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**Peter Berkowitz: Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism**

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\* *Introduction* \*

If we ask ourselves on what causes and conditions good government in all its senses, from the humblest to the most exalted, depends, we find that the principal of them, the one which transcends all others, is the qualities of the human beings composing the society over which the government is exercised.

(John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*)

SINCE OPINIONS about character bear upon the one who opines, under the best of circumstances it may be embarrassing to speak about virtue. From the precarious position where one's judgments have consequences for how one ought to be judged, and suggest the standards according to which one judges others, those who wish to understand virtue are persistently tempted by two opposing tendencies. Some yield to lofty sentiments, prattling on sanctimoniously about how human beings ought to be; others, presuming to see things as they really are, resolutely search out or grimly describe the self-interested impulses that supposedly define the actual and exclusive motivations of human conduct. Yet airy idealism and narrow realism do not exhaust the range of perspectives from which virtue may be investigated. Getting down off your high horse does not condemn you to running with the pack. To be sure, the mean or middle ground from which the claims of virtue and the charges against it can be fairly evaluated is more difficult to attain and harder to hold than either of the extremes. This is partly because understanding virtue is inseparable from its exercise.

Rewarding as the study of virtue for its own sake may be, for students of politics the study of virtue is not a choice but a necessity imposed by the character of their subject matter. Not that the question of virtue has a single formulation or one right answer. Rather, like freedom, obligation, law, the regime, and justice, virtue belongs among the fundamental phenomena of political life

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for which a respectable theory of politics must give an account and concerning which it cannot but take a stand. Silence is an option but not a solution, for, as I shall argue, a political theory that overlooks the question of virtue spawns fatal theoretical lacunae while passing by key features of the conduct for which it presumes to account.

The inescapability of virtue is more apparent in ancient and medieval political philosophy, where virtue, or the promotion of human excellence, was generally held to be the ultimate aim of politics. By contrast, modern political philosophy has tended to reject such lofty goals as impractical, delusive, and dangerous. Especially in its Enlightenment and liberal strains, modern political philosophy put forward a different fundamental goal for politics. Instead of seeking through politics to promote human perfection, the liberal tradition came to understand the goal of politics as the protection of personal freedom. The liberal tradition embraces freedom as the aim of politics on the grounds that it is both more attainable and more just than the promotion of virtue. But the repudiation of virtue as the aim of politics must not be equated with the repudiation of the very idea of virtue, or with a denial that questions of citizens' and officeholders' character are of pressing political significance. Indeed, I shall argue that the liberal tradition, through a variety of prominent spokesmen, affirms that maintenance of a political order capable of securing the personal freedom of all depends upon citizens and representatives capable of exercising a range of basic virtues. Liberalism, I shall suggest, can no more do without virtue than a person on a diet can survive without food and drink.

The liberalism to which I refer is a complex and many-sided tradition. John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill are among this tradition's leading spokesmen. But many others—including Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, the authors of *The Federalist*, Burke, and Tocqueville—shared its fundamental premise and in various ways elucidated its strengths and weaknesses. I shall follow Judith Shklar in understanding liberalism as a political doctrine the primary goal of which is “to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of per-

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sonal freedom.”<sup>1</sup> I add to Shklar’s definition what she left implicit, namely, that even as a political doctrine liberalism rests on the fundamental premise of the natural freedom and equality of all human beings. To establish and secure the personal freedom of all, the liberal tradition has articulated a set of characteristic themes including individual rights, consent, toleration, liberty of thought and discussion, self-interest rightly understood, the separation of the private from the public, and personal autonomy or the primacy of individual choice; and it has elaborated a characteristic set of political institutions including representative democracy, separation of governmental powers, and an independent judiciary. I shall also emphasize what goes understated in Shklar’s writings and is generally less well appreciated but vital to an understanding of liberalism’s possibilities and prospects: notwithstanding its focus on the political conditions that support personal freedom, the liberal tradition has provided a fertile source of reflections on such nongovernmental supports of the virtues that sustain liberty as civic association, family, and religion.

The tendency within liberal thought to diminish the significance of virtue in descriptions of, and prescriptions for, political life is well known. It is less remarked that a coherent and comprehensive account of politics, liberal or otherwise, cannot succeed without giving virtue its due. To be sure, the leading theorists of liberalism adduce strong practical and theoretical reasons for, and display considerable resourcefulness in, circumscribing virtue’s role. Yet the best of the liberal tradition exhibits an illuminating ambivalence and reveals a range of instructive opinions about the claims of virtue and how they can best be respected. This can be seen even and especially in that part of the tradition famous for getting along without virtue. Hobbes, for example, in his masterwork *Leviathan*, at the conclusion of his most comprehensive enumeration of the laws of nature, declares that, properly speaking, the laws of nature are not laws but moral virtues and, accordingly, that “the science of virtue and vice is moral philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> Locke devotes an entire work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, to expounding an education in virtue that begins in infancy, that extends to young adulthood, and that prepares

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individuals to prosper in a free society. Kant argues that ethics involves both “genuine virtue” and lesser qualities of mind and character to which he is reluctant to give the name virtue. Moreover, in the effort to accommodate the necessities of political life, Kant makes practical concessions to virtue and devises stratagems by which virtue, having been formally expelled from politics, is brought back in through the side door. And Mill understands both the exercise of individual liberty and the quality of democratic self-government to turn on the virtue of ordinary men and women and their representatives in government. The problem with much contemporary thought, I shall suggest, is not just the lack of a coherent account of the place of virtue in the political theory of liberal democracy but, more telling, the absence of embarrassment in the face of such a lack.

Over the past decade, leading liberals in the academy have contributed to the recovery of an understanding of the importance of character to liberalism. Yet the turn to “ordinary vices” and “liberal virtues” has not gone far enough.<sup>3</sup> Three issues deserve greater attention. First, the operation and maintenance of liberal democracy—that form of democracy in which the will of the people is grounded in and limited by individual rights—depend upon the exercise of moral and intellectual virtues that, according to liberalism’s own tenets, fall outside its strict supervision, and that it not only does not always effectively summon but may even discourage or undermine. Second, the extraliberal or nongovernmental reservoirs from which liberalism has drawn in the past to foster the virtues necessary to maintain itself—in particular, the family, religion, and the array of associations in civil society—have undergone substantial transformations and can no longer be counted on in the way that the classic liberal tradition counsels. Third, liberal principles seem to spawn characteristic vices, vices that are entwined with liberal virtues and which threaten the capacity of citizens to sustain free and democratic institutions.

