


2016

## Situating Political Obligation in Political Ontology: Ethical Marxism and the Embedded Self

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Chambers, Chris A., "Situating Political Obligation in Political Ontology: Ethical Marxism and the Embedded Self" (2016). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 64.  
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SITUATING POLITICAL OBLIGATION IN POLITICAL ONTOLOGY:  
ETHICAL MARXISM AND THE EMBEDDED SELF

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program  
in Philosophy in the College of Arts and Humanities in The Burnett Honors College at the  
University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term, 2016

Thesis Chair: Dr. Michael Strawser

## **Abstract**

Though various obligations typically affect our behavior without being recognized, they have a substantial impact on how we operate as human beings. The relationships we have between, say, our parents when in their household obligate us to take out the trash at certain times and wash the dishes after dinner. The relationships we have between our closest friends often oblige us to hear them out when they have undergone a traumatic experience. Upon reflection, it may be easy to point out a number of the obligations which inform our social behavior. What is not so easy, however, is pointing out the foundation for such obligations. In this project I will explore the foundation of obligation, specifically political obligation. Through this exploration I will attempt to situation political obligation in the ontology of political actors. In particular, an analysis of liberal democracy and social democracy, and their ontological backgrounds, liberalism and communitarianism, will be utilized in order to elucidate both the usefulness and the location of political obligation. Ultimately, I will show how recourse to Marxism provides for a more robust account of political obligation.

## **Dedication**

Of all the persons with whom I have developed long-lasting, meaningful relationships, there are two to whom I dedicate this project. I dedicate this thesis to Joyce P. Chambers and Trevor A. Chambers. *Ohne sind, ich bin nichts.*

## **Acknowledgments**

There are many I would like to thank for their contributions, both implicit and explicit, to this project. First and foremost is my thesis chair Dr. Michael Strawser. His incisive criticisms of my often vague ideas and his commitment to ensuring that I produced a well-reasoned thesis (on time!) were absolutely central to this project's completion. I must also express my gratitude to Dr. Daniel Marien and Dr. Don Jones, the two other members of my committee. Taking their classes throughout my time at University of Central Florida inspired me to take philosophy more seriously, to think as clearly and as critically as I possibly could. And their demanding questions during the oral presentation of thesis pushed me to express those very skills they taught me. I wish to thank Dr. Mark Tunick, who, while not an official member of my committee, provided invaluable feedback on the conceptual underpinnings of the project. I wish to thank Denise Crisafi in particular and the University of Central Florida's Honors in The Major Program in general for allowing me to partake in this intellectual journey. Lastly, I would to thank a number of my colleagues who have made my time at the University of Central Florida: John Euliano, Matt Diaz-Liaz, Ben Cook, Mark Otte, Ariel Gonzalez, Sara Gray, Patrick Landy, and Markus Murden. Particularly, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Chandra Kethi-Reddy, Ramon Lopez, and David Moosmann. These three gentlemen did more to my development as a scholar than I think they can ever imagine. Thank you.

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## Introduction

Whether we recognize it or not obligations play an essential role in our lives. We are wont to say that there are certain things we not only *should* do, but *must* do lest our action, or lack thereof, be deemed morally and perhaps even legally reprehensible. Obligations are oftentimes different in kind; they can be predicated on, say, a religious maxim, a secular, ethical theory, or any other system of rules meant to dictate how we ought to behave. A Muslim woman may feel obligated to donate a portion of her salary to those in need, given her commitment to certain Islamic principles. A Rastafarian man may refuse to cut his hair, and instead form them into dreadlocks, because he feels obligated to maintain himself, both spiritually and physically, as whole. A Kantian who does not identify with binary genders may feel internal tension when presented with the opportunity to tell a white a lie, a lie that would only benefit them. They would feel obligated to abide by the Kantian principles which preclude one from lying, even if there are no ramifications.

Obligations can also exist between persons. Let us take, for example, the relationship between parents and their progeny. When two persons beget a child a unique bond is immediately created. A bond that is unique because of the admittedly obvious fact that no other person but your mother can be your mother, and no other person but your father can be your father. Since each parent is partially responsible for the creation of a child, each parent has a set of responsibilities attendant to that child. These responsibilities, or obligations, include but are not limited to providing a loving home for a child, ensuring that the child is allowed to develop both socially and intellectually, and protecting the child from emotional and bodily harm. While

these responsibilities change as a child ages, the basis for the obligation remains the same. Because the nature of the parents vis-à-vis their children is necessarily unalterable (since, indeed, one's parents will always be one's parents), the *foundation* for the obligation, too, remains unaltered.

An obligatory relationship is also seen between a teacher and her students. Much like parents and their children, teachers intrinsically owe something, as it were, to their students. It is in the nature of the teacher that we “find” the obligation to educate and provide for a social and intellectually developmental environment for students. But, a bit more can be said about the obligatory relationship between teachers and students. Coupled with the intrinsic commitments teachers have *qua* teachers, their obligations to students are augmented by the level of respect that develops reciprocally between teachers and students. This will require a bit of clarification. Because teachers provide an environment which fosters the personal growth of students, assuming a teacher is, in fact, a good teacher, she is accorded a level of respect on the part of her students. Conversely, as individuals who have some level of autonomy despite their age, and who bring different cultural perspectives to the classroom, the students accord respect on the part of the teacher – influencing her obligation to use pedagogical methods which provide for the aforementioned, positive environment. The obligatory relationship is, in a sense, dialectical – both parties play a role in its existence.

While various kinds of obligations play a role in our day-to-day activities, it is not always so clear from where these obligations originally arise; especially in the case of person-to-person obligations. One might argue that the authority of either a text or a person, the power they have over your social activities, is what obliges you to assent to their decrees. One might, conversely,



argue that voluntarily agreeing to treat some text or figure as authoritative is what bounds us to that entity's decrees. This kind of argument is often seen in political and legal philosophy. Further, one might argue that obligations are produced by the very *nature* of a certain relationship, and that the kind of relationship between two entities shapes the kinds of obligations each party has. We see this in both the parent-to-child example and the teach-to-student example.

In this project, I will focus on that last articulation of obligation. I will indeed focus on how the kind of relationship between two parties tells us, as it were, something about the obligations each party has to the other. In order to elucidate this kind of obligation, I will attempt to find a foundation for political obligation in particular. Now, if one were to ask whether there is at all a foundation for obligation one could respond, with a cool facetiousness reminiscent of W. V. O. Quine in his famous essay *On What There Is*, "yes, of course."<sup>1</sup> However, as Quine too realized, questions of this kind require a lot of unpacking. Before attempting to answer this question, there is a separate, though related question that must be addressed: Is finding a foundation for political obligation at all important?

Throughout the history of philosophy there have been a number of debates that seem nigh impossible to resolve. For example, the free will debate has wracked the brains of philosophers tracing back to the medieval and modern western periods of philosophy up until the present day. Though different views have been added to the debate, it arguably has not made much progress since its inception. Similarly, the debate between proponents of liberal democracy – the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> "A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: 'What is there?' It can be answered, moreover, in a word – everything – and everyone will accept this answer as true." W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is," 1.

democracy which favors a state that champions individual liberties and rights – and those of social democracy – the kind of democracy which favors the “common good” of its constituents – is one that has gone on for decades and doesn’t appear to be in a place where it can be settled.. If we are to make progress in philosophy broadly and in political philosophy specifically, we must have some way of grappling with these seemingly incommensurable debates. This project will show how articulating a foundation for political obligation does the job of grappling with incommensurability.

Before moving any further, I should note that I use political obligation in an idiosyncratic manner. Typically, when philosophers speak of political obligation they mean a person’s obligation to abide by the dictates of a political state. This may come in the form of obeying certain laws or voting during times of an election (if we are talking about a democratic state). Political obligation, for me, means something a bit different, or at least I will be using it in a different manner throughout this project. In this project, political obligation means our obligation to orient a political state in a certain way, to construct it in such a way that it favors certain principles that can be instantiated through policy. When applied to concrete circumstances, political obligation means our obligation to “move” our political state in a certain direction, to choose leaders who will actively abide by certain maxims. I will try to show that given certain intrinsic qualities had by all persons, and the relationship between persons, we are obligated to design political states in a certain manner.

In order to wade through this admittedly abstract idea, I will turn my attention in Chapter One to the aforementioned liberal democracy-social democracy debate. In it I will show how “liberal democracy” and “social democracy”, as concepts, have many of the same core

principles. It is indeed that similarity between principles that leads to issues of incommensurability, of which state we ought to favor. The point of departure between liberal democracy and social democracy, as I will show, lies in the competing conceptions they have over the “self.” In other words, the point of departure between liberal democracy and social democracy lies in a clash over the *nature* of persons, specifically political persons; it is a clash over what is known to some as “political ontology.”

Chapter Two will, therefore, involve an explanation of what “political persons” and “political selves” are and how they relate to political obligation. To do so, I will appraise of the contemporary literature regarding political ontology. This literature largely centers on the so-called liberalism-communitarianism debate. Because the liberalism-communitarianism debate despite its relative youth is expansive, I will focus on the work of a number of key figures such as John Rawls, Alasdair MacIntyre, Ronald Dworkin, and Will Kymlicka. In this chapter I intend to show that the communitarian view of the political self, when it comes to the relation between the political self and political obligation, is more normatively robust and conceptually accurate conception of the self.

Though, as Chapter Two will show, the communitarian model is preferable to the liberal model, the manner in which it is articulated by figures such as Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Alasdair MacIntyre is still lacking. Indeed, the articulation provided by those figures leaves one in want for a stronger relationship between political obligation and the political self. For that reason, I will turn my attention to a view of Karl Marx’s philosophy known as Ethical Marxism. In Chapter Three, I will argue that Ethical Marxism provides us, albeit implicitly, with a conception of the political self that is closely aligned to the communitarian view, yet reminiscent

of notions expressed by liberals. In a sense, Marx's view provides us with a third-way between liberalism and communitarianism. Not only does Marx's view allow us to take the best of both worlds, as it were, it also, more importantly, expresses the conception of the political self which is dense enough to ground political obligation.

Chapter Four, the conclusory chapter of this project, will bring this project to its close by returning to the debate of Chapter One – liberal democracy vs. social democracy. With the articulation of the political self developed through Marx and the notion of obligation concomitant to it, some progress can be made in the liberal democracy-social democracy debate. Though I will remain modest, insofar as I will not provide a full account of just what political state one is obligated to manifest, I hope to provide some guidelines as to what kind of state is the proper option. In this chapter, I will articulate two important ideas: a notion of “natural goods” and an idea of “self-development”.

## **Chapter One: Unpacking Liberal Democracy and Social Democracy**

Finding a workable conception of liberal democracy is not an easy task due to its polysemous nature; it has meant different things, to different people, at different times. Further, liberal democracy is, at least to a certain extent, a blend of two different ideas – namely liberalism and democracy and both have had different meanings at different times. The same can be said about social democracy. While a younger form of democracy, social democracy has also referred to different ideas, to different people, at different times. Though the task of finding workable conceptions of liberal democracy and social democracy is no simple feat, doing so will allow me to frame my research question in such a way that I can subsequently locate a foundation for political obligation. Since my space is limited and since the literature regarding liberal democracy and social democracy is vast, my conceptions of liberal democracy and social democracy may be, to some, unsatisfying. Nevertheless, I think that by the end of this chapter, we will have workable conceptions of liberal democracy and social democracy. Conceptions that can be later used to move us, so to speak, to a discussion of the political self.

### **Liberal Democracy versus Liberal Democracy?**

As I noted above, one of the essential issues with using liberal democracy to frame a debate is its lack of a consistent definition. Liberalism, for example, is used to refer to, on one hand, the classical liberalism of Hobbes and Locke, and, on the other, the philosophical liberalism, as Michael Freeden terms it, of John Rawls.<sup>2</sup> Though both are considered liberal

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theories*, 142.

thinkers, Hobbes explicitly disfavors a democratic state in favor of monarchical authoritarianism, while Rawls designs his liberal principles to fit with “modern constitutional democracies.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, liberalism is used to refer to the libertarianism of Hayek and Nozick, which favor a minimal state, while simultaneously referring to the reformist liberalism of T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse.

Similar to liberalism, though not as widely defined, democracy comes in a number of different forms.<sup>4</sup> When talking about democracy one can, for instance, mean the classic forms of direct democracy present in ancient Athens, or the representative form of democracy characteristic of the United States. As Barry Holden explains, the difficulty of defining democracy oftentimes stems from “a failure to recognize the distinction between *defining characteristics* and *necessary conditions*.”<sup>5</sup> Many, indeed, point to political systems such as the Athenian democracy and claim that a definition of democracy must encompass all of its characteristics, instead of first addressing the conceptual background of democracy and then applying it to disparate political states. Fortunately for this project, I am using liberalism in conjunction with democracy, i.e., liberal democracy, which mitigates many of the definitional issues. Liberal democracy still, however, suffers from some definitional issues that must be addressed.

Though many political theorists have offered disparate conceptions of liberal democracy,

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Leviathan* for the Hobbesian conception of a state and “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *inter alia*, for Rawls’s views on the political state.

<sup>4</sup> See: David Held, *Models of Democracy*.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, 3.

