

# 1



## Liberalism and Moral Pluralism

Both in theoretical debates and in practical politics, it has often been claimed that liberalism has become the dominant political ideology of the Western world. This seems to be true, especially since the term *liberalism* refers to a general political outlook that is shared by most citizens and political parties—whether they call themselves liberal or not. The main characteristics of this general outlook consist of a constitutionally warranted sense of respect for the life and liberty of each individual, a concentration on equal rights, an affirmation of the value of democratic government and moral pluralism, and the advancement of a market economy. As Richard Bellamy puts it: “From New Right conservatives to democratic socialists, it seems that we are all liberals now.”<sup>1</sup> To the extent that liberalism can be understood as a general political outlook, it provides a relatively solid *modus vivendi* on the basis of which often fierce battles of interpretation take place over the question of what a just and good society should look like.<sup>2</sup> However, this characterization of liberalism is so general that it calls for further specification.

### **Liberalism**

It is important to stress the fact that I will focus on normative liberal political theories. These are philosophical theories that discuss the normative grounds on which liberalism should be defended and how this relates to more specific questions of, for instance, social justice, institutional design, and civic virtue. Such theories start from basic

intuitions and empirical knowledge as to the autonomy and vulnerability of human beings, their capacity to act reasonably and morally, the sense of justice and good that comes with this capacity, and the purposes a just society serves—most notably the protection of personal and political freedom.<sup>3</sup> In this section, I will briefly discuss concepts of freedom, equality, state neutrality, and the good life that should not be understood as describing empirical realities of existing liberal societies. Rather, they should be understood as core concepts of theories that aim to articulate pictures of how humans, understood as members of political communities, could and should live together. In this sense, they are ideal notions; however, they are not as abstract as they often seem to be. A convincing ideal notion stays in close contact with empirical reality.<sup>4</sup> For example, the notions of freedom and equality are so influential in contemporary normative theory because they seem to articulate the normative expectations of many citizens of existing liberal societies. They do not want their fellow citizens, the government, social organizations, the business sector, religious authorities, and so on, to control their lives. Furthermore, they expect to be protected by the institutions of constitutional freedom.<sup>5</sup> The aim of normative political theory is to articulate the normative expectations implicit in these claims, to tie them to general conceptions of justice, reasonableness, freedom, equality, and so on, and to mold them into a coherent conceptual framework that is suited to help people reflect on questions of social, legal, and political order and legitimacy. The hope of normative political theorists is that, by doing so, they will provide society with well-articulated insights.

Let me begin my discussion with the concept of freedom. Most contemporary liberal thinkers agree that citizens of liberal-democratic societies should be considered free in two different, yet closely related, respects. First, they should be able to form, revise, and rationally pursue their own conception of a good life.<sup>6</sup> It is not always clear why people choose to walk different paths in life, but it is clear that they do. One person may pursue a career as a gardener and be a convinced atheist, while another may pursue an academic career and be a devoted Catholic. Of course, factors such as their intellectual and physical abilities and their social and cultural backgrounds are likely to introduce their choices. But this does not necessarily mean that personal choices cannot be made. Freedom is a lived experience. Generally put, it is the experience of successfully deciding for oneself how one wants to lead one's life and being respected as a person who does so. Liberalism embraces this general notion of freedom.

The first type of freedom is often labeled “personal freedom.” But as I just noted, the experience of deciding for oneself how one wants to lead one’s life presupposes that others respect one’s ability to do so. Humans are social beings, and their aims and choices affect the lives of others. In order to deal with the conflicts that often arise from this inescapable fact, every society needs a stable regime of social integration that defines the limits of personal freedom. Within liberal societies, and certainly within liberal theory, such a regime is usually conceived of in terms of social, moral, and legal norms; principles; and procedures that set standards for interaction within society. Furthermore, this is meant to reflect—in some way or other—the democratic will of the people to whom they apply. Behind this expectation lies the second idea of freedom constitutive of liberalism. This is the idea of the public autonomy of the citizen, understood as her capacity to reflect on the adequateness and legitimacy of the norms, principles, and procedures that set limits to her own personal freedom and to the personal freedom of her fellow citizens, and to her capacity and fundamental right to play a role in their generation. Of course, this notion can be justified in many different ways.