Oddly, some of liberalism’s proponents have made common cause with its critics to insist on a fatal or at least bitter antagonism between liberalism and virtue.<sup>4</sup> But this is a serious mistake, one preventing liberalism from recognizing the conditions that pre-

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serve it. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, the liberal tradition not only makes room for virtue but shows that the exercise of virtue is indispensable to a political regime seeking to establish equality and protect freedom. Of course, I do not mean to say that it is a simple matter to protect or promote virtue in a liberal society; nor do I wish to deny that peculiar features of liberal thought may in the long run put the integrity of virtue at risk.<sup>5</sup> Rather, what I wish to suggest is that one can begin to grasp the genuine complexity of the matter and start to see the real risk by appreciating the rich and illuminating set of opinions advanced by the makers of modern liberalism about the dependence of freedom and equality on virtue.

## ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF THE VIRTUES

One of the challenges confronting any exploration of the importance of virtue to liberalism consists in determining just what sort of thing is the virtue for which one is looking. The problem is pronounced because, as Hobbes and Locke are at pains to point out, the meaning of virtue is imprecise and inconstant.<sup>6</sup> In meeting this challenge, the classic account of virtue found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* provides instruction. Not, of course, as an authoritative statement of a particular catalog of virtues, or as the last word on the ends of a truly human life, or as an entirely adequate account of the means for acquiring and promoting virtue. Rather, Aristotle's examination of the virtues serves as an advantageous point of departure for the raising of certain basic questions about virtue and its relation to politics. It also illuminates the continuity across time and culture that lies beneath the imprecision of expression and inconstancy of use surrounding the term "virtue." And it brings into better focus the advantages and limitations of the ways in which virtue in the liberal tradition has been conceived and elaborated.

The primary sense of virtue (*arete*) in ancient Greek was that of a functional excellence. The virtue of a knife is sharpness, the virtue of an eye is seeing clearly, the virtue of a judge is deciding

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cases impartially in accordance with law and equity, and the virtue of a human being, Aristotle thought, consisted in a certain activity of the soul in accordance with reason. What I wish to stress is that the excellence of a human being was, in Aristotle's view, not the sole type of virtue. Rather, human excellence was but an instance or species, perhaps even the most important and noble instance or species, found under the genus virtue.

In general, then, Aristotle understood virtue as a condition or state of a thing that enabled it to perform a designated task well. That task could be conventional, a result of human decision, or natural, somehow inherent in a rational order that owes nothing to the will, imagination, or activity of human beings. With regard to human beings, virtue refers to those qualities of mind and character that aid in the performance of particular tasks or in the pursuit of determinate ends. Human beings, of course, can have many ends: satisfying physical desire, cooperating for mutual advantage, acquiring wealth, winning fame and glory. And to each of these lesser ends there are corresponding virtues. Aristotle calls those qualities of mind and character that conduce to man's natural end "human virtue" or the "virtues of the soul."<sup>7</sup>

It is especially worth noticing that Aristotle's generic or formal definition of virtue does not entail any particular account of human nature and is as compatible with his own view that the human soul has a specific function or excellence as with, say, Hobbes's repudiation of the very idea of human perfection. In other words, the generic definition of virtue as a functional excellence can and ought to be distinguished from such controversial issues as whether human beings have a nature and, if they do, in what manner that nature can be perfected. In the absence of an overarching goal or single perfection, human beings can have or perform many functions. Human beings can be husbands and wives, citizens and store owners, investment bankers and short-order cooks, philosophers and artists, friends and foes. And each of these roles or functions requires its peculiar virtues. The distinction between human excellence and excellence at the various and sundry functions that human beings may from time to time perform, and in the diversity of tasks they may choose to pursue,

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is worth stressing for several reasons: the distinction is crucial to a grasp of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy on its own terms; it is vital to an appreciation of the pertinence of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy to liberalism; and it is routinely misunderstood or obscured by contemporary scholars.

Indeed, the prevailing tendency in contemporary thought is to equate virtue with the idea of human perfection—a tendency which has roots in early modern misrepresentations of Aristotle<sup>8</sup>—and then reject virtue on the grounds that the idea of human perfection is politically irrelevant or morally destructive or no longer intelligible. The fact is, however, that Aristotle did not understand virtue as pertaining exclusively to a human being's highest end. A human life, as Aristotle understood it, has not only a highest end but also intermediate or lesser ends, and the attainment of these intermediate or lesser ends depends on the exercise of particular virtues or qualities of mind and character.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Aristotle could even refer to the virtue of the body,<sup>10</sup> the virtue of the nonrational element of the soul,<sup>11</sup> and the virtue of such (in his view) incomplete human beings as women, slaves, vulgar artisans, and children.<sup>12</sup> It is often overlooked—to the detriment of the understanding of Aristotle as well as liberalism—that while Aristotle's account of a human being's highest end implicates controversial opinions about human nature and metaphysical first principles, his generic definition of virtue presupposes neither a particular view of human nature nor a theoretical account of the cosmos.

What tends to be mistaken for the entirety of Aristotle's interest in the question of virtue—the question of human virtue or virtue of the soul—is, in fact, the distinctive focus of one critical part of Aristotle's political science, the part that he develops in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and which is devoted to investigating happiness and the character of the good life.<sup>13</sup> In the *Ethics*, Aristotle divides human virtue into two kinds. Moral virtue, which governs feelings and actions, is a fixed disposition or character trait acquired through habituation, involving choice, and performed in accordance with right reason.<sup>14</sup> Intellectual virtue, which governs thought, comes mostly from teaching and is exercised in practical



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judgment as well as in theoretical contemplation.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between moral and intellectual virtue is, however, imperfect because the moral virtues involve the exercise of reason, and the perfection of reason depends upon the cultivation of the virtues of character.<sup>16</sup> In a kind of antiformula formula, Aristotle contends that virtue consists in doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, toward the right people, for the right reason.<sup>17</sup> This means, among other things, that what excellence in action consists in very often cannot be specified in advance and in practice always calls for the exercise of practical wisdom, or the ability to understand circumstances in context and fit one's actions to them so as to do what is right.<sup>18</sup> The ultimate good for a human being is happiness or flourishing, the exercise of moral and intellectual virtue in proper proportion over the course of an entire life. Virtue, however, does not guarantee happiness, since good fortune, which cannot be entirely mastered by human beings, plays an ineliminable role in securing the external goods—reputation, wealth, health, family, and friends—necessary for the effective and full exercise of the virtues.<sup>19</sup>

While he indicates in the *Ethics* that there is but one catalog of moral virtue—a catalog that prominently features courage, temperance, generosity, liberality, magnanimity, and justice—Aristotle observes in the *Politics* that there is a variety of forms of government or regime. Every regime depends upon citizens endowed with a specific set of virtues that are relative to the regime's particular needs and goals.<sup>20</sup> The excellence of citizens in a democracy, a regime in which the people, who tend to be poor, rule, and whose principles are freedom and equality, differs from the excellence of citizens in an oligarchy, a regime in which the few, who tend to be wealthy, rule. Under most regimes, the virtues of a good citizen and those of a good man will differ because actual regimes tend to exalt forms of life that are partial and incomplete, whereas the good man pursues the best life, which requires the harmonious exercise of the full range of the virtues. At best, the life of the good democrat or good oligarch involves some part of moral and intellectual virtue. Perhaps only in the best

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regime, the regime devoted to human virtue, do the virtues of the human soul coincide with those which serve the regime's specific end.