I take the articulations provided by C.B. MacPherson and David Held to be the best.<sup>6</sup> Held, in *Models of Democracy*, divides liberal democracy into two distinct camps – protective democracy and developmental democracy – and though MacPherson was not influenced by Held, he utilizes similar terminology.<sup>7</sup> As MacPherson notes in *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, protective democracy and developmental democracy are conceptions of liberal democracy which are at odds with each other.<sup>8</sup>

Protective democracy places “a high value on individual freedom of choice, not only as between political parties but also as between different uses of one’s income, of one’s capital, and one’s skill and energy.”<sup>9</sup> Since such a high value is placed on the individual’s freedom of choice and free use of one’s abilities, political states are seen as solely playing a protective role over one’s freedoms. Liberal democrats who favor protective democracy indeed “think it is desirable that the power and authority of the government should be limited, typically by subjugating the government to regulation by such devices as a written constitution and/or bill of rights.”<sup>10</sup> Protective democracy is the kind of liberal democracy favored by classical theorists ranging from Jeremy Bentham and James Mill to John Locke.

I should note that there is a distinct difference in what Bentham and Mill saw as necessary to protect when compared to that which Locke saw as necessary to protect. For Bentham and Mill, our intrinsic desire to maximize our utility, to “infinitely appropriate” as

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<sup>6</sup> See: Barry Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*; C.B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* and *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*; David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Frank Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*, and Prakash Sarangi, *Liberal Theories of State: Contemporary Perspectives*.

<sup>7</sup> Held, *Models of Democracy*, 5; MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*.

<sup>8</sup> These terms are not used in the essays within this book, but there is no doubt the versions of liberal democracy articulated fall under these two categories.

<sup>9</sup> MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, 12.

MacPherson phrases it, implied that a proper state, since it is the product of utility maximizers contracting among themselves, should protect such utility maximization. In a Benthamite protective democracy, “there is ... no idea that it [the protective democracy] could be a morally transformative force ... it is nothing but a logical requirement for the governance of inherently self-interested conflicting individuals who are assumed to be infinite desirers of their own private benefits.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Locke viewed liberal democracies as protective over our natural rights – chiefly the right to property. Though Locke did not view persons in a state of nature, a state wherein there is no central government, as brutish and violently self-interested as Hobbes did, he did contend that persons are unable to self-regulate property relations and meaningfully protect their property. As such, persons, in a sense, leave the state of nature and design a democracy whose basic function is to ensure that property relations, along with our other rights, are protected to the fullest extent.

Protective democracy is in stark contrast to developmental democracy, which treats liberal democracy as playing an integral moral role in our lives. The developmental view of democracy is largely attributable to John Stuart Mill, though one finds similar views on democracy in T. H. Green and, to a certain degree, L. T. Hobhouse.<sup>12</sup> Under a developmental democracy, the federal government of a political state is treated as more than a protective, administrative body. The federal government in a developmental democracy has an express interest in promoting the moral education and moral development of its denizens. For the liberal democrat who favors developmental democracy, a political state is seen a vehicle by which

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<sup>11</sup> MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> See: “New Liberal Successions: The Modernization of an Ideology” in Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory* and John Seaman, “L. T. Hobhouse and the Theory of “Social Liberalism” for more on Green and Hobhouse respectively.



persons may come to fully appreciate and enjoy their creative capacities. As Held notes in reference to Mill, “liberal democratic or representative government was important for him [Mill], not just because it established boundaries for the pursuit of individual satisfaction, but because it was an important aspect of the free development of individuality.”<sup>13</sup> Persons in a developmental democracy are explicitly seen as “an enjoyer and exorter of [their] uniquely human attributes or capacities”, instead of as beings who care only for the maximization of personal utility.<sup>14</sup> And the state, as a product of the wishes of individuals – whether one views a social contract as essential for the creation of a state or otherwise – must ensure that those human attributes or capacities are realizable.

Though developmental democracy is distinct from protective democracy, developmental democracies are still expect to protect certain rights and liberties. J.S. Mill, for example, famously articulated his Harm Principle – one can pursue one’s ends and desires without any interference by the state so long as those ends and desires do not harm others – within the framework of a democratic state. So, while a federal government should, according to a developmental democrat, encourage the development of one’s creative capacity, it must do so while simultaneously respecting and protecting the individual rights and liberties of its constituency. The respect that the federal government must have for individual rights and liberties is precisely why the federal government, even under a model of liberal democracy which cares for moral education, cannot force its denizens to adhere to a particular moral framework, a particular conception of the good. Instead, the federal government in a

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<sup>13</sup> Held, *Models of Democracy*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, 24.

development democracy provides political avenues – such as open voting and the opportunity for persons to involve themselves in local administration – by which persons can develop their moral attitudes. The development of one’s creative capacities is, indeed, an individual endeavor; a developmental democracy must ensure that that remains the case.

Even though liberal democracy is separable into two distinct conceptions, it does contain a set of core principles. Before proceeding to those principles, however, I will first address how liberal democracy relates to classical forms of capitalism. Doing so sets the stage for contrasting social democracy and liberal democracy; setting that metaphorical stage is necessary for factoring political ontology into this project.

## **Liberalism and Capitalism**

Even though capitalism no longer refers solely to the *laissez-faire* fiscal policies which arouse with the fall of feudalism and mercantilism, addressing some of the core facets of capitalism still does well to highlight features of liberal democracy.<sup>15</sup> My hope in discussing liberal democracy through the lens of capitalism is to further animate the core principles of liberal democracy that will be the focus of the following section. Discussing liberal democracy through the lens of capitalism also aids in showing both how and why social democracy arose in the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Western Capitalism and State Socialism* Howard Davis and Richard Scase describe both the historical progression and conceptual similarities of western capitalism and eastern-European, state socialism. They do so in order to explain the effects of industrialization and, as

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<sup>15</sup> Welfare capitalism is, for example, a form of capitalism not wed to *laissez-faire* ideas. See: David Stoesz, “Welfare Capitalism: A New Approach to Poverty Policy.”

they call it, post-industrialization on the United States and European countries. For them, two features of capitalism and socialism are expressive of each one's nature: their modes of production and the purpose of production.

To describe the mode and purpose of production with capitalism, Davis and Scase examine the factory system which arose in Europe and the United States during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The essential goal of factories during this time-period was the maximization of profit and they were oriented fully around that end. By dividing the labor required to produce commodities, and by ensuring rigid time schedules for employees, employers were able to “exercise close control over workers to ensure they work efficiently and conscientiously.”<sup>16</sup> Further, factory owners were able to ensure that profits were maximized because of the virtually unfettered power they had over regulatory methods within their firms. Indeed, the labor regulations we currently take for granted, such as the forty-hour work week and the prohibition of child labor, were not adopted until the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and even then factory owners retained a wealth of regulatory authority.<sup>17</sup>

The reason why such labor relations and conditions were justified at the time, and are still to a degree justified today, is because of the purpose of production which was thought to be common among all wage-laborers and capital-holders – one's economic self-interest. As Davis and Scase put it, “the hierarchical nature of power relationships within enterprise was necessary for the rational pursuit of profit. This functioned to integrate the activities of individuals who, despite the various positions of superordination, shared the *common goal of economic self-*

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Davis and Richard Scase, *Western Capitalism and State Socialism*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> The Fair Labor Standards Acts, which limited work weeks to forty hours and prohibited certain forms of child labor, was passed in 1938. See <http://www.aflcio.org/About/Our-History/Labor-History-Timeline> and <http://www.dol.gov/whd/childlabor.htm>.

*interest*” (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup> Factories are oriented around the pursuit of profit because profit, under this view of capitalism, is what primarily motivates factory owners and employees. It was our supposed desire to decide which employment opportunities better maximized our income that undergirded the laissez-faire approach to the Contract Clause in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Supreme Court jurisprudence which, indeed, helped maintain the factory organization seen during the time period.<sup>19</sup>

A comparable account of capitalism is outlined by Michael Luntley in *The Meaning of Socialism*. According to Luntley, when the state remains neutral to what ends individuals ought to pursue, when it allows its constituency to decide what will be in their own best interest, the state, albeit implicitly, commits itself to “a free market in conceptions of the good.”<sup>20</sup> Luntley terms this free market of goods an “economism about values.”<sup>21</sup> The definitions of capitalism and capitalists provided in *The Meaning of Socialism* capture the same sense of liberal democracy as the articulations above, but they do come with a bit of theoretical baggage. For instance, Luntley defines capitalistic societies in two ways: (1) “a capitalist society is one in which the economy is primarily arranged for the benefit of Capital,” and (2) “a capitalist society one in which the economy is primarily arranged for the benefit of capitalists.”<sup>22</sup> To Luntley, (1) focuses on the structure of the capitalist state, so the mode of production, instead of on the purpose of production. Since “the benefit of capitalists” means the benefit of those who have

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<sup>18</sup> Davis and Scase, *Western Capitalism and State Socialism*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> To cite Justice Rufus Wheeler Peckham’s majority opinion in *Lochner v. New York* (1905): “The act is not, within any fair meaning of the term, a health law, but is an illegal interference with the rights of individuals, both employers and employees, to make contracts regarding labor upon such terms as they may think best, or which they may agree upon with the other parties to such contracts.”

<sup>20</sup> Michael Luntley, *The Meaning of Socialism*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

ownership over capital, Luntley believes that (2) – which unlike (1) relies on the purpose of production – is an anachronistic understanding of capitalism, better suited for the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

The two definitions can be, in a sense, blended together despite Luntley not seeing this as a possibility. Truly, the goal of capitalism is the maximization of profit and the accumulation of wealth. So the definition used by Luntley throughout the rest of the text is a proper fit. However, the definition as provided does not account for *whose* profit is supposedly maximized. This is where a reformulation and then combination of definition (2) comes into play. In definition (2) Luntley attributes the benefit of Capital, albeit implicitly, to the benefits of capital-owners. Understandably, the idea of capital-owners doesn't fully map onto the manner in which individuals contemporarily engage with the market because, indeed, one need not own capital in order to operate within a capitalist system. If the definition of capitalism is broadened to incorporate profit-seekers instead of only those who own capital, a much more useful, general definition follows as a result. We are left with a definition of capitalistic states as states in which the economy is primarily organized for the benefit of profit-seekers. Defining capitalism in this way encapsulates the idea of the state as neutral to *all* competing interests, instead of showing a bias towards the interests of capital-owners.

Liberal democracy when mapped onto capitalism underscores two points. First, individuals are out, though not necessarily maliciously, for their own self-interest (in this context economic self-interest), because it is the individual who knows what is good for herself.

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<sup>23</sup> “(2) personifies these requirements in the interest of a particular class of people, those who own capital. This personification may have mattered if the ownership of capital still fitted the classical pattern of nineteenth-century capitalism.” Ibid, 51.

Secondly, it underscores the idea that political states ought to remain neutral in terms of competing interests and should allow individuals to foster the good life in a way they see fit.

### **The Kernel of Liberal Democracy**

At this juncture, we can now outline the core principles of liberal democracy since we have broken liberal democracy down to its two major variants – protective democracy and developmental democracy – and illuminated some initial basic principles by analyzing capitalism. The principles which together form the kernel of liberal democracy are: equality, liberty, and democracy. I will outline each in turn.

Unlike liberty and democracy, equality, as a core feature of liberal democracy, is often excluded from the list of core concepts. Cunningham, though not one to exclude equality, notes how proponents of liberal democracy-through-capitalism see equality as implying equality of wages or substantive equality of opportunity, and thus burdensome on not only the economy, but on the notion of liberty.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, much like the other terms central to this chapter – namely “liberalism” and “democracy” – “equality” has referred to different things, to different people, at different times. Barry Holden, in *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, recognizes the polysemous nature of “equality” and offers a conception which I take to be correct. He writes, “equality has to do with ‘sameness’ and its proper recognition: things (persons, groups or whatever) are equal if they are the same in important respects and the principle of equality demands that things which are the same in relevant important respects ought to be treated equally, i.e. in relation to those respects in which they are the same, they ought to be treated the same way.”<sup>25</sup> So when it comes

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<sup>24</sup> Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, 15.

to, say, access to democratic institutions such as voting polls, all persons in the United States should have the same opportunity for access. Opportunity for access must be equal because United States citizens are the same in important respects. All United States citizens, for example, recognize the integral role the Statute of Liberty plays in our national identity, they recognize the unfortunate history of slavery and racism that haunts the United States' history, and they recognize the rich cultural diversity currently present in the United States. Because United States citizens are identical in these regards, they ought to be treated equally in regards to access to the United States' democratic institutions. Now, this is not to say that the barriers which may prevent access ought to be equalized; that is a separate question. Rather, equality of access means that access, *per se*, must be equal.

The notion of equality elucidated above is central to liberal democracy. Liberal democracy champions the power persons have in determining how they are treated by the government, and the fact that said power is shared between persons. Implicit in this explanation of liberal democracy is the idea that the "power of the people" is a power shared *equally* between the people.

Along with equality, liberty is central to liberal democracy. Unlike equality, liberty's status as a central concept of liberal democracy typically is not controversial. Though it might be articulated differently by disparate liberal theorists, it has nevertheless retained its place as a central idea. Michael Freeden, for instance, describes J. S. Mill's conception of liberty as having three essential components. Mill's notion of liberty, according to Freeden: (1) is attached to the development of individuality, (2) is primarily liberty of expression and action that requires protection against the behavior of other individuals, and (3) is expressed by the individual's

ability to pursue their virtues in their own ways.<sup>26</sup> One might go so far as to regard liberty as the *most* important facet of liberal democracy. Liberty concerns the role individuals play in determining what ends are worth pursuing. Since only we know what is truly good or bad for us, only we should determine what ends we ought to pursue. Liberty, indeed, entails that individuals ought to be left “free to shape their lives according to their own notions.”<sup>27</sup>

As noted above, people in a liberal democracy have ultimate authority over how the government operates. The reason *why* people in liberal democracy have that authority is because of epistemic access each person has individually in knowing what is good for them. Both liberty and equality are protected by the last component of liberal democracy – democracy.

