean for a society to “promote”

pluralism. If pluralism is a fact that needs “no elaborate documentation” (163), why must it be promoted? One wonders what institutional apparatus and what policies are being called for here. And if pluralism calls for intervention for the sake of promoting a contestable good such as diversity, then it runs afoul of the neutralist core of much contemporary liberal theorizing. To be sure, not all liberalisms are neutralist. Theorists such as George Sher and Steven Wall have developed “perfectionist” versions of liberalism,<sup>15</sup> and others, such as Joseph Raz and George Crowder, have argued that pluralism entails perfectionist liberalism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, perfectionist liberalism remains a controversial option in liberal theory, and if Flathman indeed holds, with Raz and Crowder, that pluralism entails a decidedly perfectionist interpretation of liberalism, he needs to *argue* for that entailment and to get into the details of institutional and policy implications. In *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* he attempts neither.

These criticisms point to a more fundamental flaw in *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*: the meanings of the key concepts under examination in the book—liberalism and pluralism—are never made explicit. Consider Flathman’s characterization of *pluralism*:

At the core of pluralism is the recognition of a multiplicity of persons and groups that, on the one hand, are identifiably related to one another and, on the other hand, can be usefully distinguished from other individuals and groups. A commitment to pluralism, however transitory or transitional, as a descriptive/analytic theory involves the belief that, here and now, such a multiplicity cannot be explained away. (1)

Unfortunately, this characterization proves unhelpful. For example, even the religious fanatic who holds that there are but two categories into which persons fall, “the saved” (i.e., all and only those who subscribe to his own faith) and “the wicked” (i.e., everyone else), is, on the proposed analysis, a pluralist in virtue of the simple fact that he recognizes that certain people (i.e., the wicked) live differently from the way he lives. It seems odd to think of such a person as a pluralist.

Undoubtedly, Flathman intends to distinguish between pluralism as a *description* and pluralism as a philosophical *theory*. Descriptively, pluralism is the seemingly undeniable claim that there is many-ness or multiplicity; philosophically, pluralism is the thesis that this multiplicity “cannot be explained away.” Our hypothetical fanatic is a pluralist in the first sense, but not the second. However, Flathman does not give any indication of what it would be to “explain away” multiplicity. Suppose

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<sup>15</sup>George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Steven Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup>George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum Books, 2002); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

someone offers a genealogical account of the multiplicity of ways of life on the North American continent. Does that person thereby attempt to “explain away” that multiplicity? Must a pluralist in the philosophical sense hold that diversity among different persons and groups admits of *no* explanation at all? Either Flathman needs to follow Berlin in identifying pluralism as the philosophical thesis according to which certain conflicts among goods are not rationally resolvable due to the fact that there is no *summum bonum* in light of which competing values could be made commensurate, or he needs to offer a non-Berlinian analysis of the pluralist’s philosophical thesis. Neither appears in the text; so in the end, it is not clear what Flathman thinks pluralism is.

Flathman’s appeal to liberalism suffers from the same lack of definitional foundation. There is no sustained discussion in the book of the nature of liberalism, and very little indication of what sort of liberalism Flathman wants to assert. Given the fact that currently there seems to be almost as many versions of liberalism as there are liberal theorists, this omission is disappointing. When Flathman does talk about liberalism, it is mostly in contrastive terms. For example, he recognizes that pluralists cannot countenance rights “in the strict sense” and that consequently pluralism “will not be acceptable to some liberals” (176). Further, he claims that pluralists reject the idea that “rationality, reasonableness, deliberation, and related notions” (177) should be central to democratic politics, while he also recognizes that “[m]any liberals will find this feature” of pluralism “objectionable” and possibly “antiliberal” (177). Thus, it seems that Flathman holds that pluralism entails a politics that rejects any strong sense of rights and is suspicious of appeals to rationality, and yet Flathman both *endorses* such a politics and holds that such a politics is properly liberal. This is indeed an interesting conception of liberalism, one about which I should like to hear more. But, unfortunately, nothing more is said.

*Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* gives us insight into how a distinguished political theorist reads and converses with four other powerful thinkers. For those seeking such insight, this book will be revealing, thought-provoking, and rewarding. Similarly, those who have been tracking the development of Flathman’s own political thought will find that the idiosyncrasies of his readings of these thinkers illuminate other aspects of his work. For those interested directly in the intersection of liberalism and pluralism, *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy* suggests a number of directions in which one might venture; however, the prospects for a happy integration of pluralism and liberalism remain nonetheless uncertain.

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