These two ideas of freedom—which at first sight seem to logically presuppose and complement each other perfectly—are crucial to most accounts of the normative core of pluralist and liberal societies.<sup>7</sup> The first is often thought to reflect typically modern ideas of personal autonomy and authenticity. In fact, these are separate ideas. One can act autonomously without being authentic and vice versa. But both involve the notion that the good life for human beings consists of the active participation “in the determination of their lives,”<sup>8</sup> that being true to one’s own “originality,” that “doing your own thing,” and that “finding your own fulfillment,” are valid ideals.<sup>9</sup> Both notions imply that one should be respected not only as a reasonable agent in some general sense, but also as one who has a unique self-determining authority in the formation, revision, and pursuance of a conception of the good life. The uniqueness of this authority is important because it has a bearing on what, in modern pluralist societies, can count as a good life. The ideals of personal autonomy and authenticity do not prescribe the content of conceptions of the good life, but they do set limits to their structure, that is, to the way in which individuals are expected to form such conceptions and to identify with them. Autonomous and authentic persons lead their lives “from the inside.” In light of these ideals, the question of the good life is primarily a question for self-determining individuals, not for collectives.<sup>10</sup>

These brief remarks concerning personal autonomy and authenticity are certainly not as uncontroversial as they may seem to be at first sight. Leading “politically liberal” theorists such as John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman will find the ideals of personal autonomy and authenticity too “perfectionist” to allow them to play a fundamental role in liberalism as a political tradition.<sup>11</sup> In Rawls’s words, political liberals will claim that personal autonomy and authenticity present ideals of human excellence that the government “can no more act to maximize . . . than it can advance Catholicism or Protestantism, or any other religion.”<sup>12</sup> Although I suspect that these authors would be willing to acknowledge that these ideals primarily affect the structure and not the content of personal conceptions of the good, they would certainly reject any suggestion that the liberal state should deliberately foster them. For this would undermine another important liberal idea, that of the liberal state’s aim for neutrality among competing conceptions of the good life. So, political liberals and many other liberals would not accept the ideals of personal autonomy and authenticity as uncontroversial facts of social life that liberalism can unproblematically embrace. Rather, they welcome them as possible ways of thinking about the good life that exist among other ways, for example, the idea that there is no real value in examining one’s “authentic” identity, or that the unautonomous imitation of someone else’s life is not necessarily a bad thing.<sup>13</sup>

An important question in the present study will be whether liberalism, understood as a political doctrine, presupposes the ideals of personal autonomy and authenticity. I will argue that it does, especially so with respect to personal autonomy, but that this does not mean that it should not respect persons who do not adhere to these ideals. However, until I will have shown this we should be reluctant to be too perfectionist about the liberal notion of personal freedom. Let us for now characterize this notion minimalistically as the freedom to live one’s life according to one’s given conception of the good life, and not say anything more about the exact quality of such conceptions.<sup>14</sup>

I mentioned that, for political liberals, the neutrality of the liberal state with respect to different conceptions of the good life is important. In fact, state neutrality is important for most liberals.<sup>15</sup> The liberal state does not only aim for neutrality among competing reasonable conceptions of human excellence within a liberal order; it also respects all citizens as being equally entitled to having their voice heard in the generation of the norms, principles, and procedures that govern life in liberal society. Again, there are many different ways in which the liberal principle of neutrality can be accounted for. Some

authors primarily concentrate on the “hypothetical” consent of all citizens to general principles of liberal justice; others concentrate on the normative core of “actual” empirical processes of democratic opinion formation and parliamentary decision-making.<sup>16</sup> In both accounts, the idea of equality plays an important role.