In *Democratic Theory and Socialism*, Frank Cunningham neatly captures the idea of democracy. He remarks that, “democracy as a liberal-democratic value means that those affected by some decision directly or indirectly take part in making it.”<sup>28</sup> Democracy is a government “of the people, by the people” for the people” as Abraham Lincoln once famously said. It is, as Holden notes, “a political system in which the whole people, positively or negatively, make, and are entitled to make, the basic determining decisions on important matters of public policy.”<sup>29</sup> Democracy is central to liberal democracy because is it the vehicle by which liberal values, that of liberty and equality, are expressed, codified, and recognized.

Equality, liberty, and democracy, when blended together, produce the idea of a liberal

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<sup>26</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Beiner, “What Liberalism Means,” 12.

<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, 5.



democratic state. In the following I section I will address the social democratic response to the values of liberalism as well as the economic conditions liberal democracy, supposedly, created.

### **Social Democracy versus Communism**

An initial difficulty that arises from explaining social democracy is the claim that it is no more than another, less controversy-inducing name for communism. Therefore, it is imperative that an analysis of socialism begins with differentiating it from communism.<sup>30</sup>

Karl Kautsky's work on social democracy and communism does well to underscore the important differences between the two political systems. Before outlining the differences he provides, I will admit that his appraisal of the two is not in terms of their theoretical background. For Kautsky, the difference lies, instead, in the socialist principles largely developed by Marx and the political practices of the Soviet Union. So, even though distinguishing social democracy from communism is largely a terminological matter, immediately clarifying what I mean by social democracy makes a subsequent discussion of social democracy *contra* liberal democracy clearer.

As noted, "social democracy" for Kautsky refers to the kind of political state developed in the writings of Marx and Engels, while communism refers to "the theory and practice of the social and political system of the Soviet Union."<sup>31</sup> Since the terms social democracy and communism have regrettably been used interchangeably since 1848, Kautsky believes that it is necessary to provide a historical account of social democracy in order to show why it and

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<sup>30</sup> Given the complex nature of both socialism and communism (if there is a difference) one could write volumes on their supposed similarities and differences. I will do my best to differentiate them *solely* for the sake of further analysis.

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Hook, "Introduction" to Karl Kautsky's *Social Democracy versus Communism*, 7. Textual evidence from the rest of the book supports the belief that Kautsky would agree to Hook's definitions.

communism are mutually exclusive. To do so he examines the progression of social democracy from post-war Russia up to the rise of Lenin and Stalin after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Though Kautsky does not phrase it this way, the differences he saw in social democracy and communism can be thought of in way which resembles my analysis of capitalism; the difference between social democracy and communism is in the modes of production and purpose of production.

Under communism, the state does not merely play a significant role in the planning and management of the economy – the state is the *sole* actor in fiscal planning and management. Furthermore, the political climate under communism is inhospitable to any notion of freedom and democracy. As Kautsky notes, “...the sober truth is that Russia is ruled by a single minority political party which is in turn ruthlessly controlled by its Secretariat. There is absolutely no freedom of speech, press or assembly for any dissenters. Strikes are punishable by death.”<sup>32</sup> The latter portion of that quote is especially relevant to the difference between communism and social democracy. With communism, only superficial regard is given to the working class; figures such as Lenin and Stalin through the use of propaganda and anti-capitalistic sentiment present themselves as champions of the working class. This, however, could not be further from the truth. Lenin and Stalin alike used the working class as no more than a means to achieve political power. This is precisely why, as Kautsky points out, the Bolsheviks opposed the Social Revolutionists and Mensheviks following the revolution. To Lenin, those who opposed his dictatorial power were “class enemies, counter-revolutionists, miserable traitors, more dangerous

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<sup>32</sup> K. Kautsky, *Social Democracy versus Communism*, 15.

and corrupting than direct class enemies [capitalists].”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the other social democrats were “cowardly deserters ... fit to be hung.”<sup>34</sup> For communism – or what might be more properly called state capitalism – the means of production were determined solely by the “Red Czar” and the purpose of that production was accumulation of political power for the “Red Czar.”<sup>35</sup>

Social democracy is in stark contrast to the state of affairs resulting from communism. Though a social democratic state is not a neutral actor with respect to the ends of the constituency – so it is still distinct from liberal democracy – the state would not act with the dictatorial force of a communist state. When initially describing socialism Michael Luntley uses an analogy that highlights the fact that socialism is inherently democratic (hence the title social democracy), while communism is inherently totalitarian. The analogy is presented as follows:

The scientific deference to the authority of truth does not amount to obsequiousness to some petrified set of eternal verities, nor to the command of a set of high priests of science. That would be the very antithesis of deference to the authority of truth. Deferring to the authority of truth requires a certain attitude, a certain methodology comprising a commitment to experimentation, repeatability of tests and objective measurement of results before the benchmark of our common experience. These may be tall ideals to live up to, but it is such methodological requirements that are implicated in bowing to the authority of truth. The same applies in bowing to the authority of the good.

The notion of the good life is the notion of the truth about what constitutes good and evils for human beings. And, just as in the scientific analogy, *so deference to the authority of the good, far from being a start on the slippery slope to totalitarianism, is the best guard we have against such terrors.*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>35</sup> Much like Kautsky, Erich Fromm also pejoratively refers to the Soviet Union as one which embodies state capitalism. “While the truth is that the Soviet Union is a system of a conservative state capitalism and *not* the realization of Marxist socialism.” Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, vii.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Luntley, *The Meaning of Socialism*, 13 (emphasis added).

Unlike communism, social democracy uses the democratic process that is implicit in the scientific method in to determine what ends ought to be chosen and what good may be good for all. Under the Red Czar, to continue the analogy, “... there is only one form of science – that officially authorized by the government. He who entertains scientific views other than those prescribed officially is thrown out to starve and must, indeed, consider himself fortunate if he is not exiled or shot.”<sup>37</sup>

The means and purpose of production are worth bringing up once more to fully elucidate how social democracy differs from communism. With social democracy, the means of production are only partially determined by the state. Individuals ought to be able to engage freely in the market; they ought to be able to engage freely in forming contractual relationships, and should be able, at least to a certain degree, to do with their earnings what they wish. But all of these interests are mitigated by the greater good of the constituency as a whole. If a contractual relationship is formed, say to create a monopoly over the car industry, a social democratic state has the power to intervene and prevent that contract from happening.<sup>38</sup>

### **Social Democracy: A Reaction and a Transition**

A comparison between social democracy and communism, while illuminating, only tells us part of social democracy’s story, as it were. The rest of the story is “told” by the history of social democracy vis-à-vis liberal democracy. Indeed, social democracy arose as a reaction *to* liberal democracy and attempted to transition away *from* liberal democracy. Liberal democracy

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<sup>37</sup> Otto Bauer; Karl Kautsky, *Social Democracy vs Communism*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> The best example of this is the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. While championing principles of a free market, it simultaneously underscores the supremacy the greater good, the good of all those who wish to trade, over the freedom of contract. For more information of the Sherman Antitrust Act see: <https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/competition-guidance/guide-antitrust-laws/antitrust-laws>.

as a kind of democracy is not inseparable from classical capitalism, but when it reached the prominence it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century it did so under the auspice of laissez-faire economics. The high regard accorded to individuals *qua* individuals was expressed by economic practices and policies such as the freedom of contract and reduction of state authority.

By limiting the state's power and allowing persons to freely engage in contractual relationships, persons would be able to, presumably, enjoy gains in personal wealth unimaginable in the feudal system. And this was indeed the case at the onset of liberal democracy's rise. But, as theorists from all across the Continent soon noticed, liberal democracy, and as a byproduct classical capitalism, did not produce the kind of conditions promised by its proponents. John R. Rodman in his introduction to *The Political Theory of T. H. Green* sums up the liberal democratic condition quite poignantly; I will quote him at length:

The optimistic assumption that the uninhibited pursuit of individual profit automatically worked out to the common good of all had come up against the hard facts of life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The appalling facts about the long hours and low wages, the insecure, unhealthy, and degrading conditions of work the chronic drunkenness in which relief from misery was sought, and the sordid living conditions that had to be suffered by the men, women, and children of the urban proletariat had been documented in the evidence gathered by such bodies as the Sadler Committee as early as 1832. The irony was that these conditions were the product of the same Industrial Revolution that created unprecedented wealth. And even more savage irony lay in the fact that *this system of dependence and oppression had grown up under the aegis of the Liberal ideal of freedom*, articulated in such slogans as 'free competition', 'freedom of contract', and 'freedom from state interference'.<sup>39</sup>

Social democracy arose largely in Germany and France as a response to perceived failings of liberal democracy. Political parties such as the SPD in Germany and organizations 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Internationals (also in Germany) all developed around the idea that we, as persons who

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<sup>39</sup> John R. Rodman, "Introduction" in T. H. Green, *The Political Theory of T.H. Green*, 5.

now enjoy the benefits of technology, can do better than this – we can do better than allowing the obscene conditions to persist. As such, social democracy developed as a form of government not merely opposed to peripheral aspects of liberal democracy – it was explicitly opposed. As Sheri Berman remarks, “ultimately, the practical consequences of unfettered capitalism – dramatic inequalities, social dislocation, and atomization – generated a backlash against liberalism and a search for ideological alternatives.”<sup>40</sup> And as Freedman similarly notes, “the origins of socialism may be seen in its dual response to the rise of industrial capitalism and to the unfair and contrived hierarchies which the new economic order adopted, imposed, or further promoted.”<sup>41</sup> Despite the scathing criticisms levied against liberal democracy by the social democrats of Germany and France, social democracy from a conceptual standpoint is not far from liberal democracy. In the following section I will outline the conceptual kernel of social democracy vis-à-vis liberal democracy.

### **The Kernel of Social Democracy**

Three fundamental concepts when combined make up social democracy: equality, fraternity, and democracy. I will outline each as they relate to liberal democracy’s core ideas, in continuation of the idea that social democracy developed as a reaction to and departure from liberal democracy.

The definition of equality provided by Barry Holden, that equality “has to do with ‘sameness’ and its proper recognition, is general enough to fit under the social democratic framework. Equality under a social democracy differs, however, in what counts as *truly* equal as

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<sup>40</sup> Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 430.

opposed to only nominally equal. Reusing the idea of equal opportunity of access to democratic institutions clarifies the distinction. In the section on liberal democracy's core values, I noted that to be equal for a liberal is to have the same opportunity of access to institutions such as voting polls and the like. Equality for social democrats in relation to democratic institutions means much more than that basic level of equality. For social democrats, there are often subtle aspects of the voting process that makes access to the polls, and as such representation in the state and federal government, drastically *unequal*. A social democrat might note the fact that, say, voting locations are disproportionately in middle to upper class neighborhoods, and that access to the facilities by lower-income families is, as a result, virtually precluded. A social democrat might further note that access to polls *per se* doesn't account for the voting habits of disparate social groups. Indeed, those who are not fortunate enough to spend their free time reading the latest political news, and those who were not raised in households wherein voting was championed, may simply neglect to participate in electoral politics. So, even though there may be no laws against certain social groups, the metaphorical cards are, nevertheless, stacked against them.

Contrary to the standpoint of theorists like Frank Cunningham, I do not think that social democratic equality need be identified with material inequality.<sup>42</sup> Though my articulation of social democratic equality does not necessarily exclude Cunningham's formulation, it captures the more basic idea of social democratic equality. It captures the idea that the equality promised by liberal democracy may be no more than an illusion, an illusion which tricks disadvantaged persons into thinking they are keeping up in race when they are, in fact, three laps behind.

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<sup>42</sup> "Material inequalities are, other things being equal, morally unjustified." Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*, 101.

Along with equality, social democracy, as a concept, is predicated on the idea of “fraternity.” Unlike liberal democracy’s core concept “liberty,” which places emphasis on the autonomy individuals have in determining their life-goals, “fraternity” emphasizes the inherently social character of all persons. Freedman highlights the importance of fraternity in noting that, “all socialisms subscribe to some notion of group membership, to a view which regards individuals as constituting fraternities or communities, even – in some cases – as defined by their membership of such groups.”<sup>43</sup> For social democrats, an individual’s aims take the backseat to the interests of the people as a whole. Social democrats underscore the importance of fraternity for two particular reasons. For one, the fact that we are social beings is something social democrats view as descriptively true. Though social democrats do not think that persons somehow lack individuality, they recognize that individuality “is conditioned and shaped by the sociability implied by group membership and gregariousness.”<sup>44</sup> And second, to social democrats the egotistical individuality implicit in liberal democracy is what lead to the deleterious effects of classical capitalism. Because the good of the people is held to a lower regard than that of the individual, policies which disadvantaged “the masses,” “the proletariat,” were, at least to a degree, justified at the time. Much like liberal freedom does not promise freedom for all persons, as G. A. Cohen once noted, liberty does not promise liberty for all persons. To social democrats, fraternity is the means to securing a way of life reminiscent of the days prior to the liberal democratic revolution; a way of life that championed, instead of disparaged, the importance of community.

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<sup>43</sup> Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 426.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



The final core facet of social democracy is, naturally, democracy. Much like liberal democracy, democracy is the vehicle by which socialist values are expressed. As Freedman (in typical fashion) aptly puts it, “the belief in community [fraternity] and in equality entails a genuine commitment to some version of democratic self-development, both because a community operates in one sense as an undifferentiated body and because, superimposed on that perspective, none of its members has a valid claim for superior status.”<sup>45</sup> Even though democracy is treated differently by different theorists, with some according it more respect than others, democracy figures strongly in a conception of social democracy. Democracy is, indeed, the means by which “the masses” gain political clout in a given political state. It is how the will of a few individuals can come together to form the “will of the people.” Without democracy, there simply is no “social democracy,” in neither name nor in concept.