It is common for contemporary scholars to ascribe to Aristotle, without qualification, the view that the aim of political life is to promote human excellence and perfect citizens.<sup>21</sup> This, however, is an unfortunate oversimplification, one that encourages many liberals in their determination to view Aristotle as irrelevant or hostile to their concerns.<sup>22</sup> It is true that Aristotle asserts in the *Ethics* that the "true statesman" must study virtue so as to be able to make citizens good.<sup>23</sup> But what he makes clear in the *Politics* is that true statesmen are at best seldom at the helm and very few actual regimes embrace virtue as their guiding principle. Given these facts of life, the primary task of politics most of the time, according to Aristotle, is not to perfect men's souls but to preserve actual imperfect regimes by fortifying citizens against the bad habits and destructive tendencies fostered by the way of life to which their regime is devoted. Aristotelian political science does not seek to transform imperfect regimes, such as democracies and oligarchies, into regimes devoted to human excellence; rather, it aims to institute measures so as to enable imperfect regimes to honor their principles and to moderate their unwise tendencies. The single greatest expedient for preserving a regime, says Aristotle, is the one most neglected by actual regimes: education in virtues that serve as a counterpoise to the characteristic bad habits and reckless desires which regimes tend to foster in their citizens.<sup>24</sup>

From an Aristotelian perspective, the student of politics must take into account the virtues relative to the maintenance of the specific regime in question as well as the virtues relative to a human being's final end or perfection. Particularly on Aristotle's account, inquiry into the greatest good or final end for a human being does not exhaust the inquiry into virtue because all tasks, including the political tasks of ruling and being ruled, have their associated virtues. It is true that the opinion that human perfection has a determinate form is bound to affect the assessment of

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what must be done to preserve particular regimes. But it is also true, from Aristotle's perspective, that however the question of human perfection is decided, no regime can long survive unless qualities of mind and character that support its specific principles and purposes and counteract its unwise tendencies are deliberately cultivated and regularly exercised.

To appreciate the qualified sense in which Aristotle was a perfectionist in politics is certainly not to dispose of all the serious objections that can be raised against his account of virtue. The familiar objection remains that his catalog of virtues in the *Ethics* reflects the particular and contingent sensibilities of the ascendant class in fourth-century Athens. To this objection it is easy enough to reply that we need not follow Aristotle in every respect, that we are not bound to endorse only those or all those virtues which Aristotle discusses, and that Aristotle himself insists that in ethics and politics the truth must be indicated "roughly and in outline."<sup>25</sup> But even after these replies have been accorded their due weight, a thorny issue persists: by invoking the notion of a human being's characteristic activity or function and the idea of greatest good, Aristotle's account of virtue, if only at its peak, appears to depend upon a discredited metaphysical biology and a refuted speculative cosmology.

Although real, this problem poses less of an obstacle to our learning from Aristotle's practical philosophy than is commonly supposed.<sup>26</sup> And this is not in the first place because Aristotle's metaphysics is more defensible than has been commonly thought. It is, rather, because his overall account of virtue is less dependent upon his metaphysics than has been typically assumed. I do not mean that one can, at the end of the day, understand virtue as a human excellence without implicating controversial doctrines about human nature and the first principles of the cosmos. What I do wish to suggest is that one can begin the inquiry into the relation between virtue and politics and make considerable progress before one has firmly settled all vexing theoretical issues. At least if one takes Aristotle seriously. For Aristotle's own procedure is to consider the question of virtue as it arises in ordinary lan-

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guage and out of daily life, and then, by refining commonly held opinions about morality and politics and working through their implications, to move beyond them.<sup>27</sup>

By following Aristotle's procedure and beginning with the actual language of morality and politics rather than with final judgments about the theoretical presuppositions of such a language, contemporary students of politics can find in their world, as Aristotle found in his own, basic and pervasive claims about the moral and political significance of a range of qualities of mind and character. For in ordinary language and everyday experience we still distinguish good from bad lives, and—though our powers of discrimination, our capacity to articulate our opinions, and our confidence in our judgments may have declined—we still invoke virtues such as courage, generosity, integrity, toleration, decency, delicacy, and the capacity for love and friendship in order to characterize and evaluate both ourselves and others. This is all that one needs, from an Aristotelian perspective, to commence the investigation of virtue and take the question of the political significance of virtue seriously.

In the long run, a complete understanding of virtue does require an account of first principles and a defense of controversial opinions about human nature and the cosmos. But, especially in light of the antifoundationalist, pragmatic, and postmetaphysical perspectives that are fashionable today, it is proper to ask why virtue should be held to a more stringent standard than, say, freedom or equality or justice. If, as many contemporary liberal and postmodern political theorists believe, we can discuss freedom, equality, and justice for political purposes perfectly well without invoking foundations or appealing to first principles, then perhaps discussion about virtue can proceed some substantial distance before vexing questions about foundations and first principles receive final answers. This is not to say that the question of virtue's foundations is a small matter. It is, rather, to observe that the first principles need not be fixed firmly before an inquiry into the moral and political significance of virtue can get under way and begin to yield benefits.

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I should make clear that I believe that the contemporary aversion to, or attack on, foundations is often tendentious. It confuses a strategy of avoidance appropriate to political debate with a dogmatic disavowal of the significance of metaphysics that is quite inappropriate to intellectual inquiry. And it tends to slide rapidly from a reasonable doubt about whether human beings have a nature to perfect into an invincible certainty that human beings do not. Nevertheless, it is possible to wrest an important point from the excesses characteristic of antifoundationalist, pragmatist, and postmetaphysical theorizing: in many areas of ethics and politics the foundations do not have to be secured before exploration of the key concepts can commence. Thus does the contemporary aversion to metaphysical foundations, by detaching questions about the usefulness of moral and political categories from questions about the theoretical framework that, some may suppose, renders them fully intelligible and absolutely secure, provide an opening for questions about the place of virtue in liberalism.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, in the present climate of opinion, the very mention of human excellence is more likely to provoke patronizing smiles, cynical sneers, or outright derision than intellectual engagement. According to widespread beliefs today, tasks are not given and definite but constructed and of infinite variety, happiness is a matter of individual choice, and there exist a thousand and one acceptable styles of life. These opinions, rooted in philosophical ideas that partially constitute liberal, Enlightenment modernity, seem to remove the ground from underneath virtue understood in terms of human perfection by flatly denying that human beings have a nature to be perfected or a circumscribed range of tasks to discharge. And the contemporary critique of foundations quickly and carelessly slides from the view that philosophizing about morality and politics can proceed without perfect knowledge of foundations to the dogmatic insistence that theoretical foundations for morality and politics definitely do not exist. To understand virtue's embattled position today, one must explore the features of liberal modernity that, by encouraging a repudiation of its apparent ground, have put virtue understood as human excellence on the defensive.