The idea of equality lies behind the liberal idea that all citizens have the fundamental right to be respected as free and reasonable persons. This assumption is based on a post-Enlightenment belief in the reasonableness of human beings, which is based on their capacity to act autonomously in the “public” sense that was just described, and also, in a more general sense, on their capacity to acquire knowledge of the natural and the social world by following the logic of their own thought and perception (as opposed to following the logic of systems of thought offered to them by, e.g., tradition or political and religious authorities). One of the basic ideas of the Enlightenment era was that if genuine knowledge of the world could be attained by all reasonable beings, then all reasonable beings should have an equal say in a society’s attempts to shape and control the world.<sup>17</sup> This idea motivated political thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant—who we now think of as “early liberals”—to question tradition, convention, and forms of heteronomous political authority as the basis of social order and political legitimacy, which concern all members of society. And since they should in principle be seen as reasonable beings, there is no reason why they should not have a voice in the generation of the norms and principles and procedures that govern their lives. The idea is that as long as these are generated and controlled in ways that all reasonable individuals can (could) agree to, they may be said to be legitimate.<sup>18</sup>

So liberal theories are egalitarian when it comes to the question of their legitimation. The theories I will focus on are egalitarian in other respects too, most importantly with respect to the notion of equality of opportunity. When thinking about equality, we can distinguish between formal equality and substantive or effective equality.<sup>19</sup> Formal equality is legal equality per se. The formal egalitarian argues that a just society is one in which all citizens have equal rights. But are “equality of libertarian rights” (Robert Nozick) or “equal legal and political treatment” (James Buchanan) enough to effectively treat human beings as equals?<sup>20</sup> The liberals I will concentrate on in this study answer this last question in a negative manner. They believe that formal equality is not enough. Their well-known argument is that in order to really count as equals, some citizens may require special attention. They are not exclusively preoccupied with the vague notion

that, on a very fundamental level (e.g., the level of their ability to act reasonably), everyone is equal and should, therefore, be treated equally, but with the substantive moral position that everyone, whatever their resemblances and differences may be, should have equal opportunities in life. The idea that people should not always be treated equally, but should be treated as equals, is the idea that the conditions for the full development of person A may require different measures than the conditions for the full development of person B, and that the liberal state has the responsibility for providing everyone with basic conditions of well-being. In a society in which everyone has the same rights, but in which some of them cannot make effective use of these rights because they lack the minimum conditions that will enable them to flourish in that society (e.g., a minimum income, basic education, and basic health care), the liberal state has the responsibility to support these citizens—particularly if their position is not one of choice but of chance. In a world characterized by huge, nonvoluntary inequalities in economic and cultural capital and opportunities, this substantive notion of equality or distributive justice is a minimum requirement for a liberal theory that poses the fundamental question of how the liberal state could treat its citizens as equals.<sup>21</sup> The liberal theories I focus on are usually understood as interpretations of what, in practical political terms, is known as welfare liberalism or social-democratic liberalism.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the idea of equality plays a role in liberal thought in what one could call a presumption of equal value regarding different conceptions of a good life.<sup>23</sup> Liberalism and ethical pluralism go hand in hand. Therefore, liberal citizens as well as liberal governments will at least have to presume that the often quite different conceptions of the good life of different persons are, in some way or other, of equal value. This means that they will have to acknowledge the fact that value schemes that are not their own may well contain valuable ethical orientations, both for those who adhere to these value schemes and even for those who do not. Of course, there are limits to the presumption of equal value. The liberal state cannot tolerate blatantly unreasonable conceptions of the good life. This can only be pursued at the cost of the freedom and equality of others. But so long as individuals respect the limits set by legitimate general norms, principles, and procedures for peaceful interaction, they must be equally entitled to pursue their own conceptions of the good life.