### **Liberal Democracy or Social Democracy?**

At this juncture, we can turn now to how the liberal democracy-social democracy debate relates to the broader goal of this project now that the baggage of each has been sufficiently unpacked. In this project, I am concerned with the question of whether political obligation may be situated in political ontology. To address this question, I first wanted to look at the practical benefits of finding a foundation for political obligation in the first place. It is useful in a debate such as this one where it is not clear whether a liberal democracy is preferable to a social democracy. Some might argue that the financial benefits of liberal democracy entail that it is the preferable system. To this, a social democrat would retort that gains in GDP do not imply that

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 439.

the populous is happier, in a eudaimonic sense, nor that the people have made moral progress. Others on the opposing side might argue that social democracy as a more inclusive form of democracy is preferable. And to this, a liberal democrat would retort that any democratic progress made in social democracies was done at the cost of individual liberty.

There is indeed nothing *about* liberal democracy or social democracy that makes either necessarily preferable. In order to determine which system is better, we must make recourse to some other standard of judgment, such as an appeal to justice. I think I can offer something stronger than an appeal to justice. Throughout the rest of this project I will show how an appeal to political obligation, our obligation to create certain kinds of political states, can resolve this debate. Further, and more importantly, I will show how this debate points us in the direction of political obligation's foundation. If we look to the core principles of liberal democracy and social democracy we see that they are nearly identical except in one regard: liberal democracy has liberty as a predicate, while social democracy has fraternity as a predicate. On one hand, the individual *qua* individual is championed, and on the other, the good of the community writ large is held to the highest standard. In the following chapter I will show how this disagreement can be cashed out in terms of a disagreement over the nature, the ontology, of political persons. From there, we will be able to move to how political obligation is couched within political ontology.

## **Chapter Two: The Political Ontology behind Liberal Democracy and Social Democracy**

In the last chapter I showed, or at least attempted to show, how liberal democracy and social democracy, are fundamentally at odds with each other due to competing conceptions of political selves. Endeavoring to elucidate how the difference between liberal democracy and social democracy involves a difference in how the political self is understood is necessary for this project – which is to uncover a foundation for political obligation. If the project at hand is successful, political obligation will provide a guideline for determining whether a nascent political state ought to develop a liberal democracy, social democracy, or something in between, or whether a preexisting state ought to transition to one or the other. In order to ground political obligation, I will examine the philosophical frameworks which serve as a backdrop to liberal democracy and social democracy.

Political ontology, as noted above, will be used as a means of grounding political obligation. As the name implies, political ontology involves the being of politics – for my purposes specifically of political persons. While examining political actors in some sense presupposes the existence of a political state, it does not do so in a way that commits us to a narrow analysis of how persons in a specific political state interact with that state. We can indeed generalize my understanding of political ontology to be used in any political framework. By clarifying the conceptual milieu of political ontology we can show why political actors ought to forgo their current political situation for another. That is, in fact, what I intend to show at the close of this project. So, when inquiries are made into political ontology the goal is arrive at a

better understanding of what constitutes a political actor's nature. Two prevailing views on political ontology have arisen over the past three decades. Though the labels are not necessarily used (nor liked) by their adherents, the two views are typically labelled "liberalism" or "individualism" and "communitarianism." In the next section I turn to the first of the two major camps – liberalism – in order to elucidate the political ontology undergirding liberal democracy.

### **On Liberalism**

Political actors are political selves, but this term need not imply any classic commitments regarding the self, such as the commitments made by Descartes or Locke. Addressing a weighty criticism of political ontology analysis made by liberal theorists is a good way to begin explaining the liberal conception of the political self. The criticism is that liberal theory is a matter of politics, not ontology – so the arguments proffered against liberalism which rely on liberalism's supposed ontological issues fall on their face. This criticism is most notably advanced by John Rawls in defense of his seminal work *A Theory of Justice*.

Rawls attempts to move his view of justice as a matter of fairness away from any talk of ontology in his essay *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical*. He does so by starting with the scope of justice as fairness. For Rawls, justice as fairness is not meant to be a general theory of morals which is either true of all political states or should be sought by all political states. Instead, justice as fairness is specific to what "I [Rawls] have called the 'basic structure' of a modern constitutional democracy."<sup>46</sup> So, for Rawls, justice as fairness need not be exhaustive of all the moral principles requisite to produce a good society, nor need it encompass a holistic

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<sup>46</sup> John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," 188.

account of political institutions, political persons, or political practices. What he is concerned with is the very basics of a constitutional democracy and, as such, justice as fairness only covers the basics. The basicness of justice as fairness is, in fact, the very reason why Rawls can make the attractive, theoretically parsimonious claim that justice as fairness is only a matter of politics.

The claim that justice as fairness only need concern political matters is strengthened a by a political fact pointed out by Rawls. The fact is as follows:

The essential point is this: as a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide a publicly recognized basis for a conception of justice in a modern democratic state. The social and historical conditions of such a state have their origins in the Wars of Religion following the Reformation and the subsequent development of the principle of toleration, and in the growth of constitutional government and the institutions of large industrial market economies. These conditions profoundly affect the requirements of a workable conception of political justice: such a conception must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.<sup>47</sup>

What is Rawls is saying here is that justice as fairness must be able to account for the fact that the conceptions of the good we have as denizens of a political state are not common conceptions of the good. Though one might conceive of the good in way similar to their parents or siblings, the conception of the good will more likely than not be different, if not radically different, the conception of good by, say, a family on the opposite side of the political state. This difference stems from the disparate cultural upbringings persons within political state have. Indeed, the difference is the very reason why modern constitutional democracies, to use Rawls's phrase, are considered pluralistic.

Given these differences, Rawls posits two core principles which undergird justice as

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

fairness. The principles are (1) the equal liberty principle which maintains that “each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties” and (2) the difference principle which maintains that “social and economic inequalities ... must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality and ... they must be to greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.”<sup>48</sup> These principles when taken in conjunction captures those intuitive notions of equality and fairness which are encapsulated within modern constitutional democracy. They, further, inform us as to what political practices and political institutions within a modern constitutional democracy are conducive to justice as fairness. As such, they are the only principles Rawls sees as necessary to accept.

It may seem as though Rawls provided a compelling reason why ontology need not play a role in the analysis of justice. Since justice as fairness is specific to a particular kind of political state, constitutional modern democracies, and only implicates principles of justice that are particular to that political state, ontological commitments need not be admitted. That contention is fair, but the same cannot be said about Rawls’s articulation of political persons. In order to justify the above principles of justice, Rawls states the following, “What must be shown is that a certain arrangement of the basic structure, certain institutional forms, are more appropriate for realizing the values of liberty and equality *when citizens are conceived as such persons, that is (very briefly), as having the requisite powers of moral personality that enable them to participate in society viewed as a system of fair co-operation for mutual advantage.*”<sup>49</sup> So, a specific view of political persons has to be determined prior, indeed in an ontological sense, to the description of

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<sup>48</sup> Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” 191.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid (emphasis added).

the ‘basic structure’ of modern constitutional democracies. And though the presence of ontology is evident in the fact that ontological priority plays a role in Rawls’s theory, it also permeates deeper levels of Rawls’s theory.

I will mention from the get-go that Rawls seemingly denies the proposition that the nature of political actors is truly a topic which warrants the label political *ontology* – and this makes sense given the general trajectory of *Justice as Fairness*. Indeed, he notes that, “a conception of the person in a political view, for example, the conception of citizens as free and equal persons, need not involve, so I believe, questions of physical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine of the nature of the self.”<sup>50</sup> For Rawls, the political self who abides by justice as fairness is not some general articulation of selfhood independent of the stipulated constitutional modern democracy. Since it is not independent of the given political state, the political self, for Rawls, does not presuppose any commitments to ontological principles. Though the avoidance of ontology is understandable when speaking generally of fairness, the same sort of maneuver cannot be made when dealing with political actors. This is because of the implicitness of ontological commitments related to the political self.

When we deal with how political actors interact with each other and political states in terms of political philosophy, we deal with the matter of how political actors *are* – that is, how they behave, how they form beliefs about politics, how politics affect them on an personal and emotional level, and, perhaps most importantly, how they reason. The ontology involved in political philosophy need not implicate the questions of metaphysics which dominant contemporary analytic philosophy. Ontology, as I see it, in the realm of political philosophy is,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 194.

instead, about what general characteristics find expression in the behavior of political persons. Now, if Rawls heard this I think he would reference the fact that “citizens as free and equal persons” is contingent to constitutional modern democracies too. This might get him out of the woods, as it were, but for his reliance on the original position thought experiment to justify *why* free and equal persons prefer certain ethical principles.

In order to elucidate fully the reason why free and equal persons opt for both (1) everyone having equal access to the same body of rights and (2) the “difference principle,” Rawls asks the reader to consider a hypothetical state of nature situation. Under the Rawlsian state of nature, which he terms the original position, one is asked to consider a hypothetical situation in which you do not know your race, gender, socio-economic position, or age. Indeed, one is asked to step behind the so-called “veil of ignorance” and consider the kinds of a policy that would be beneficial to you regardless of your social position. Since you would have no way of knowing whether you are in a socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged position, Rawls argues that a rational person would favor both of the ethical principles mentioned above. This is because Rawls intuitively assumes that rational persons, when considering how different policies affect them, think in a self-interested manner. In fact, the strength of the original position actually stems from our self-interest. Our desire to ensure our own well-being causes us to choose principles that end up benefiting everyone and, as such, lay the foundation for a just – by way of fairness – society.

The fact that the original position relies on an abstraction away from concrete political facts in conjunction with the fact that it presupposes an aspect of human nature, namely our self-interest, is what underscores the implicit ontological commitments Rawls has despite his efforts.



Rawls, indeed, cannot move away from the presence of an assumption about the being of political actors – even if it as seemingly innocuous as the intuitive assumption that political actors are self-interested. Michael Freeden, in explaining the ideological history of American philosophical liberalism, arrives at a similar point. In *Ideologies and Political Theory* he remarks that, “the emphasis on rational and political autonomy privileges a distinct conception of the person.”<sup>51</sup> Though Rawls is not the only liberal theorist to be considered in relation to political ontology, the subtle view of the self received from Rawls is a good starting point.

At this juncture, we can now delineate the various dimensions of the self involved in the liberal perspective. The dimensions outlined are not meant to be exhaustive of all the various characteristics of the liberal political self; a full account of that would require a separate project dedicated solely to that. Only the dimensions relevant to establishing political obligation will be discussed. The first, and perhaps foremost, dimension is the importance of the individual good. For the liberal theorist it is intuitively true that all persons within a political state have individual, particularized conceptions of what ends they ought to pursue. Though parents might teach their children the roots of their children’s eventual moral framework, so even though children might start off with wanting to pursue the same ends, the growth and development of each child’s moral framework results in them having a disparate conception of the good. Even though conceptions of the good held by the persons of a political state might overlap, which they often do because of similarities in ethnicity, socio-economic position, and religion, both the ends in themselves and the manner in which the ends are pursued are unique to each person. To be clear, liberal theorists, at least in general, no longer contend that our conceptions of the good are

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, 238.

formed independently of other persons. David Gauthier, for instance, notes how, “The liberal individual has her own conception of the good. That conception need not rest on purely asocial motivation, for the liberal individual is not an asocial being.”<sup>52</sup> That point is similarly articulated in Will Kymlicka’s *Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality* wherein he points out that, “it is, of course, true that participation in shared linguistic and cultural practices is what enables individuals to make intelligent decisions about the good life.”<sup>53</sup>

From the importance of individual conceptions of the good, one can move to the second aspect of the liberal self – namely, the fact that political selves can only flourish within a political state that is neutral to individual conceptions of the good. The importance of a neutral state should be reminiscent of the explanation of capitalism provided in the previous chapter, and this is no mere coincidence. Indeed, the fact that the liberal self requires a neutral state underscores the fact that the liberal self serves as a philosophical background, or perhaps one can say a philosophical presupposition, to capitalism. Because of how particularized conceptions of the good are, liberal theorists are wont to assert that a common conception of the good, if it is at all even possible, could only be instantiated in an oppressive state. Rawls in *Justice as Fairness*, for instance, notes that agreement on basic questions of philosophy in general, let alone questions of ethics and morality, “cannot be obtained without the state’s infringement on basic liberties.”<sup>54</sup> Instead of dictating what ends the denizens of a political state ought to pursue, political states should foster a political community in which the constituents are able to engage with each other, and through their engagement decide on what ends to pursue. That political actors ought to

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<sup>52</sup> David Gauthier, “The Liberal Individual,” 154.

<sup>53</sup> Will Kymlicka, “Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality,” 175.

<sup>54</sup> Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” 194.

determine their conceptions of the good interpersonally and without state intervention is precisely why democratic institutions and democratic values, such as freedom of speech and assembly, are essential to the make-up of a liberal state. It is through our interactions within town halls meetings, public debates, and public demonstrations that we shape the moral frameworks we have. It is in these settings where we determine just what will, and will not, work for us in terms of developing an ethically good life.

The final aspect of the liberal self that is relevant to this project is what has become a tag line for the liberal perspective – the priority of the right over the good.<sup>55</sup> Whether intrinsic or only political, liberal theorists emphasize the rights which all persons possess, and which ought to be given credence over goods. The priority of the right over the good is a phrase Michael Sandel, when criticizing the liberal standpoint, has used to pejoratively characterize the relationship between rights and ends espoused by liberal theorists.<sup>56</sup> Though Sandel uses it pejoratively, I do not think that the phrase necessarily entails a negative connotation. Prioritizing the right over the good is a notion stemming from both the notion of individual goods and the importance of a neutral state. What it essentially means is since political actors are able to determine which goods are, in fact, good for them, since the political self is ontologically prior to the ends affirmed by it, political states should be bodies which guarantee certain rights, not determine certain ends. Indeed, what is of utmost importance is the *rights* political actors should have so that they may determine what ends ought to be pursued. The importance of rights augments the claim that democratic institutions and values are an integral component to the

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<sup>55</sup> The priority of the right over the good has also been referred to as the “primacy of rights.” See Charles Taylor’s essay “Atomism.”