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### LIBERAL MODERNITY AND VIRTUE

Virtue has become embattled within contemporary liberalism for reasons that go to the foundations of modern thought. Modernity is, of course, more than a way of thinking, designating a wide range of changes in cultural, economic, social, and political life that began to accelerate in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet few would disagree that modernity crucially involves a new understanding of the human condition based on a rejection or dramatic revision of inherited ideas about nature and God. Distinctively modern thought comes into being through an explicit critique of classical Greek philosophy and biblical faith. To many medieval thinkers what was most apparent were the differences or conflict between the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, which culminated in the idea of a self-subsistent human excellence completed in the perfection of one's rational faculty, and biblical faith, which promulgated the idea of salvation or redemption as the ultimate gift of a mysterious God. But to thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes the philosophy stemming from Plato and Aristotle and the religion rooted in the Bible were alike in the most important respect. Whereas medieval thinkers grappled with the conflicting accounts of the greatest good or ultimate end taught by philosophy and faith, Machiavelli and Hobbes were more impressed by the fact that, in the teaching of both classical philosophy and biblical religion, there was a transcendent moral order, not subject to human choice or will, that established principles of right conduct, defined human happiness, and revealed the soul's perfection.

According to a standard picture of the history of the early modern world, new beliefs and changes in theoretical outlook—in particular, growing skepticism about a moral order external to and independent of human beings—placed the very notion of human excellence under powerful strain. The rise of natural science, the disenchantment of the heavenly spheres, the growth in confidence that human beings could, by focusing their minds and taking matters into their own hands, improve and perfect their

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condition combined to discredit the claims of theoretical reason and religious authority to guide human life. By calling into question the belief in a natural or divine order that could be known through the exercise of reason, modern philosophy, slowly but surely, seemed to reveal that the idea of human excellence was itself a human invention. And virtue, when understood as a human invention, or as a general name for qualities of mind and character that people in a particular society happened to value and praise, seemed to lose much of its splendor and become scarcely recognizable as virtue. For if human beings lacked a nature, task, or calling, then they must also lack virtue in the precise sense, for virtue, it was thought, involves the perfection of a nature.

There were also practical considerations that motivated the shift in attention away from questions about virtue. The bitter wars of religion that ravaged Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries convinced many thoughtful observers of the urgency of removing questions about ultimate salvation or the highest good from the sphere of politics. To preserve peace and order, government, it was argued, must be limited, in regard to both its legitimate end or ends and the means or powers it could use to achieve those ends. The proper aim of government was not to cultivate virtue, as, it was said, the ancient philosophers thought, but to maintain peace, protect individual rights, and promote material prosperity. To be sure, it is one thing to say that it is not *government's* business to cultivate virtue, and quite another to assert that virtue is altogether irrelevant to the maintenance of peace, the protection of individual rights, and the promotion of material prosperity. Yet the heavy conceptual artillery and powerful rhetorical thunderbolts that the makers of modern liberalism deployed to show why government must stay out of the business of fostering human excellence suggested to many that fostering virtue of any sort was a dubious business for *all* reputable associations and self-respecting individuals.

So, according to the standard picture, while one strand of liberal thought demoted virtue on the basis of a theoretical critique

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of metaphysics and religion, another strand downplayed the political importance of virtue by invoking practical judgments about the dire consequences of imposing conceptions of the good life through the use of the coercive force of the state. In many cases, of course, the theoretical critique of reason was joined to the practical judgments about political necessity, with the result that opinions about human perfection were pushed into the background of moral and political thought.

This standard picture—which has been embraced by both liberals and their critics, and which, on the whole, has much to recommend it—is not in every respect adequate. It obscures an especially important matter: despite their rejection by and large of the idea that the state should be devoted to the promotion of human excellence, the makers of modern liberalism did not reject virtue as a critical category of moral and political philosophy, and never dreamed that a politics based on natural freedom and equality could achieve its goals independently of the qualities of mind and character of citizens and officeholders.

The inadequacies of the standard picture require a reconsideration of what the liberal tradition has to teach about virtue. Part of the problem, however, is that to see the inadequacies one must have already begun the reconsideration. Accordingly, I want to suggest that we can obtain valuable guidance in understanding liberalism's long-standing and fruitful entanglement with virtue by considering the writings of such formidable critics of liberal modernity as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Leo Strauss. The philosophical explorations of MacIntyre, Taylor, and Strauss shake up old habits of thought about liberalism and throw new light not only on liberalism's characteristic weaknesses and typical exaggerations but also on its internal dynamics and neglected possibilities. The suggestion that such critics estimably illuminate not only the weaknesses but also the strengths of the liberal tradition may come as a surprise to many liberals in the academy. But it should not. For it is a central liberal virtue to listen respectfully to viewpoints different from one's own, and it is a famous liberal principle that knowledge is advanced through the clash of



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opposing viewpoints. In this particular case, I shall show that the exercise of liberal virtue and adherence to liberal principle pay rich dividends for liberalism.<sup>29</sup>

Consider, for example, MacIntyre's widely discussed and controversial book *After Virtue*. MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project—the effort to supply a rational justification, independent of aesthetics, law, or theology, for abstract rules of right conduct<sup>30</sup>—has precipitated a calamitous breakdown in the language we use in speaking about virtue. On the view that the history of our concepts is an indispensable component of philosophical analysis, MacIntyre traces the transformations that the concept of virtue has undergone—from the martial qualities that characterized pre-Homeric Greek heroes to the expertise in technique and the mastery of manipulation that, MacIntyre argues, characterize exemplars within the contemporary American moral outlook: the therapist, the aesthete, and the manager. What comes to function in Aristotle's ethics as a category embracing a set of excellences of character (the virtues), traits that enabled a human being to achieve his specific excellence, deteriorated by the late nineteenth century, on MacIntyre's account, into a singular moral quality (virtue) governing the sexual conduct of women. Writing in 1981, and hence before the renaissance in virtue studies that his own work helped set in motion, MacIntyre lamented the vanishing of reflection on the virtues from contemporary academic liberal discourse and the fading of virtue as a living moral category in the lives of ordinary citizens. By demonstrating the irrationality of the theory and the emptiness of the moral life that suppressed or sought to expel virtue, MacIntyre hoped to establish the superior rationality of the Aristotelian moral tradition, in which virtue was seen as a central moral and political category.