Again, not all theorists account for this presumption of equal value in similar terms. All agree that tolerable conceptions of the



good should at least promote in those who adhere to them toleration for other conceptions of the good. But liberal authors disagree about whether more substantive judgments as to the validity of conceptions of the good can be made. Some defend noncognitivist views that border on moral skepticism, the idea that the value of conceptions of the good cannot be rationally assessed. They regard conceptions of the good as subjective preferences, the value of which the liberal state cannot (and should not try to) assess. From this perspective, all that matters is that citizens understand that their personal conceptions of the good are theirs, not everybody else's, and that claims to the validity of such conceptions of the good should not be brought into deliberations concerning matters of public and political concern.<sup>24</sup> Other theorists, however, maintain that the value of conceptions of the good can in principle be rationally assessed through reasonable dialogue,<sup>25</sup> or by looking at received standards of what must be considered valid conceptions of the good within a liberal society.<sup>26</sup> In later chapters, I will argue for a combination of the second and third accounts and show why the first approach should be rejected. My argument will have considerable consequences for the question as to whether liberalism presupposes a substantive conception of the good life. I will argue that it does. For now, however, it suffices that we understand that the liberal state aims to respect its citizens both as "publicly" autonomous reasonable subjects and—within certain minimalist limits—as individuals who must be presumed to have valid reasons to orient themselves to their particular conception of a good and valuable life.

To conclude, I am primarily interested in liberal theories that allow all citizens to enjoy personal freedom and public autonomy equally.<sup>27</sup> These are prerequisites for leading a good life within a liberal society. Therefore, it is in order to claim that the central question of this study is *how a liberal society could let the interests of all citizens in leading a good life matter equally.*

### **Pluralism and how (not) to defend liberalism**

As I said earlier, I want to defend the thesis that liberalism is a tragic doctrine; that it is characterized by conceptual tensions and practical conflicts that are inescapable, to a considerable extent irreconcilable, and that involve the experience of loss. In the general characterization of liberalism I just presented, I did not stress any of those aspects of my tragic view because the main defenders of

liberalism I will focus on concentrate on the decidedly untragic notion of reconciliation. As thoroughly modern theorists, they look for ways in which human beings could think of social, legal, and political order that do away with the agonizing experience of irreconcilable tension, conflict, and loss, and that unite them in a just and reasonable society that benefits them all. The basic premise is that reasonable persons, capable of acting freely, should in principle be able to live together in ways in which conflicts can adequately be transcended and, possibly, even reconciled.

I do not want to deny that this is a highly valuable way of viewing reality. Both for questions of social order and for questions of individual well-being, the importance of the ideal of reconciliation can hardly be overestimated. One of the great achievements of modern liberalism is that, from the days of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward, it has pacified social strife by fostering modes of toleration that enable people to live peacefully together despite their moral and cultural differences. The reconciliation that liberalism aims at is not achieved through homogenization. It is rather based on trust in the power of public reason; the reason of a community of citizens who shape their pluralist social world in a collective effort to attain justice and personal freedom for all. As John Rawls puts it, within the liberal tradition "pluralism is not seen as disaster but rather as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions."<sup>28</sup>

But how should this "natural outcome" be conceived? Should it be accounted for in terms of humanity gradually coming to live up to its quasi-innate moral core? Or should it be conceived of in terms of a more contingent pragmatic achievement that has gradually been morally embraced by a great many people who flourish as a result? This is an important and difficult question, which goes straight to the heart of contemporary philosophical debates over liberalism. On the one hand, we see authors such as Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, who use notions such as autonomy, reasonableness, and justice in what I would call an a prioristic mode.<sup>29</sup> To put it simply, here the basic idea is that if all human beings were true to their essential capacities for autonomy, reasonableness, and justice, social and political reconciliation could be attained. Because these authors tend to view these capacities as essential human capacities, they can rather unproblematically assume that it would be good for all citizens of liberal societies to embrace and act upon them. On the other hand, we see what we could call historicist authors such as Joseph Raz, Richard Rorty, and William A. Galston, who stress the fact that lib-



eralism is a lived tradition whose historically contingent central notions developed within, and have proven to be of great value for, individualist and pluralist cultures.<sup>30</sup> These authors believe that so-called essential capacities for autonomous and reasonable action are not so much capacities of all human beings, but rather culturally situated capacities that are conducive to particular—liberal—forms of social cooperation. They emphasize that, although these capacities are highly valuable characteristics of virtuous members of liberal societies, one cannot simply assume that they are essential characteristics of human beings per se. In this study, I will opt for a variant of this second approach. I will not so much show that humanity has no essential moral core, but rather that it is wise to accept that we cannot decide that question and that we, therefore, should look at liberalism and at its central notions in the second way. For we do know from experience that, despite its historical successes, liberalism has always been, and still is, a contested tradition. It seems wise to take that experience seriously.