<sup>56</sup> See: Michael Sandel’s “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self” and *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*.

liberal perspective. Democratic institutions and values, indeed, are not goods political states should merely provide to their denizens. Rather, the denizens of a political state, under the liberal view, have a *right* to those values such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion, and a *right* to access public forums of various kinds from which they (the denizens) may express their disparate and often competing values.

As I noted above, other facets of the liberal self might very well exist. However, when it comes to describing how political obligation stems from the self the three facets discussed above are all that need to be mentioned. Though the liberal conception of the self maps onto many of the intuitive ideas we have about political actors, democratic values, and political states, the communitarian conception of the self will be shown to be descriptively more accurate and more robust in terms of normativity. I turn to why that is the case in the next section.

## **On Communitarianism**

In the introduction to *Individualism and Communitarianism*, Shlomo Avineri concisely sums up the two points of contention communitarians have against liberal theorists. Since the two points of contention Avineri brings up will be used to show why the view I eventually adopt is preferable to both liberalism and communitarianism, I will quote Avineri at length:

Communitarianism is put forward in two spheres. One is methodological, the communitarians arguing that the premises of individualism [liberalism] such as the rational individual who chooses freely are wrong or false, and that the only way to understand human behavior is to refer to individuals in their social, cultural, and historical contexts. That is to say, in order to discuss individuals one must look first at their communities and their communal relationships. The second sphere is the normative one, communitarians asserting that the premises of individualism give rise to morally unsatisfactory consequences.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Shlomo Avineri, "Introduction" to *Individualism and Communitarianism*, 2.

Communitarians typically take issue with are the first and third dimensions of the liberal self. For the communitarians, Michael Sandel in particular, there is a common conception of the good held by all the members of a political community. This is not to say that the persons of a political community are mindless automatons without any individual conceptions of the good. Instead, a belief in the common conception of the good means that along with the individual conceptions we have, there are ends that we all find worth pursuing. A good way to think about how the good is commonly conceived is to think back to democratic institutions and values. As I noted earlier, the liberal perspective treats democratic institutions and values not as goods political states ought to embody, but as functions of a political state that are guaranteed by right. Democratic institutions and values ought to be guaranteed by right because, for the liberal theorist they only have instrumental value. Indeed, they are only valuable *because* they create a space, of sorts, for persons to engage with one another and determine, in a self-interested way, what goods are worth pursuing. This is precisely why the interaction between persons is talked about by liberal theorists in terms of “co-operation”; there are no goods that truly bind us together.<sup>58</sup>

The communitarian belief in a common conception of the good is in stark contrast to the instrumental, liberal view. For the communitarian, democratic institutions and values (to continue with that example) as part of the makeup of a political state are not produced because of a sense of co-operation for mutual advantage, but because of the communal ties we have due to

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<sup>58</sup> Rawls in “Justice as Fairness”: “The idea of social co-operation requires an idea of each participant’s rational advantage, or good. This idea of good specifies what those who are engaged in co-operation, whether individuals, families, or associations, or even nation-states, are trying to achieve, when the scheme is viewed from their own standpoint.” (196). Gauthier in “The Liberal Individual”: “Persons rationally recognize the constraints of morality as conditions of mutually beneficial co-operation.” (152).

family, socio-economic community, and cultural community. Indeed, within community-based political states, as opposed to purely co-operative political states, we “engage the identity as well as the interests of the participants, and so implicate its [community-based political states] members in a citizenship more thoroughgoing than the unencumbered self can know.”<sup>59</sup> So, for the communitarian democratic institutions and values play a much more substantial role in how we conceive of the good. Since democratic institutions and values have formed as a tradition among contemporary Western democracies – most distinctly Great Britain and the United States – the good that members of those political communities see in democratic principles is common to all of them. Even though paradigms about the efficacy of democratic institutions ebb and flow over time, and even though values such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are appreciated to different degrees, the members of Western democracies still see the life created by democracy as a life that is, or at least has the possibility to be, good for all of us. This is why even the most ardent dissenters to a status quo would still look to democratic processes in order to make their voice heard, as it were.

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the philosophers typically associated with the communitarian camp, stresses the importance of tradition in his 1981 book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre attempts to explain the degradation of moral discourse by tracing the history of how morals were talked about throughout the history of the West. He highlights philosophers and writers ranging from Max Weber and Jane Austin in order to underscore the fact that when we use terms like “good” and “virtue” and accord to certain individuals and political bodies moral authority, we always do so within a particular narrative

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<sup>59</sup> Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 19.

history. Further, and perhaps most importantly, when we appraise the actions of others and, as such, accord to their behavior some sort of normative status we do so by situating their behavior in some sort of narrative, some sort of tradition. As MacIntyre notes toward the latter portions of *After Virtue*:

...in successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer. It is now becoming clear that we render the actions of others intelligible in this way because action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.<sup>60</sup>

So, when we talk about the good in a political state, or even more generally speaking decide on what actions are generally permissible and generally impermissible, we do so by implicitly appraising the actions of other political actors with regard to how such actions were dealt with in the past. This is not to say that persons can have more general principles they abide by – such as a consistent respect for all opinions or an appreciation for external factors, such as socio-economic conditions, that may affect another’s behavior – when they normatively judge someone’s actions. But, importantly, even the reliance upon general ethical principles is, itself, embedded within a certain tradition. Indeed, a political culture which has fostered the belief that people may create for themselves certain ethical maxims would likely have persons who rely on that before immediately looking to history. However, as it is clear to see, it is *because* that hypothetical political culture has fostered such a belief that persons may be comfortable using general, universal principles.

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<sup>60</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, 211-212.

The entanglement of moral language in narrative histories and traditions underscores the reasons why some view on the good is always common to a particular political community. Because of our shared histories and overlapping cultural practices there is always some degree of acceptance to a standard of the good – whether that good be characterized by an appreciation of democratic values, of heroic virtues, or of an appreciation for a higher, divine law. Common conceptions of the good in relation to individual conceptions of the good can, in a sense, be seen to play a meta-ethical role. The reason why we are able to make individualized determinations regarding the good is because we have a prior framework of goods that serves as a metric by which we can truly determine what ends to pursue. Sure, our self-interest plays a role in how we balance our interests, but contrary to arguments made by liberal theorists self-interest is not exhaustive of our appraisal of various goods. We, indeed, concern ourselves with a myriad of other aspects of human life when choosing ends, such as the preservation of cultural values or the betterment of our family members' lives. Though not the only examples, preserving cultural values and bettering one's family are examples of the common good conditioning, at least to some degree, our normative choices.

The fact that we incorporate other-oriented concerns into our normative judgments and make judgments which are predicated on common goods presupposes a certain *kind* of political actor who makes normative judgements in this manner. So, in order to fully elucidate the communitarian perspective one must turn to how it responds to the third facet of the liberal self – namely that rights have primacy over goods. Much like the claim that rights have primacy over goods, contending the opposite, too, presupposes a view of the self. The view of the self usually talked about in the communitarian self is the self as “constitutive”, “narrative”, or “situated”. For



the purpose of this project I will use the term “embedded self” to reference the communitarian self. Unlike the liberal self, which is prior to and independent of the ends it chooses, the embedded self is “...only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization which brought him to be and which nourishes him.”<sup>61</sup> The embedded self is constituted by its ends, to use the language of Sandel, and constructed by its narrative history, to use the language of MacIntyre. So, what truly matters is not our *right* to choose one end over another, but rather the ends we end up choosing *per se*.

The liberal perspective on the political self does correspond to many of our contemporary, Western ideas regarding politics. We tend to take the importance of individual freedom and rights as axiomatic in politics, and think that the effects of social context are largely insignificant. Though the liberal self seems to fit with our intuitive notions on politics, it, I think, lacks the descriptive and normative power of the embedded self. In terms of describing the political self, the communitarian view, unlike the liberal view, takes seriously the manner in which socio-economic context informs our normative judgments. Communitarian theorists – in particular MacIntyre and Taylor – not only appreciate the role of context in our judgments but bring that understanding of context to the forefront of their thought. For liberals, normative reasoning operates much like the reasoning of formal logic. To liberal theorists, when rational agents are presented with a range of different ends they determine which to pursue from a detached standpoint that, while possibly informed by tradition, does not require an understanding of tradition in order to make the choice. When choosing ends, the liberal rational agent applies different abstract principles to different real-world situations as if they were mapping sentential

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, “Atomism,” 57.

constants in propositional logic and quantificational logic to natural language. The reasoning involved in the normative sphere, however, does not operate this way. When we reason about normative values we, instead, weigh the virtues regarding living a good, ethical life with how others have considered virtues; we consider how the socio-economic and cultural contexts of disparate peoples affects their normative frameworks, and decide how our background can either synthesize or reject principles from their background. That is why I term this kind of reasoning “social reasoning” as opposed to the formal reasoning involved in the liberal perspective.

Furthermore, the communitarian view is also more normatively contentful than the liberal view. For a theory or philosophical perspective to be more normatively contentful than another one must be able to say more about what we should and should not do *because* of that theory or perspective. As we know from the liberalism section above, liberal political ontology implies a political state which is neutral to competing conceptions of the good. The fact that liberal political states are neutral underscores a principle fundamental to liberal political ontology and to classical liberalism in general – the importance of negative liberty. Negative liberty and its compliment positive liberty were described in their modern form by Isaiah Berlin in his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Negative liberty, which is also termed negative freedom, captures the idea that in order for someone to be politically free they must be able to go about their business without being coerced by the state, or any other, to do some action. Further, in order to be ‘free’ from a negative liberty standpoint one must be able to engage in whatever political and social practices one wishes so long as these practices do not burden the practices others engage

in.<sup>62</sup> The concept of negative liberty is expressed by neutral political states in that political states do not coerce their constituents to pursue certain goods. And as a corollary to that, neutral political states also create an environment within which political actors may freely choose ends without the undue influence of other political actors. Therefore, liberal political ontology and the kinds of political states it implies is fundamentally about what political actors should *not* do. It, indeed, proscribes certain behavior without, as a compliment, encouraging other behavior. Because liberalism only speaks to what we should *not* do it lacks the same degree of normative power present in the communitarian view.

The communitarian view, to the contrary, both encourages and enjoins certain behavior. The communitarian perspective not only appreciates and emphasizes the importance of social context and tradition, communitarianism also appreciates the virtues attendant to contexts and traditions. For the communitarian self, the development of, say, democratic practices in the West is not only important for an understanding of why our morals are oriented in certain ways. The concrete practices of democracy offer to political actors standards of social and political conduct. Continuing with the democracy example, it is essential for one to engage with the democratic institutions that be if one is to understand truly how democracy plays a role in one's life. This is precisely why voting and openly discussing politics are necessary for a democratic state, whether it is new or old. So, since communitarian political ontology recognizes the importance of virtue and *praxis* it, indeed, accounts for what political actors *should* do.

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<sup>62</sup> Whether political actors or a political state may impinge upon innocuous social and political practices to some degree for the sake of other interests is difficult to determine. This is why this principle of negative liberty – essentially John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle – is difficult to justify. For the purposes of describing liberal political states, justifying the Harm Principle is not necessary. I am merely using it and negative liberty in general to describe implicit, normative features of liberal political states.

Because deleterious practices are oftentimes embedded in traditions – the most obvious example is the tradition of slavery – communitarian political ontology requires a method for determining what political actors should *not* do. If such a method is not articulated then a communitarian would lack the capacity to declare that those who owned slaves or, as another example, participated in the Holocaust are morally responsible for their actions despite their being raised in a tradition where such behavior is acceptable. The notion of social reasoning as a component of the communitarian self offers that requisite method. Since we reason by appraising the values of traditions and practices against one another, we have the ability as rational, encumbered agents to, in a sense, see how virtues either were or were not expressed by certain traditions. Our ability to recognize and abide by certain virtues and deny practices that were either only ostensible virtues or not virtues at all underscores the claim that communitarianism provides one with the proper normative equipment to go about our social and political practices. Liberalism lacks the same amount of normative equipment and, as such, is normatively less robust, less contentful, than communitarianism.

### **Toward a Third-Way**

Despite the seeming advantage of communitarianism in terms of having more normative power than liberalism, there are three distinct issues with which communitarianism has to grapple. The first stems from a critique levied against the liberalism-communitarianism dichotomy by Will Kymlicka directly and John Rawls and David Gauthier indirectly. The second relates to the kind of political state implied from communitarian political ontology. And the last relates to whether political obligation, as I have construed it, can be couched within communitarianism. I will speak to each in turn.