MacIntyre's argument in *After Virtue* is vulnerable to serious criticism. It has been said that his intellectual history is one-sided; that his account of the moral decline of the contemporary world is greatly exaggerated; that his dependence on intellectual history as a causal factor, to the exclusion of political, economic, and social forces, is misguided; that he is oblivious to liberalism's achieve-

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ments; and that his proposal to “men and women of good will”—that they quietly withdraw from the political life of liberal democracy and engage in the “construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us”—is apocalyptic.<sup>31</sup> The truth in these criticisms, however, is compatible with MacIntyre’s central claim about the gradual impoverishment of our capacity to speak about virtue, and the narrow and narrowing perspective on the moral and political significance of character resulting from the internal dynamics of liberal thought and practice.

Moreover, his critics—and MacIntyre too—overlook the opportunity for liberalism embedded in MacIntyre’s interpretation of liberal modernity’s breakdown. For example, by MacIntyre’s own account, “the classical tradition of the virtues”<sup>32</sup> was an important feature of English thinking about the moral life as late at least as the first quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> It follows that virtue was an intelligible and available concept through much of the period in which liberalism received its classic formulations. Arguably, the very conceptual transformations that MacIntyre brings to light and which he claims have accelerated in the twentieth century have, in distorting and diminishing our moral vocabulary, also distorted and diminished the vocabulary necessary for exploring the role that virtue has played in the history of the making of modern liberalism and must continue to play in any coherent defense of liberalism today. Perhaps the very breakdown of our moral language, a breakdown that MacIntyre so effectively describes, not only inhibits us from seeing ourselves in terms of the virtues but also has occluded the role played by opinions about virtue in the liberal tradition.

In a more direct manner, Charles Taylor’s sympathetic and wide-ranging account of modern thought, *Sources of the Self*, also indicates that modernity has richer resources with which to speak about virtue than has generally been supposed.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to MacIntyre, Taylor is an admirer of modern thought, but like MacIntyre he discerns within modernity destructive tendencies. One of these is modernity’s neglect of the moral and conceptual

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sources that sustain it. And one of Taylor's striking theses is that many of the achievements of which modernity is most proud have important roots in classical thought and biblical faith. Accordingly, Taylor finds that such notable achievements in the long process of the making of the modern self as the turn toward the psychological and moral depths of the individual, the affirmation of the ordinary life of work and family, and the invention of romanticism or expressive individualism were decisively prepared and crucially sustained by premodern theological categories and aspirations, categories and aspirations that modernity self-consciously rebelled against and came to pride itself on having overcome. The presumption among modern thinkers to have altogether superseded religious faith and traditional philosophy, Taylor warns, has been one cause of excesses and follies committed by modernity's champions, and is a tendency, in Taylor's view, that today threatens modernity's solid achievements. Taylor suggests that modernity has rashly weakened its position by cutting itself off from the premodern sources that have, even in its most innovative moments, inspired and nourished it. To the extent that his overall argument is sound, one would expect to find that virtue, a prominent premodern category, plays a bigger role in traditional liberalism, both visibly and behind the scenes, than received wisdom recognizes.

In the search for liberalism's neglected possibilities and untapped resources, Leo Strauss, too, can be a surprising ally. Among the most controversial and influential scholars of political philosophy in the twentieth century, Strauss may be best known for his revival of the serious study of Plato as a living source of wisdom about politics. Strauss presented his recovery of Plato's political philosophy in terms of a fundamental quarrel between ancient and modern thought. Against the prevailing scholarly consensus in the first half of the twentieth century—which saw Plato, and indeed the history of premodern Western political philosophy, as a kind of primitive protoliberalism, a necessary step on the way toward enlightenment and modern liberalism—Strauss stressed the fundamental differences separating ancient and mod-

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ern philosophy. Against the scholarly consensus that came to prevail after World War II that Plato was a teacher of totalitarianism, Strauss stressed the skeptical side of Plato's thinking and the support that classical political philosophy lent to modern liberal democracy. Indeed, against contemporary self-confidence, Strauss suggestively argued with great passion and inventiveness that in the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns it was an open question as to who had the upper hand.

Owing perhaps to the practical task he set for himself, Strauss may sometimes have exaggerated the scope of the differences and disagreements between ancient and modern thought. Indeed, in the effort to awaken scholars from their dogmatic slumber, Strauss, on occasion, melodramatically emphasized the radical nature of the break with ancient and medieval thought through which modernity came into being.<sup>35</sup> I speak of occasional exaggeration and melodramatic emphasis because in his detailed studies of particular thinkers—as opposed to his shorter essays and brief introductions to his books—Strauss makes clear that the modern break with antiquity is frequently partial and incomplete, that important continuities mark the history of political philosophy, and that the conflict between characteristically ancient and characteristically modern ideas often plays itself out, and sometimes to fruitful effect, within the confines of modern thought.

Although his name has come to be identified with the idea that a vast gulf separates modernity from antiquity, Strauss himself, time and again in his writings, called attention to the ways in which modern thinkers, in the exposition of their moral and political ideas, had recourse to or presupposed typically ancient notions.<sup>36</sup> Strauss's own specific interpretations of modern political philosophers amply demonstrate that the famous quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is seldom clear-cut, and that, at its best, modern political philosophy remains fruitfully entangled with opinions characteristic of classical political philosophy. Thus, like the historical work of MacIntyre and Taylor, Strauss's critique of liberal modernity points to an important lesson about liberalism that resourceful liberals can adapt to their advantage:

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gulf though there may be, there is more antiquity in modernity than is commonly supposed. Virtue is an element of this neglected antiquity within liberal modernity, and as such, I shall argue, it constitutes an important resource for liberals today.

## COMMUNITARIAN CRITICISMS AND LIBERAL LESSONS

While one opening for the acquisition of a better understanding of virtue in liberalism has been carved out by leading critics of mainstream academic political theory, another opening arises from promising developments within the mainstream itself.<sup>37</sup> It is well known that a single work published in 1971, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, has been largely responsible for the elevation of a particular conception of liberalism, one devoted to both the protection of individual liberty and the securing of the social and economic bases of equality, to the top of the agenda of academic political theory. A decisive measure of the impact of Rawls's work is that the family of criticisms of liberalism that sprang up in the 1980s understood liberalism—even when not explicitly addressing his work—in roughly the way Rawls did. This family of criticisms focused on liberalism's alleged indifference to conceptions of human flourishing, exclusion of the pursuit of higher goals from the domain of politics, and inattention to the ways in which a well-ordered society and a good life depend upon the exercise of virtue, the practice of citizenship, and participation in a common political life. This family of ideas came to be known as the communitarian critique of liberalism.

The communitarian critique was swiftly countered by a rejoinder from a variety of liberals, including Rawls himself. The liberal rejoinder tended to pursue two lines of argument. First, that the communitarian critics mischaracterized liberalism, attributing to it rigid theoretical dichotomies and implausible assumptions about moral psychology and social life to which liberals were not committed either by intent or by implication. And second, that many of the practicable reforms that communitarians endorsed

were viable, and indeed reasonable and desirable, within a liberal framework.