Of course, the choice for the second approach has significant implications for anyone who wants to defend liberalism. Typically, those who choose the first approach have a standard answer to those who contest liberalism. They argue that these contestants are wrong, or unreasonable, because they simply do not understand what it means to live up to the real meaning of—the postmetaphysical philosophical truth about—autonomy, reasonableness, and justice. In a way, this is a comfortable position. It provides the theorist with an Archimedean point from which many, if not all, conceptual tensions and practical conflicts that may spring from liberalism can be assessed and—at least theoretically—resolved. It assures the Archimedean liberal that she is right about her fundamental theoretical beliefs, although she will admit that she may not yet have fully grasped all of liberalism's practical and theoretical implications. Theorists who opt for the second approach, however, cannot be so sure about their basic beliefs and assumptions. They have no Archimedean point to argue from. Rather, they are faced with a world full of different and often conflicting values, orientations, and principles that at first sight cannot be fitted easily into a coherent scheme. They believe that liberalism is one among many possible ideologies that aim to organize society, and that there simply are no knock-down arguments that could ultimately show that, among these, liberalism is the only viable option. Still, from their historical and political perspective, they choose to defend liberalism rather than any other doctrine. They account for the capacities for autonomy, reasonableness, and justice in terms that are

not a prioristic. They understand them as critical values and virtues characteristic of a particular political tradition that is well worth arguing for, simply because it is conducive to forms of social interaction, pluralism, and personal freedom that represent good answers to questions that modern societies pose—not necessarily because liberalism’s basic assumptions are thought to be more “true” or “less controversial” than those of other doctrines.

In contemporary liberal theory, the battlefield on which discussions over how to defend liberalism take place is very often that of moral pluralism. Moral pluralism exists if people, who in some way or other (are forced to) live together, hold different moral views, that is, views that are critical to their identity and that give meaning to their being in the world. The clause “who in some way or other (are forced to) live together” is important here. The term *moral pluralism* makes sense only if people with different moral views interact and consequently run the risk of getting into normative conflict over questions that call for morally motivated answers. If a group of three isolated islands in the Pacific Ocean were inhabited by three peoples with different moral views and if each people were to stick to an island of its own and live a self-contained life there, we would not say that moral pluralism was a feature of social life on the archipelago. If, however, they were to take up economic and cultural relations, visit each other’s islands, and become political allies (or enemies), they would soon find out what moral pluralism consists of. They would experience what has been called difference: through interactions with strangers from other islands they would realize that these strangers attach significance to persons, values, and objects in ways formerly unknown to them. And they would find that severe normative conflicts can spring from the collision of different worldviews.

Of course, difference and moral pluralism are not necessarily the same. There are many sorts of differences that can be experienced as morally neutral: bodily differences, differences of accents within one language, and differences of taste are good examples.<sup>30</sup> But it is true that difference is often indicative of moral pluralism. As J. Donald Moon puts it: “Ties to family, love, friendship, and attachments to land and home can give rise to moral pluralism when they lead to distinct group identities and significant differences within a society.”<sup>32</sup> And we might add that ties to religion, ethnicity, culture, gender, and ideals of personal excellence may give rise to the same phenomenon. Particularly so if they inspire social and political action that aims to gain influence over important institutions asso-

ciated with education, culture, politics, law, and so forth.<sup>33</sup> It seems, then, that moral pluralism exists if distinct group identities and significant and morally relevant differences occur within one social setting. This kind of pluralism is labeled moral, because the difference between groups originates from the existence of two or more conflicting moral frameworks—which will in most cases encompass both conceptions of general social norms, principles, and procedures and ideals of personal excellence—within one society or community.