Though he identifies as a liberal, Kymlicka is one of the staunchest, most consistent critics of not only communitarianism specifically, but the liberalism-communitarianism dichotomy in general. For him the division between liberalism and communitarianism rests largely on a misunderstanding of Kant, and as a result a misunderstanding of Rawls. To revisit the criticism made of liberalism by communitarians, the communitarians (primarily Sandel) contended that liberalism is contingent upon an untenable epistemology, that we can know moral principles, and consequently political principles, without looking to the influence of social-historic context. For that reason, *inter alia*, we ought to abandon the liberal project and instead begin with the role of history and society in our moral upbringing. In response to that criticism, Kymlicka first notes the lack of textual support in favor of the proposition that liberalism accepts ‘abstract individualism’ and a skepticism to the good as axiomatic to the liberal project. The texts of Kant and Rawls, in fact, speak to the contrary according to Kymlicka. He notes in “Liberalism and Communitarianism” that, “the liberal defense of freedom rests primarily on the importance of those tasks and projects [social and historical contexts] ... it is our projects and tasks that are the most important thing in our lives, and it’s because they are so important that we should be free to revise them.”<sup>63</sup> What Kymlicka is saying here is that the liberalism does *not* deny the role of our ‘tasks and projects’ in our moral upbringing, our moral orientation, so these tasks and projects are not irrelevant to the liberal political self. Instead, liberalism appreciates the role of context but then emphasizes the importance of the self’s ability to reflect back on its context and determine whether the principles learned are worth holding onto. The reflective capacity of the liberal self is what allows the liberal self to avoid the possibility of being wed to a tradition that,

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<sup>63</sup> Kymlicka, “Liberalism and Communitarianism,” 187.

upon reflection, embodies morally abhorrent behavior. Two oft-cited examples of such traditions are the tradition of slavery and the tradition of patriarchy. The notion that liberalism is inclusive to an appreciation for context and to a political actor's reflective capacity is also present in Gauthier's work and Rawls's work. Gauthier for instance remarks that while the liberal individual has its own understanding of the good "that conception need not rest on purely asocial motivation, for the liberal individual is not an asocial being."<sup>64</sup> He goes on to further remark that as a corollary to the liberal individual's social nature, "the liberal individual must have the capacity to reflect on her preferences."<sup>65</sup> Rawls makes the point similarly in "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," wherein he notes how, "we look, then to our public political culture itself, including its main institutions and the historical traditions of their interpretations, as the shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles."<sup>66</sup> Though the importance of reflective capacity is not made as explicitly by Rawls, I think we ought to read his version of the Kantian rational actor as capable of reflecting upon the traditions within which they developed and deciding which principles they wish to express and which they wish to forgo. Indeed, if, as Rawls notes, citizens have the moral personality requisite for participating in society in a way that leads to mutual cooperation then they surely have enough moral personality to reflect upon their 'tasks and projects'.

Importantly, and as Kymlicka points out in "Liberalism and Communitarianism", the communitarians did not ignore this issue. Indeed, both MacIntyre and Sandel attempt to account for that issue in their respective major texts. What Kymlicka points out, and what I agree with, is

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<sup>64</sup> Gauthier, "The Liberal Individual," 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," 192.

the fact that their attempts to account for one's reflective capacity are virtually indistinguishable from their liberal counterparts. So, if the liberals, like the communitarians, can appreciate the role of tradition and the communitarians, like the liberals, recognize the importance of a political self's reflective capacity, then there really is no respectable difference between the two camps.

Coupled with the issue of whether communitarianism is meaningfully distinguishable from liberalism, it suffers from a further complication unique to this project – the question of what political state we ought to manifest, or move toward, given the communitarian articulation of the self. While liberalism has a one-to-one correspondence to liberal democracy, a similarly strong connection does not exist between communitarianism and social democracy or any other form of political state. It is true that a base level, social democracy implies a view of the self in-line with communitarianism, a self which respects a common conception of the good. But when one moves in the other direction and tries to determine what state communitarianism implies, there is not much beyond some level of respect for tradition and the common good. Further, communitarianism *per se* does not provide a clear solution to the problem of authoritarianism as it was discussed in the previous chapter. Though the communitarian might say that its version of the political state would respect and try to develop the common good, the communitarian would remain silent as to the restrictions we ought to place on a political state in regards to how a political state guarantees a common good.

Given the conceptual problems of both liberalism and communitarianism, neither serve as a strong basis for political obligation. Instead of utilizing a modified version of either political ontology I will instead attempt to ground political obligation in a Marxist political ontology.

Explaining the features of a Marxist political ontology and the manner in which political obligation is grounded shall be taken up in the next chapter.



## Chapter Three: Ethical Marxism and the Embedded Self

### Marx the Scientist, or Marx the Ethicist?

If one is to ‘prove’ that political obligation can be grounded in political ontology one has to show that the ontological characteristics of political actors, the way political actors *are* in terms of how they reason in different circumstances and what informs that reasoning, imply certain obligations which bind and condition their decisions. Political obligation in this context does not refer to one’s obligation to abide by the laws of one’s respective political state. In this context, political obligation refers instead to our obligation to create a certain kind of political state, and to foster a certain kind of political environment. If political obligation can be grounded in political ontology, then one would have a means to address the issue of what kind of state a body of people ought to create given the common goals shared by competing models of government? By having a solid foundation for political obligation we can approach the aforementioned issue and say “since we know that this kind of state follows from this understanding of political actors, and that the understanding of political actors is coherent, we know that we ought to do our best to move toward that state.”

Given the conceptual difficulties of both liberal political ontology and communitarian political ontology, I aim to find a middle-way between the two; a middle-way that keeps what is best from communitarianism and liberalism, and forgoes what is problematic. Though he is not usually associated with this kind of philosophical discussion (in the same way that Aristotle and Kant are, as well as Hegel more recently), the philosophy of Karl Marx is distinctly informative on matters concerning political ontology and obligation. There is indeed a niche within Marxist thought that concerns his views on human nature – I intend to show that what Marxists call

human nature one can justifiably call political ontology – and the effects a Marxist view of human nature might have on one’s perspective on politics and economics. I will show in the following sections that while the political self as articulated by Marx is ostensibly basic it captures many aspects of the human condition which render it more normatively robust, and thus better equipped to guide our judgments about political obligation, than either liberalism or communitarianism.

Before addressing the Marxist political self, a possible criticism ought to be preempted – namely that Marx, when describing the conditions of alienation and the transition from capitalism to communism, was acting as a scientist, not an ethicist. The criticism essentially is as follows, when Marx attempted to elucidate the theoretical background of capitalism he did so with the intention of distancing himself from his German Idealist predecessors – Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte. To Marx, the speculative idealism central to the three major Idealists, and Hegel in particular, had thus far stunted the progress which philosophy should have been making. Indeed, when analyzing the conditions of, say, Asian countries as he did in *The German Ideology*, Marx did *not* start with abstract notions about political states and then try to show how various political states instantiate those notions (as Hegel arguably did in his *Philosophy of Right* wherein he attempted to show how the contemporary Prussian state was the embodiment of the *Geist*). Furthermore, Marx rejected the opposite methodological approach, an approach that would start with concrete political states and then try to generate abstract principles. There simply was no room for abstract speculation according to Marx, no matter where one started.

Bringing up the so-called distinction between Young Marx and Mature Marx is one way to respond to the criticism. There is indeed a split within Marxist literature over the relevance we

ought to accord to the Marx of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and whether the ideas expressed in those manuscripts cohere with the ideas of *Das Kapital*.

On side of the argument, thinkers such as Erich Fromm and Shlomo Avineri think that there is only a *prima facie* difference between younger Marx and older Marx; a difference largely of what facets of philosophy and politics Marx focused on, rather than a theoretical difference. Because they give credence to the work of younger Marx and see continuity within his thought, Fromm and Avineri argue that Marx is not as far from Hegel as one might like to believe.<sup>67</sup> As a result, persons on this side of the argument would temper the harsh criticisms levied against Idealism by Marx and argue that it is possibly to coalesce some moderate Idealists positions with Marxist materialism (admittedly I am not quite sure how that would play out, but it is at least possible).

On the other side of the argument are thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Sydney Hook. They too recognize the difference between young Marx and mature Marx but see this difference as one which implies, at least in part, a rejection of some of Marx's younger conclusions.<sup>68</sup> For persons who argue against the continuity of Marx's thought, the split between younger Marx and older Marx is that temporal difference – i.e., the fact that Marx matured. The Marx who still had idealistic tendencies was a Marx still wed to the Hegelian dialectic. Conversely, the Marx of *Das Kapital* and other later works (the *Grundrisse*, Marx's last major work to be published, is arguably an older work, but we need not concern ourselves with that) is concerned almost solely with economics and political science. The Hegelian dialectic that formally informed Marx was

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<sup>67</sup> See: Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, and Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*.

<sup>68</sup> See: Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, and Sydney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*.

replaced by dialectical materialism, which is largely only like the Hegelian dialectic in name and basic form.

Depending on where one falls in the argument, one would see Marx as more closely aligned with speculative Idealism, which provides the kind of philosophical environment one would need to make general ethical claims, or more closely aligned with positivistic materialism, which precludes any attempt to make general claims, ethical or otherwise, about political states and political actors. While I tend to think that there is continuity within Marx's thought, there is a way to explain ethical Marxism, the idea that Marxism provides insight to ethical issues, without implying one view or the other. If we look to what Marx and subsequent Marxists said about the conditions and the nature of the human individual, we will see that normativity is built into Marxism. Further, addressing the conditions and nature of individuals is how we will develop the political ontology necessary to ground political obligation. As such, the question of the human individual will take up the balance of this chapter.

### **The Marxist Embedded Self**

One of the reasons why some Marxists see Marx as a scientist first, and ethicist second is because of how strongly he emphasized the concrete circumstances of individuals. And though, as I noted above, I do not wish to delve too much deeper into whether Marx was primarily a scientist or an ethicist, the concrete circumstances of individuals is nevertheless a good place to start. For Marx, and this is how he attempts to set himself apart from his German Idealist predecessors, "the central issue is that of the existence of the real individual man, who *is* what he

does, and whose 'nature' unfolds and reveals itself in history."<sup>69</sup> Considering human individuals in a way that separates them from their particular socioeconomic circumstances is fundamentally flawed according to Marx. The flaw lies in the lack of consideration for how socioeconomic circumstances affect the moods, orientations, and behaviors of individuals, and the lack of such consideration is what leads to the abstract speculation characteristic of the German Idealists. When we think a-historically, a-socially, and a-economically about the nature of human individuals we blind ourselves to the effects of history, society, and economy on human individuals. Marx's consideration of the effects of economy and society on the nature of humans is what leads many to say that his philosophy of man is no more than vulgar reductionism; this label is totally misguided. It is not as though Marx contended that an analysis of economics was exhaustive of any analysis of human nature, that we can learn everything about human nature by looking to the economic structure of a society. Rather, Marx thought that when addressing human nature we ought to consider the circumstances within which human nature is intelligible. Indeed, as Adam Schaff puts it in *Marxism and the Human Individual*, "When Marxism talks of the economic determinants of social developments, it is not preaching some kind of economic fatalism but simply analyzing the controlling factors of development, which proceed from the mode of production and eventually affect the dispositions of men to accept certain views and attitudes."<sup>70</sup> Erich Fromm makes a similar point when discussing materialism, which is the facet of Marxist thought usually associated with economic fatalism, "this aspect of 'materialism' [dialectical as opposed to historical] involves the study of the real economic and social life of

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<sup>69</sup> Fromm, 'Preface' to *Marx's Concept of Man*, v.

<sup>70</sup> Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual*, 212.

man and of the influence of man's actual way of life on this thinking and feeling."<sup>71</sup> To understand human nature we must understand how humans are with relation to their socioeconomic environment. And furthermore, to understand human nature we must understand that an eye is always turned toward better the conditions of human beings. We must analyze, on one hand, what constitutes human nature and, on the other hand, what that understanding of human nature *says* about how the conditions of human beings should be. This is what makes Marx's analysis of the human condition essentially ethical, though not ethical in the same way as German Idealists. Now, when we start from the standpoint of human beings, political selves, vis-à-vis their socioeconomic environment, we see that there are two basic facets to human nature – (1) that we are social and (2) that we are historical. I take these two facets to, indeed, be the foundational components of Marxist political ontology, and as such the foundation for political obligation.

That we are social creatures by nature is a critical aspect of Marx's thought. As Marx himself notes in his *Theses of Feuerbach*, "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."<sup>72</sup> Individuals, indeed, have a "social origin and nature"<sup>73</sup> that stems from the fact that we are always embedded within a social framework. On this point, Marx is quite similar to the contemporary communitarians spoken of in the last chapter. Much like Sandel, Taylor, and MacIntyre, Marx, too, recognizes that humans are never born and nurtured outside of a social context. Marx, in fact, criticizes the liberal tradition along

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<sup>71</sup> Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' from *The German Ideology*, 570.

<sup>73</sup> Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual*, 50.

the same lines as the communitarians. As Adam Schaff notes, “the vision of an isolated individual could only come into being in an atomized free-competition society, but once it did come into being it was easily accepted that this had been the natural state of the individual man.”<sup>74</sup> The reason why traditional liberal theorists gave as much credence the importance of the individual as they did is because of the social situation within which their ideas developed. We, as humans, are born into a particular culture with particular practices, some of which render opposing cultural practices intelligible while others make the practices of disparate cultures seem nonsensical. Individuals are never just “woman” or “man,” we are *always*, for example, “woman born in south Germany to a middle-class Catholic family,” or “man born in Portugal to a lower-class Jewish family.” We, indeed, are embedded within contexts of which we have no control over as these practices “exist as a result of the activity of earlier generations.”<sup>75</sup> Our intrinsic socially-conditioned nature is precisely why Marx focused on the role of class. Though features of humanity such as language, whether written, signed or spoken, religion, and cultural practices generally speaking affect our development as humans, Marx saw class as a particularly impactful feature. Unlike language and religion, the effects while perhaps more pervasive, are distinctly more subtle. When an individual, say, believes that it is unequivocally wrong to ban any kind of speech, it does not seem intuitive to trace that belief back to the effects of that person’s class on their beliefs. What Marx did and what Marxism does is it brings those implicit, subtle effects of class to the forefront and attempts to show how those effects, along with our social nature in terms of being interpersonal, reveals our human nature.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 66.