The liberal rejoinder to communitarian criticism particularly emphasized the characteristically liberal concern for the moral life.<sup>38</sup> A new generation of liberal thinkers rejected the idea—an idea, it must be said, that derives considerable support from statements by Rawls and other eminent liberals<sup>39</sup>—that liberalism can be adequately grasped as a procedural political system committed to maintaining neutrality toward competing visions of the good life. The truth, according to the new liberals, is more complicated. Although it does place an emphasis on formal procedures, is primarily concerned with institutional arrangements, and does cherish the toleration of a range of practices and conceptions of the good life, liberalism is, contrary to its communitarian critics as well as some of its most influential champions, a doctrine containing a partial vision of the good and a compelling account of decent character.

The liberal rejoinder sometimes gave the impression that liberalism had weathered the storm of communitarian criticism without compromising its basic principles or backing away from its fundamental commitments. This impression, however, is misleading. In fact, the liberalism that the most prominent liberals in the academy defend today reflects a chastened understanding. The communitarian challenge spurred liberals to articulate a richer and more flexible liberalism that is less embarrassed to acknowledge its dependence on institutions, practices, and beliefs falling beyond the range of the liberal theorist's special expertise and the liberal regime's assigned jurisdiction. This more reflective and self-conscious liberalism is also better able to recognize its limitations and thus take measures to compensate for its weaknesses and disadvantages. And thanks in part to the communitarian challenge, liberal theorists have increasingly come to appreciate the capacity of a liberal framework to respect the role of moral virtue, civic association, and even religious faith in the preservation of a political society based on free and democratic institutions.<sup>40</sup>

The communitarian critique of Rawlsian liberalism did a great service by focusing attention on dimensions of moral and political

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life that academic liberalism had neglected. “Rights talk” among liberals is now better balanced by attention to responsibility and duty. Leading liberal thinkers find themselves preoccupied with the content of character. Concern for the dignity and well-being of individuals has been complemented by consideration of the role of communities in forming individuals who are capable not only of caring for themselves and cooperating for mutual advantage but also of developing enduring friendships, sustaining marriages, and rearing children. Liberal theorists have increasingly come to appreciate that the practice of limited constitutional government, the protection of basic individual rights, and the promotion of virtues such as toleration depend in part on citizens adept in the art of association. And the fact is, notwithstanding occasional reckless rhetoric to the contrary, few communitarian critics are eager to say farewell to fundamental liberal principles and virtues. The serious question that has emerged from the communitarian critique of liberalism is how well contemporary liberalism can be taught to care for those necessities which in the recent past it has been inclined to neglect: the cultivation of moral virtue, the art of association, and the practice of citizenship.

## VIRTUE IN ACADEMIC LIBERALISM

In regard to virtue, at least, the challenge consists in making explicit and refining an appreciation that is already present in the seminal text of contemporary liberal political theory. For it has frequently been overlooked that an instructive account of liberalism’s dependence on certain necessary virtues was already available a decade before the communitarian critique of liberalism arose. And this instructive account could be found in the very place that the communitarian critique implied it was least likely to appear, in Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>41</sup>

In the neglected third part of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls defines the virtues as “sentiments, that is, related families of dispositions and propensities regulated by a higher-order desire, in this case a desire to act from the corresponding moral principles.”<sup>42</sup> Much

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could be said about Rawls's redefinition of virtue in terms of sentiment, desire, and moral principle and his exclusion of habit, consequences, and practical wisdom from virtue's definition. But what I wish to call attention to is Rawls's recognition of virtue's necessity. In particular, political stability in a well-ordered liberal society, Rawls holds, depends upon citizens with grounds for mutual trust, a capacity for friendship, and a shared sense of justice.<sup>43</sup> Such virtues as Rawls believes a liberal state depends upon, however, do not, according to him, develop naturally or easily. They are, in Rawls's account, in part the happy by-product of life under just institutions. But they must also, Rawls argues, be actively cultivated.

In an ideal or well-ordered liberal state, Rawls explains, the necessary moral virtues begin to emerge in the private sphere. It is in the family that the child first develops the capacity for love and trust.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, the rich array of voluntary or secondary associations that flourish in a well-ordered liberal society foster the "cooperative virtues," which include "justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality."<sup>45</sup> Finally, through fulfilling the offices of citizenship, individuals develop an allegiance to the principles of justice such that they learn to treat fellow citizens as the free and equal beings they are.<sup>46</sup> What must be stressed in connection with Rawls's account of how the virtues are acquired is that the private virtues, the cooperative virtues, and the virtue of justice are, in his view, not luxuries but necessities for liberal citizens. In the absence of citizens endowed with the requisite virtues, a liberal state, Rawls indicates, would suffer political instability and would be unable to maintain its essential institutions.<sup>47</sup>

Rawls's sketch of the sources of the necessary virtues in a well-ordered liberal society is an explicitly idealized account.<sup>48</sup> This, however, does not justify his dubious claim that the salutary effect of life under liberal institutions is to dissolve "men's propensity to injustice,"<sup>49</sup> a claim that is a contemporary manifestation of the old Enlightenment illusion of inevitable progress, the conceit that reason and history are cooperating to bring about the moral improvement of humankind. But the larger point is that if even in a well-ordered society liberal institutions depend upon citizens



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endowed with moral virtue, would not the importance of virtue be greater still in an imperfect liberal democracy where citizens would find it necessary to negotiate mutual distrust, formal inequities, and structural defects in basic political institutions? That is, doesn't the logic of Rawls's own account imply the critical importance of virtue to the sort of imperfect liberal democracy in which we live? And doesn't his idealized account also imply that since ordered institutional life is one key source for the formation of moral virtue, in an imperfectly ordered liberal society virtue would be not only more important but harder to come by? Having argued that the public good in a liberal state depends upon moral virtue, and that the sources of moral virtue in such a state are intact, two-parent families, a vibrant civil society, and active citizen participation, Rawls leaves the reader to wonder what steps a liberal regime and its citizens may or must take in nonideal circumstances—circumstances, for example, in which families are in disarray, civil society is moribund, and political participation is anemic—to promote the private and public virtues on which stability in a liberal democracy depends.<sup>50</sup>

A growing discrepancy between liberal democracy's need for virtue and its supply of it is, of course, no idle hypothetical scenario but, rather, an increasingly common description of the actual condition in which American liberal democracy finds itself today. It is for this reason that the complicated interrelation of liberalism, virtue, and what Tocqueville called "the art of association" has become a subject of growing investigation.<sup>51</sup> What needs to be emphasized at this juncture is that it is from within the very confines of Rawlsian liberalism that questions arise about the connection between the virtues necessary to the maintenance of liberalism and the range of sources that sustain them. Although it is certainly not the only perspective that makes virtue an issue, and despite the fact that it has not had much noticeable effect on the interest in virtue exhibited by Rawls's most devoted readers, a Rawlsian perspective directs students of liberal democracy in America to ask what means, consistent with liberal principles, a liberal regime such as America and the individuals whose lives it frames ought to adopt to support the family, to revivify intermedi-