Along with being intrinsically social in terms of being intrinsically grounded and nurtured within a social context, human beings are also social in a more colloquial sense of the term. To use the language of Robert Brandom, we are social because we are essentially discursive. Along with having judgments, ethical or otherwise, that are conditioned by our socioeconomic context we are creatures who constantly engage with each other and share our judgments. Whether it be in the home, in a town hall meeting, at a local coffee shop, or at work human beings are constantly in the business of dialogue and discourse. As I mentioned in the last chapter, we are creatures who engage in social reasoning. We balance the principles from which our morals develop not just by a cold examination of other traditions, other cultures, but by engaging with persons from other cultures and seeing to what extent our values map onto theirs. Our ability to appraise the traditions and values of other cultures, and through dialogue express our agreements and disagreements with those cultures, underscores the feature of the embedded, Marxist self which resembles the liberal perspective. Indeed, much like Kymlicka, Marx, too, recognized the importance of our reflective capacity. As Schaff notes, though the Marxist political self is conditioned by social context, the Marxist self is still autonomous, and “what is meant, when speaking of this autonomy, is primarily the individual’s freedom to make choices of alternatives through which he makes history.”<sup>76</sup> Like Kymlicka, Marx saw it as necessary to emphasize the role of an individual’s autonomy in deciding which ethical ends they ought to pursue. For Marx, we as individuals, as embedded political actors, do not only interpret the frameworks within which we have developed, we also create the future conditions for both ourselves and our children. Our creative role in history is precisely why Marx states in Thesis 11

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<sup>76</sup> Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual*, 146.



on Feuerbach that while previous philosophers have interpreted history, it is now our job to create it. The creation of our history is bound within our social nature, our social reasoning, which is the product both of our social contexts and our discursive nature.

Our essentially historic nature is the second, core feature of a Marxist political ontology. Perhaps even more-so than the inherent sociability of human nature, the historicity of human nature is critical to understanding the Marxist political self. As I noted toward the end of the preceding paragraph, Marx saw human beings as playing a fundamental role in the creation of their own histories. What he means by this is that we, as political actors with concrete existence in particular socio-historic contexts, have, by way of our effect on the political, social, and economic climate of our environment, the means to write the history for future generations. The conditions within which our progeny develop are substantially based on the actions of political actors (as the contemporary generation), and they affect their progeny in the same way. One of the reasons why political actors are able to engage in social reasoning is because of our analysis of disparate social situations not in atomistic isolation, but vis-à-vis the historical progression that led to the situation faced by a political actor.

There is one more element I must add to this notion of the embedded self: an idea of recognition. Though the notion of recognition may have issues attendant to it, using it in relation to the embedded self will further clarify how political obligation relates to the embedded self.<sup>77</sup> The concept of recognition is at focus in the following section.

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<sup>77</sup> See Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.

## Recognition and the Embedded Self

Recognition – the idea that we form our identities and understand our differences by recognizing attributes of the other – is a relatively young notion in political theory. Though there may be other theoretical reservoirs within which one can find notions of recognition, most of the contemporary literature on recognition is rooted in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>78</sup> While there is neither explicit nor implicit reference to recognition in Marx’s corpus, cashing out the relationship between sociability and historicity and political obligation in terms of recognition makes that relationship all the more intelligible. Both sociability and historicity involve a recognition of what we *owe* to others.

For sociability, consider the effects of social interaction on a person. Social interaction, at least for those who are gregarious, brings a base level of happiness. And for those more introverted, interaction often provides one with a sense of belonging and acceptance. Unfortunately, social interaction may have deleterious effects on an individual. It may involve degrading, hateful speech that marginalizes persons, makes persons feel as though they are isolated from their surrounding world. Sociability, whether positive or deleterious, affects us in a deeper, more implicit manner however; our moral frameworks are to a substantial extent developed from our societal interactions.

Now, it is true that many come to understand the good solely through philosophical, religious, and literary texts. We can, for instance, imagine a hypothetical situation I will term The Hermit Case.<sup>79</sup> With The Hermit Case we imagine a hermit who has been isolated from

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<sup>78</sup> See: Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*; Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*; Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”; Robert Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*.

<sup>79</sup> I thank my close friend and colleague David Moosmann for suggesting this as a criticism.

society since, let us say, the age of 13. Let's also imagine that the Hermit has no recollection of his past social relationships, but still retains the ability to read and write. Finally, let's stipulate that the Hermit has access to every book written on moral philosophy and ethics. Presumably, it would be possible for the Hermit to learn all there is to know about living a good life, and, as such, would not require interactions with others to develop his moral framework. Now, it is possible for the Hermit to gain a full understanding of rule-based forms of ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology – but the Hermit would be necessarily unable to grasp action-based ethical theories, such as virtue ethics. So, the Hermit's moral framework would be perpetually, necessarily limited. Further, and more importantly, The Hermit Case represents a highly idealized case, whereas, in this project, we are concerned with the moral development of standard persons.

For the ordinary person, sociability is the vehicle by which one gains an understanding of the good, the bad, and the ugly in terms of how we ought to behave. When we engage with others and appraise their beliefs and practices we gain a better understanding of our own beliefs and practices. If we take a step back from our social situations and consider the effect of interpersonal interactions we will *recognize* the other as integral for our moral development; but for the other, we would not be the persons whom we are today. In this sense, we indeed *owe* something to other; as we will see later on, we owe to the other a political state which allows them to foster their personal skills and attributes.

The idea of owing is much less subtle with historicity. As I noted above, the socio-economic conditions within which we exist are the product of the actions of our forebears. Further, the socio-conditions within which our successors will exist will be determined by our

actions. Much like we *recognize* how the other is integral to the makeup of our moral mosaics, we also recognize the links we have to each other because of our historicity. We cannot escape the ramifications our actions will have on those who follow us, just as our predecessors could not escape the ramifications of their actions on us. This is precisely why we're mindful of historical events such as, say, slavery. Though institutionalized slavery has long-since been abolished, the contemporary social, political, and economic situation we face is still, to a degree, conditioned by the past institution of slavery. Something similar can be said about the lingering effects of previous forms of economic ideology, such as mercantilism and laissez-faire economics, present in current socioeconomic conditions.

Michael Quante notes in "Recognition as the Social Grammar of Species-Being in Marx" that, "it is appropriate to read the *Manuscripts* as an ethically moulded theory of an Aristotelian type, by attributing to Marx the claim that the realisation of the essence of a human being is at the same time an ethically meaningful good."<sup>80</sup> I think Quante is precisely right, though I disagree with the general thrust of his paper – that recognition for Marx ought to be cashed out in terms of alienation. Now, I do think that alienation, or rather estrangement (estrangement is the explicitly negative form of alienation), plays a role in conceptualizing political obligation through Marx. However, to borrow the theoretical framework of Freeden<sup>81</sup>, estrangement is merely an adjacent concept to the Marxist political self, whereas sociability and historicity are core concepts. As such, the notion of recognition, as a means of explaining how political obligation stems from political ontology, ought to be tethered to sociability and historicity.

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Quante, "Recognition as the Social Grammar of Species-Being in Marx," 9.

<sup>81</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*.

## **The Embedded Self Contra Liberalism and Communitarianism**

The focus on our creative role in history and the ethical development which follows from sociability is why the Marxist embedded self is preferable to the communitarian self and liberal self. Though in the same spirit as the communitarians, the Marxist view, unlike the communitarian view, offers a clear-cut path to political obligation. Any notion of obligation is simply absent from Sandel and MacIntyre, and while Taylor mentions it in passing he withholds any substantive development on the matter.<sup>82</sup> The obligation we have vis-à-vis our fellow political actors and our successors is indeed integral to the Marxist self, not merely a peripheral component. Furthermore, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, unlike the communitarian view we can imply a certain kind of political state from the Marxist embedded self. The kind of political state implied will be what sets the Marxist self apart from the liberal perspective. Though Kymlicka's version of the liberal political actor mirrors many components of the Marxist political actor, such as emphasizing the role of a political actor's reflective capacity, the kind of state implied is substantially different. For Kymlicka, who in "Liberal Individualism and Neutrality" is hesitant to propose any concrete model of the proper political state, contends that a political state ought to disfavor "state perfectionism" – the idea that the state can determine the importance of certain goods and command us, as political actors, to pursue certain ends. With state neutrality, as opposed to perfectionism, groups who have been historically and culturally marginalized have the chance to express their perspective on moral and political matters without fearing suppression by culturally dominant groups. So, for liberal political ontology, the state is

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<sup>82</sup> "Hence we can accommodate whatever is valid in the social thesis without any danger to the primacy of rights. Family obligations and obligations of friendship can be kept separate from any obligations to belong. I don't think that this argument will hold. But I can't really undertake to refute it here...". Charles Taylor, "Atomism," 17.

one that epistemically cannot know a common good and morally should not pursue a common good.

The issue of the common good and the kind of state implied by the embedded self is the final facet of this project. In the following chapter I will show how an appeal to natural goods, which can be analogized to natural rights, accounts for a common good around which a political state can orient itself and craft policy. Thinking back to the liberal democracy and social democracy debate from chapter one, the sort of state implied from the Marxist self, which is itself a third-way between communitarianism and liberalism, is a third-way between liberal democracy and social democracy.

## **Chapter Four: Natural Goods, Self-Development, and the (Other) Third-Way**

### **Common Goods versus Natural Goods**

In the case of the liberal democracy versus social democracy debate and the liberalism versus communitarianism debate the line between each camp was drawn at the notion of common goods. The disagreement was over the role of the state in determining permissible economic standards. In specifically capitalistic societies, the state (the federal government if we want to use less ambiguous terminology) is seen to play a minimal role in economic affairs. Private investors and laborers ought to be able to freely engage in whichever economic and social relationships they please, and the state's power should be limited in ensuring the enforcement of contracts. Liberal democracy, the variant of democracy of which capitalism embodies, broadens the idea of a minimal state to include the notions of personal freedom and liberty essential to a standpoint in opposition to the common good. As noted in chapter one, the state under a liberal democracy is limited to morally neutral administrative functions. Limiting the state to that capacity allows for individuals to choose which ends they wish to pursue, whether that involve engaging in economic relations they see as beneficial or otherwise; limiting the state to that capacity, indeed, fosters a true sense of democracy.

For social democracies, the federal government is regarded as having a substantial role, at least when compared to capitalism, in the economic and social affairs of its constituency. Contrary to the purported benefits of a detached state, a socialist would contend that the detached nature of capitalists states produce substantially more injustice than justice. To the social democrat, the freedom to engage in economic relations, when considered in practice, is only to the benefit of the “bourgeoisie” – to use Marxist terminology. In order to prevent the

mistreatment of the “proletariat,” the state is given the authority to legislate in the name of the common good. To emphasize a point made in chapter one, the common good on which a socialist state would legislate is not a good determined exclusively by the state. The reason *why* “social democracy” is an apt label for the variant of democracy embodied by socialism is because of the importance of democracy in deciding the common good (this is also why we can make a distinction between socialism and communism). So, under socialism the state is not a morally neutral entity. Through the force of regulatory measures and other forms of legislation, a socialist state can promote certain goods and, conversely, preclude certain ends which the constituency may wish to pursue.

Liberal political ontology, as the philosophical background of liberal democracy, conceives of political actors and political states along lines similar to capitalism. For liberalism (the term I’ve used to specifically refer to liberal political ontology), political actors are seen as the sole determinant of goods. Political actors *qua* political actors are in sole possession of the necessary personal knowledge (indeed, who knows us better than ourselves) to make the right choice as to what ends we should pursue. Because political actors have exclusive epistemic access to their conceptions of the good, the only state which can be implied from liberalism is a liberal democracy. For theorists such as Rawls, Dworkin, and Kymlicka it is unjust to have either a socialist state or a communist state because in both cases, the individual’s conception of the good takes the back seat to the good which is supposedly common to all. Whether political actors make normative decisions purely out of egoistic self-interest, as classical theorists such as Hobbes and Adam Smith assert, or we make normative decisions with some interest in advantaging others, as Rawls asserts, what matters is we are imbued with the autonomy to make



those decisions – not the political state which governs us.

On the other side of the debate, communitarian political ontology, though not as cohesive as liberalism, unites around the notion of a common good; hence, communitarianism is the philosophical background of social democracy. From the communitarian standpoint, there exists goods which are common to all of us, goods that are recognized through our intrinsic sociability. Importantly, the ability of political actors to choose which ends they wish to pursue is not forgone by the communitarians. Rather, the communitarians recognize and bring to the forefront of their theories the notion that our moral autonomy is contingent upon our social and cultural contexts. As Sandel, indeed, remarks on the matter of self-reflection and social context, “as a self-interpreting being, I am able to reflect on my history and in this sense to distance myself from it, but the distance is always precarious and provisional, the point of reflection never finally secured outside the history itself.”<sup>83</sup> From the recognition of our socio-historical contingency, the communitarians make their claim to common conceptions of good – though oftentimes only subtly. Taylor, for example, remarks that, “to believe that there is a right to independent moral convictions must be to believe that the exercise of the relevant capacity is a human good.”<sup>84</sup> Though the communitarian view is the background for social democracy, it does not give us much to work with in terms of what policy a political state, socialist or otherwise, should implement. We know from the social theorists mentioned in chapter one as well as the communitarians focused on in chapter two that the common good is of utmost importance, but from neither do we receive a workable plan as to *how* the common good is to be instantiated.

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<sup>83</sup> Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 24.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, “Atomism,” 9.

Indeed, neither the social theorists nor the communitarians mentioned in this project do much to explain *what* goods are common to us all.

As I have noted throughout this project, I think that a blend of liberalism and communitarianism offers one a way of surmounting the difficulties present in each theory. I recognize the interest in promoting the welfare of individual *qua* individual in terms of letting individuals decide what goods are right for them. Ignoring the individual's personal interests leads to the kind of oppressive authoritarianism characteristic of political states like the Soviet Union. On the other hand, there does seem to be an interest in promoting a good common to all. Doing so brings to the forefront of social and political analysis those cultural and social influences which inform our beliefs, which unite us and divide us, and which gives us the opportunity to understand one another's perspective. In order to properly articulate the kind of political state we ought to foster given these opposing ideas on the common good, one must articulate a notion of the common good that respects the unique, personal aims of political actors. I think we can do this if we articulate the common good in a manner similar to natural rights and natural justice.

I should note from the onset that natural goods are not *merely* intrinsic, basic goods. Though natural goods, in my use of the term, are intrinsically valuable they are distinguishable from moral values. Natural goods are *not* values – one can also say virtues – such as integrity, perseverance, honor, and dignity. Instead, natural goods are natural *ends*; they are certain journeys of personal development on which we ought to embark. Though virtues do involve social *praxis*, as MacIntyre indeed recognized in *After Virtue*, they do not involve the sense of striving integral to natural goods. Natural goods involve the process of pursuing certain ends

because of the moral benefit they provide to us.

Natural goods, much like natural rights in particular, stem from inherent characteristics all persons possess. In the case of natural rights, some contemporary thinkers view our capacity for rationality and moral autonomy as a basis for particular, inalienable rights. In a manner similar to natural rights, the natural good in focus in this project stems from the two basic, fundamental characteristics discussed in the previous chapter – our sociability and historicity. And to be more specific, the natural good which lies at the heart of this project and which stems from our sociability and historicity is self-development.

### **Self-Development and Estrangement**

Self-development is an idea which has been used, both explicitly and implicitly, by a wide array of political theorists – usually of the liberal disposition. As Michael Freeden notes, for example, John Stuart Mill viewed liberty as “not merely self-determination, but the subset of self-determination known as self-development.”<sup>85</sup> Freeden goes on to further note the Rawlsian conception of self-development, which is the idea that persons possess “inherent moral powers, whose development is removed from a conscious elucidation of the social and political arenas which enable such growth.”<sup>86</sup> Lastly, though there are surely more references to self-development out there, Jules Townshend notes that C.B. MacPherson saw “democracy as an end [which] meant equal access to the means of self-development.”<sup>87</sup> Given the Marxist basis for sociability and historicity, self-development, as I see it, stems from a Marxist perspective. Though not termed self-development, both Marx and subsequent Marxists emphasize the

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<sup>85</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 147.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>87</sup> Jules Townshend, “C.B. MacPherson: Capitalism, Human Nature, and Contemporary Democratic Theory,” 2.

importance of the development of one's creative faculties. Vernon Venable, for example, remarks that, "they [Marx and Engels] employ concepts of the 'genuinely human' to this [the directing of change in man] end, to inspire men not to some abstract or absolute ideal, but merely to a fuller realization of those capacities...."<sup>88</sup>

For Marx, becoming "genuinely human," so developing one's capacities, is linked to overcoming the conditions of estrangement that force persons to feel at distance, as it were, to themselves; to feel as though, because of the economic and social conditions that be, they are not truly themselves when engaging in various economic and social relations. As Adam Schaff puts it, "the universal man [one who is genuinely human] is the ideal individual who fully realizes the features that make up the 'essence' of man or his 'nature'. He is a man of all-around accomplishments whose full development is not hampered by the prevailing social relations with their various forms of alienation."<sup>89</sup> I take the overcoming of estrangement – self-development – to involve finding meaning and purpose in one's labor-activity. I take it to mean that whether one works in manufacturing, in the service industry, or in investment banking, one is able to find in their labor a means of securing those goods one takes to be important. Finding meaning in labor is of utmost importance as it underscores the credence which this Marxist view of self-development gives to individuality.

Self-development, at its core, is an individual endeavor; the individual has sole authority over the determination of what features of labor are meaningful. As such, Marxist self-development, by emphasizing the importance of individual determination, can be conceptually

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<sup>88</sup> Vernon Venable, *Human Nature: The Marxian View*, 26.

<sup>89</sup> Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual*, 91.

aligned with liberalism. In a seemingly contradictory fashion, however, self-development is also a common good, which conceptually aligns it with communitarianism. Because all political actors share the characteristics of sociability and historicity, and because self-development follows from those natural characteristics, it follows that self-development, as an end of which one ought to be in pursuit, is *common* to all persons. More importantly, and to articulate the common good in manner closer to Taylor's articulation, self-development is a good which we *recognize* as good for others.<sup>90</sup> We recognize that it is good for other persons to overcome the conditions of estrangement that maim a person's personal growth. Constantly objectivizing one's labor, to use Marxist language, in a way that makes the labor seem alien to one's self, constantly entering the workplace with the kind of existential dread seen in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, prevents persons from engaging in those social relations necessary for the development of one's moral framework. William Leiss, in citing MacPherson, puts this point quite aptly when he notes that, "a man whose productive labor is out his control [estranged], whose work is in that sense mindless, may be expected to be somewhat mindless in the rest of his activities."<sup>91</sup> Further, facing the conditions of estrangement affect the historicity of political actors. As mentioned toward the end of the last chapter, historicity is fundamental as a normative concept because we *owe* something to our predecessors. But for our predecessors, we would not enjoy the social and economic advancements currently seen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When persons

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<sup>90</sup> "We also affirm that it is good that such capacities be developed, that under certain circumstances we ought to help and foster their development, and that we ought to realize them ourselves." Taylor, "Atomism," 5.

<sup>91</sup> MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* in William Leiss, "Marx and MacPherson: Needs, Utilities, and Self-development," 9.

exist in states of estrangement, they are not able to meaningfully contribute to the creation of social and economic conditions beneficial to their successors.

### **Self-Development and Political Obligation**

At this juncture, one might press me to explain how any of this has relevance to the supposed political obligation to create a certain kind of political state. In order to address how self-development relates to political obligation I will briefly retrace the argument made throughout this project. At the onset of this project I tried to address the question of whether political obligation, which I take to mean the obligation to foster certain political environments, could be grounded in the ontological nature of political actors. The question was approached in a round-about way by looking first to the debate between liberal democracy and social democracy. The intention of referencing this debate was to show how the practical applicability of political obligation, in terms of its ability to resolve the liberal democracy-social democracy debate, reveals the importance of political ontology. Indeed, Chapter One concluded with the notion that liberal democracies and social democracies are oriented around the same goal, and that the difference lay in their respective methodologies. In Chapter Two, I argued that the difference in methodology can be cashed out in terms of political ontology – namely in terms of the liberalism-communitarianism debate. By grappling with that debate, I attempted to show the conceptual limitations of both liberalism, or liberal political ontology, and communitarianism, or communitarian political ontology. Thus, a movement was made to the politico-ontological implications of Marxism in order to how those implications capture elements from liberalism and communitarianism in normatively powerful manner.

When discussing the political ontology of the Marxist self we saw that recognition played

an essential role in understanding the relationship between political ontology and political obligation. The fact that we *owe* something to the other, and that this owing is based on the import of sociability and historicity, is why we are obligated to do something for the other – almost as a form of compensation. The something that we ought to do is we ought to create a political state which fosters the natural good at focus in this chapter, self-development. Indeed, we, as political actors, ought to explicitly and proudly favor policies which allow for the other to develop their creative capacities. We ought to do so because the development of our personal selves is, as we know from sociability, an intersubjective task. When others can better develop their creative capacities, can find meaning in their laborious activities, they will have more opportunity to share with us their moral, aesthetic, and religious perspectives. As a result of that sharing, *our* moral, aesthetic, and religious perspectives will develop; self-development is, indeed, the development of other selves. We, as political actors, are all in this together. Our own individual paths toward the good life necessarily and always involve others. And that is precisely why we are obligated to create an environment within which we all can make moral progress that is precisely why we must be mindful of history and sociability. Grappling with the ills of estrangement must be at the forefront of our minds when considering what kind of political system we want.

### **Liberal Democracy or Social Democracy, or Neither?**

Now that I have sufficiently grounded political obligation in political ontology, we can turn to one of the initial questions posed at the project's beginning – is there any reason why we should care about finding a foundation for political obligation? While there may be other ways to address debates such as whether we should live under a liberal democracy or a social democracy,

addressing the debate through political obligation (and as such through ontology) accomplished two things. First, using political obligation as a means to address the liberal democracy-social democracy got us to the discussion of political ontology – which, as we know, is essential to this project. Second, articulating the principles of political obligation, which in this project means the kind of political states we are obligated to create, provides us with a solid starting point for determining just what political state is proper.

There are, indeed, a few knowable principles regarding the creation of a political. We know that a political state ought to be mindful of individual differences; it should respect the unique moral character of each individual. Moreover, we also know that a political state should be mindful to the fact that the moral development of each individual is contingent upon others, so it should implement policy which allows for all persons to engage in the social interactions essential to one's self-development. Finally, a political state should be mindful of estrangement, the detrimental condition of alienation that prevents persons from engaging with the other. In particular, a political state should recognize the economic, social, and political conditions causally prior to estrangement, and should work its hardest to assuage those conditions.

Just what this political state would look like, I am not completely sure. It would be a third-way between liberal democracy and social democracy, since, as we see from the influence of the Marxist conception of the political self, the state we are obligated to create balances insights from both liberal and social democracy. What the political state should borrow from the liberal democratic tradition and what it ought to borrow from the social democratic tradition would, I think, require empirical and historical research that transcends the limits of this project.



Anthony Giddens's work on third-way politics may be instructive on this matter<sup>92</sup>, or one can look back to the classical reformist liberals and socialists who, too, try to balance the liberal and social democratic traditions.<sup>93</sup> At the very least, we know that the political state created would be oriented around the principles outlined above.

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<sup>92</sup> See: Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*.

<sup>93</sup> LT Hobhouse, TH Green, and John Dewey are whom I would look to for reform liberalism, and Eduard Bernstein is whom I would look to for reform socialism.

## Conclusion

Quite a bit of work was done to show what, at first, seemed like a simple idea – that yes, there is indeed a foundation for political obligation. In order to get to this point, I first framed the question by way of a different, meta-question: Is it important to articulate a foundation for political obligation? By referencing the liberal democracy-social democracy debate and spelling out their points of disagreement, I was able to arrive at a position to, first, show *why* political obligation is conceptually useful and, second, show *where* political obligation is “located.” We saw that the most critical point of a disagreement between liberal democracy and social democracy was over the ontological nature of political persons, thus bringing us to the contemporary liberalism-communitarianism debate.

The liberalism-communitarianism debate allowed us to elucidate what ontological commitments are inherent in both liberal democracy and social democracy. Further, the liberalism-communitarianism gave us insight into how political ontology figures into political obligation. At the end of the chapter, liberalism and communitarianism jointly failed to have either the descriptive accuracy or normative power, or both, necessary to solidly ground political obligation. Because of the inadequacies of liberalism and communitarianism, I opted for an alternative description of the political self – one with a Marxist basis.

The move made to Marx was done with the intention of providing an account for the political self that synthesized notions from liberalism and communitarianism. Like liberalism, the Marxist view champions the unique moral character of each individual person; and like communitarianism, the Marxist view recognizes the essential role social context plays in the development of our personhood. Ultimately, two ideas were rendered central to the Marxist

political self – sociability and historicity.

With the Marxist self, the embedded self, in mind we were able to turn finally to how political obligation figures into the politico-ontological picture. By illuminating the notions of sociability and historicity through the use of a theory of recognition and a theory of natural goods, the relationship between creating a certain kind of political state and ontological features of political persons became evident, even though the specific kind of state was left an open question. It is clear that the political state would have to reconcile the common good with individual interests, and it would pay close attention to the detrimental effects of estrangement, but the exact policies that would be best to that end is an empirical question I must leave for another day. For now, I will say that the ideas espoused by figures such as Anthony Giddens and Harold Macmillan seem to point in the right direction. Both theorists note that a “third-way” approach to economics and politics, one which uses a free market for the ends of justice, or in this case obligation. The “third-way”, as former British prime minister Tony Blair once remarked, “stands for a modernized social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left...But it is a third way because it moves decisively beyond an Old Left preoccupied by state control, high taxation and producer interests; and a New Right treating public investment, and often the very notions of ‘society’ and collective endeavour, as evils to be undone.”<sup>94</sup> Political states which embody this idea of politics, I think, are the closest example to the kind of state implied by this theory of obligation.

Now there are a few limitations to this idea worth noting. For starters, blending this kind of political obligation with a theory of justice may render some of the obligation principles

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<sup>94</sup> Flavio, Romano, “Clinton and Blair: The Political Economy of the Third Way”, 3.

secondary or tertiary. At this juncture, I am not too certain if an independent account of justice can be articulated in conjunction with this framework of political obligation. I tend to think that justice *can* figure into the equation – but I am not too sure how. Second, figures such as Aristotle and Hegel could, and likely should play a substantial role in any further development of this idea. In particular, comparing Hegel’s third-way between liberalism and communitarianism<sup>95</sup> and Marx’s might underscore the fact that Hegel’s account is, in fact more normatively robust than Marx’s. Third, there may be inherent limits to this articulation of political obligation that affect how a political state is constructed. Ideas of justice may play a role in the potential limits; as do alternate models of the political self. Finally, the standard understanding of political obligation, whether we are obligated to follow laws and so on, might affect how this idiosyncratic notion of political obligation pans out.

All of these issues are worth inquiring into on a later occasion. It is my hope eventually to expand this work to include some of these potential issues.

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<sup>95</sup> See: Robert R. Williams, *Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism: Studies in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* for preliminary insight into this topic.

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