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ate associations, and to encourage participation in democratic political processes.<sup>52</sup>

Rawlsian liberalism is not alone in articulating a connection between liberal hopes and the need for virtue. Like Rawls, Joseph Raz insists that liberalism needs virtue, but unlike Rawls, Raz believes that the liberal state should be directed toward the perfection of the individual. Raz observes—and Rawls would no doubt agree—that the moral ideal of personal autonomy, which he finds at the heart of liberalism, presupposes particular “inner capacities” and “character traits.” But Raz parts ways with Rawls when he argues that it is one of the tasks of liberal government to promote the qualities of mind and character that support autonomy.<sup>53</sup> Raz does not say very much about what this promotion would look like. Concerned as he is with the ground and scope of principles, Raz does not investigate the beliefs, practices, and institutions that support the virtues of autonomy. Nor does he explore in any detail the extent of the education required to foster the “cognitive capacities,” “emotional and imaginative make-up,” and “character traits” necessary to the leading of an autonomous life.<sup>54</sup> Thus, like Rawls, Raz develops a theory that raises questions which he does not pursue and implicates issues whose significance he does not fully acknowledge about the institutional sources that might sustain the virtues supporting liberalism.

Stephen Macedo and William Galston have each argued that liberalism calls forth and depends upon a specific set of virtues they call liberal virtues.<sup>55</sup> The liberal virtues, according to Macedo, include “broad sympathies, self-critical reflectiveness, a willingness to experiment, to try and to accept new things, self-control and active, autonomous self-development, an appreciation of inherited social ideals, an attachment and even an altruistic regard for one’s fellow liberal citizens.”<sup>56</sup> These virtues, according to Macedo, are relative to liberal regimes in two senses: they are fostered by beliefs, practices, and institutions typical of liberalism; and the stability of liberal regimes depends upon citizens endowed with them. But Macedo reluctantly acknowledges that a liberal regime cannot always be counted on to generate consistently and in ample supply the virtues its citizens need to

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preserve it. Although he remains optimistic, he allows, in the final lines of his book, the possibility that liberal regimes may depend for their vitality on the lingering effects of a pre- or extraliberal ethic.<sup>57</sup>

Galston, in his state-of-the-art study, makes thematic what Macedo only touched upon: political liberalism today derives support from a variety of perspectives and schools of thought that are by no means exhaustively defined by the liberal tradition. And Galston takes more seriously the possibility that liberal regimes do not automatically produce the virtue necessary to their own preservation.<sup>58</sup> Together, the self-critical liberalisms of Macedo and Galston suggest that one of the internal resources liberalism can call on to meet the challenges it faces today is its capacity to recognize its dependence on external or extraliberal and nongovernmental sources of virtue. Of course, the capacity to recognize a need must be distinguished from the ability to satisfy it.

Like Macedo and Galston, Judith Shklar believed that if they wish to defend liberalism effectively and understand it fully, liberals cannot avoid speaking about character. But in contrast to Macedo and Galston, Shklar doubted that the defense of liberalism required a search for insight beyond the framework of liberal thought. She saw no particular need for liberalism to seek nourishment from forms of life and schools of thought not essentially liberal.

In *Ordinary Vices*, perhaps her most original and best-known book, Shklar adopts an intriguing strategy for speaking about character in a liberal register.<sup>59</sup> The strategy consists in providing an account of the character or moral psychology of a good liberal that avoids mention of virtue and the good by dwelling on the vices and what is evil. Shklar is, of course, prepared to acknowledge that here and there one may encounter citizens with good characters, but what is really worth mentioning and resisting, she holds, is the propensity to cruelty, a propensity exhibited in such common qualities as hypocrisy, snobbery, betrayal, and misanthropy.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, Shklar's avoidance of virtue in her account of liberal character is more an achievement of rhetoric than a real achieve-

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ment. Nor could it be otherwise, since vices are conceptually related to virtues. One need not understand virtue, as did Aristotle, as a mean between two vicious or defective extremes to recognize that a vice—a blameworthy disposition or form of conduct—becomes intelligible only in the context of a range of dispositions, actions, and ends that can be seen as fitting or good.

On inspection Shklar can be seen to presuppose opinions about the good and virtue despite her reluctance to use the terms. For example, although it concentrates on what is bad and should be avoided, Shklar's delightful exploration of the psychology of the snob is grounded in the suppressed presupposition that snobbery is bad because people are entitled to a minimum of respect and dignity.<sup>61</sup> The critique of snobbery, moreover, implies that the disposition to recognize the equality of your fellow human beings and the ability to treat them accordingly are deserving of praise but, like many fine things, do not come naturally and instead require education and effort. A determination, however resolute, to speak only of vice and evil does not erase a theoretical dependence on virtue and the good.

Speaking more generally, the establishment of cruelty as the greatest evil is, in fact, itself motivated by opinions about the good and what people ought to do however they may be inclined. Furthermore, the view that human beings are pained not only by experiencing cruelty but by observing it has serious limitations as a descriptive statement; it must be qualified by the common observation that people can experience delight in witnessing a rival squirm, and the well-attested fact that for many behaving cruelly and observing cruel actions give pleasure. If the avoidance of causing or contributing to cruelty is meant by Shklar as a prescription or norm, then it must derive its force from a conception of the good that explains why the taste for cruelty should be curbed and the infliction of pain be avoided. An account, however elegant and subtle, that puts to one side the question of what is to be pursued and instead focuses on what must be avoided cannot avoid raising the question (though it can, of course, refuse to provide answers or to acknowledge the question it has raised) of why the pursuit of such avoidance is good. Unlike an unwanted visitor

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at the door, virtue and opinions about the good cannot be made to go away by our ignoring them.<sup>62</sup>

As for the question of where the qualities on which liberalism depends will come from, Shklar, surprisingly for a thinker who scorned viewing politics through the lens of speculative theory and prided herself on emancipating liberalism from the grip of illusion, casually asserts that life in a liberal regime will indirectly have a salutary effect on the character of citizens. Indeed, Shklar goes beyond Rawls in her optimistic assessment of the power of life under liberal institutions to provide citizens with a kind of spontaneous moral education. But she does so with even less justification, since Rawls's explicit purpose was to sketch a well-ordered or idealized society. With scarcely a shred of empirical evidence or theoretical analysis of passion and interest to support her, Shklar declares that living under the sway of liberal institutions and procedures will encourage "habits of patience, self-restraint, respect for the claims of others, and caution."<sup>63</sup> Even this heroic assumption, Shklar implicitly acknowledges, will not supply liberal regimes with all the necessary virtues. And she indicates that some of the moral virtues in citizens that sustain liberalism—"moral courage, self-reliance, and stubbornness to assert themselves effectively"—are not automatically generated by liberal institutions and procedures.<sup>64</sup>

Shklar sees nothing wrong with the indirect shaping of character by the day-to-day operations of the political institutions of the liberal state. Indeed, she sees such shaping as not only an inevitable but a beneficial part of the liberal state's internal dynamic. But she does deny that creating "specific kinds of character" can be part of the liberal state's deliberate educative mission.<sup>65</sup> And she fails to consider whether all the effects of liberal institutions on citizens' character are favorable to liberalism.

Shklar thus bequeaths a riddle to those who would follow her. On the one hand, she holds that "liberal politics depend for their success" on specific virtues.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, she denies that liberal regimes can ever take direct action to cultivate the virtues they require: "All it [liberal politics] can claim is that if we want to promote political freedom, then this is appropriate behavior."<sup>67</sup>

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What happens, though, if the political institutions that Shklar believes are responsible for fostering the moral virtues she deems necessary to the well-being of the liberal regime do not have the effect she ascribes to them, or, when running well, have that effect but cease to work properly? And what if, in addition to the sources which she does discuss, civic association, family, and religion grow embattled but prove indispensable to the cultivation of the virtues, both those promoted by liberal institutions and those not, that sustain the liberal state?

One problem with Shklar's account of liberalism is that she presents what is in significant measure an empirical and sociological claim—that is, that public life in a liberal state fosters the necessary citizens' virtues—as if it were a theoretical truth. By doing so, Shklar's analysis shifts attention away from systematic empirical investigation of whether and to what extent public life actually does educate citizens for liberty. Moreover, the theory she favors overlooks, for no good reason, the role of private life and intermediate associations in the fostering of the necessary virtues. And it fails to raise the question of whether liberal institutions also produce bad effects, generating attitudes and vices inimical to the liberal spirit. Finally, presenting as an inflexible conclusion of theory what is better conceived as a flexible dictate of prudence, Shklar removes from the agenda questions about even limited measures the state may take to foster basic moral virtues. If Shklar's view were accepted, then in hard times, when public life in a liberal state becomes stagnant or rancorous, civil society lethargic, and the family embattled, the state would be obliged to sit idly by and watch helplessly from the sidelines as the wellsprings of the virtues necessary for order and liberty slowly evaporated.

The efforts of Rawls, Raz, Macedo, Galston, and Shklar to establish that character is a critical dimension of liberal political philosophy are highly instructive. But they have not yet gone far enough in clarifying, especially in hard times, the disproportion between liberalism's need for virtue and the means liberalism can muster to foster the virtues it needs its citizens to possess. Nor have they taken full advantage of the resources within the liberal tradition for illuminating the connections between virtue and a politics

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based on the natural freedom and equality of all. And they have not given sufficient attention to the vices that liberal principles can engender. It is my aim to show in the ensuing chapters that the old or classic liberalism has much to say to the new liberalism about the sources, scope, and susceptibilities of the virtues on which liberalism depends.

## VIRTUE AND THE MAKING OF MODERN LIBERALISM

By exploring the transformations that virtue undergoes in the works of four seminal figures in the making of the modern liberal tradition, I shall bring to light in the coming chapters the often subtle appreciation of virtue woven into the fabric of modern liberal thought. In studies of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill, I show that each advances distinctive and instructive opinions about virtue and its relation to a politics based on liberalism's fundamental premise, the natural freedom and equality of all. At the same time I shall emphasize the practical and theoretical obstacles each thinker faces in the attempt to provide virtue the breathing room it needs to perform its function well.

In various ways the makers of modern liberalism derive the necessity of virtue from the logic of politics and derive from the logic of a state based on natural freedom and equality the conclusion that government has at most a very limited role to play in protecting or promoting virtue. This limitation was less of a liability when liberalism could confidently rely upon extraliberal or nongovernmental sources of virtue. The weakening or exhaustion of these sources does not bring about a weakening of liberalism's need for virtue; it only weakens liberalism's capacity to satisfy its need.

While the thinkers examined in this book certainly do not exhaust the range of opinions about virtue within the liberal tradition, they are preeminent and do constitute a broad spectrum. Moreover, since among the makers of modern liberalism they are least commonly associated with the idea that a well-ordered state requires citizens capable of exercising a range of basic virtues,

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they represent excellent test cases for the thesis that virtue is a critical component of any reasonable liberal theory of politics. There is, after all, no serious dispute that reflection on the qualities of mind and character that support liberty is critical to the principles expounded by Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, or Tocqueville. But there is comparatively little recognition that virtue is a crucial category in the political theories of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill. Perhaps pinpointing the roles that virtue, according to these thinkers, must play in politics does not prove once and for all that virtue is absolutely essential for liberalism or that it must always remain a problem for which only contingent and changing remedies will avail. Nevertheless, through the establishment of both the importance and the problematic character of virtue among the theorists in the liberal tradition best reputed for getting along without it, the burden of proof at least is shifted. Those who believe that liberalism is obliged to do without virtue, or those who hold that liberalism can make do with whatever supply of virtue happens to be at its disposal, must take up the matter not only with liberalism's critics but with liberalism's founding fathers and classic authors.

In the book's conclusion, I shall return to contemporary concerns about the prospects for liberal democracy in America. In particular, I shall suggest that lacunae or incoherence in such leading contemporary schools as deliberative democracy, feminism, and postmodernism are in crucial cases rooted in the contortions theorists undertake to keep virtue out of theory and politics, or in the ruses they devise to bring it back in under wraps and without pronouncing its name. I shall go on to connect the results of the investigation of the place of virtue in liberalism to contemporary debate about the family and associational life. I shall suggest that one of the key criteria for determining where government should intervene in civil society and where it should abstain from intervention is the manner and extent to which the practice or association in question supports the virtues necessary to the preservation of liberal political society.

In sum, liberal democracy rests on an unstable equilibrium between the healthy liberal impulse to economize on virtue and the



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inescapable demand for some minimum of good character in citizens and officeholders. A certain restraint in liberals in connection to virtue reflects a sound insight, because within the intellectual framework of liberalism virtue is vulnerable to persuasive theoretical and practical criticism yet remains indispensable to a complete account of free and democratic politics. Compared to the ambivalences that distinguish earlier liberal political theory, the failure to be embarrassed by the problem of virtue that marks much contemporary thought betrays a loss of understanding and balance. Liberalism has good reasons for seeking to diminish the significance to politics of virtue but betrays a tendency to take this economizing to an extreme by denying or forgetting virtue. The recognition that the real tension is not between liberalism and virtue but, rather, one that arises within liberalism about how to sustain the necessary virtues should provoke among liberals a tinge of embarrassment. Such embarrassment, however, is no disgrace. It may even provide an auspicious point of departure for the understanding of liberalism's virtue.