Now, an important question for the assessment of moral pluralism is how “real” the differences between moral frameworks are. In liberal theory, many attempts have been undertaken to show that what we, following Habermas, might call ethical pluralism—the kind of pluralism that springs from the incompatibility of nongeneralizable substantive ideals of personal excellence<sup>34</sup>—need not really bother the liberal theorist. Such personal or “private” ideals, many liberals claim, are best understood as subjective preferences that cannot be argued for in a generalizing mode. From the perspective of normative political theory, these theorists claim, such personal preferences should not be understood as the locus of the moral capacities for autonomy and reasonableness that are so important for the sustenance of a just society. These latter capacities, they maintain, are primarily capacities of persons qua human beings, not capacities of members of groups who happen to value these capacities. In moral and political theory, they conclude, generalizable principles that are deduced from essential capacities should always override claims that are born of subjective preferences. And this not just because only the former make it possible for human beings to successfully control and, if necessary, counteract the severe normative conflicts that may spring from the clash of irreconcilable subjective preferences, but rather because the dignity of human subjects is defined by their ability to act according to the essential capacity for autonomous moral action.<sup>35</sup> Moral pluralism cannot be a genuine problem for theorists who start from these assumptions. For them, the moral is one, while the ethical is many.<sup>36</sup> And, at least for normative political theory, the moral must be more real than the ethical, because—or so the assumption goes—we all share the same capacities for moral deliberation, while we are deeply divided over questions of personal excellence.

As has been often noted, the main problem with this line of thought is that it—perhaps unwillingly—presupposes a conception of individuality that borders on the schizophrenic.<sup>37</sup> It expects citizens to be able to largely abstract from personal interests, attachments, and purposes in public life (the life of autonomous,

reasonable, and generalizable reasons and actions), while it encourages these same citizens to find their personal fulfillment in substantive and possibly controversial notions of the good in their private lives. And it suggests that a liberal society is neutral among ethical notions of the good because its thin, capacity-focused notion of the autonomous and reasonable citizen does not favor any particular ethical conception of the good. Which personal ideals of excellence should be of value to individuals is left to these individuals to decide. This kind of liberalism genuinely aims to combine the best of both worlds—the world of autonomy and reasonableness and that of nongeneralizable ideas of human excellence—without compromising either of them. Its intentions are very sympathetic, its moral promise alluring. But somehow, it all seems too good to be true.

To get to the heart of this approach, let's pose some straightforward and commonsensical questions.<sup>38</sup>

1. Is it not true that we know from experience that a successful, well-educated citizen of a liberal society stands a better chance of being recognized as an autonomous and reasonable person than most poorly educated citizens?
2. Is it, therefore, not true that liberalism is no more than a cleverly disguised ideology that will primarily benefit successful members of society?
3. Is it not true that we cannot act autonomously and reasonably without being motivated by personal (ethical) convictions?
4. Is it not true that there are many people who would rather be damned than let public morality be ruled by the individualist-secular idea of autonomous reasoning alone?

Of course, "Archimedean" liberals have standard answers to these questions—with which their critics confront them all the time. Let me try to answer these questions on their behalf.

1. Yes, that is entirely true. And that is exactly why we stress the fact that people should have equal opportunities in life. Our belief in the political priority of autonomy and reasonableness should not be mistaken for the naive idea that every human being, in every situation, will automatically be capable of acting autonomously and reasonably in our sense. It is just the belief that, in principle, every human being should be respected. This implies that she should be

granted full citizenship status and that she may be entitled to extra measures by the state, which will enable her to successfully live up to these capacities and, therefore, flourish in both her public and her private life.

2. No, liberalism is not a disguised ideology that primarily favors the already well-off. On the contrary, it stands for equal liberties and opportunities for all, guaranteed and protected by a state that aims for neutrality among competing conceptions of the good life. Of course, liberalism leaves a lot of room for personal choice. So some citizens may concentrate on economic success, while others may devote their lives to personal purposes that will not be as lucrative. Liberalism is neutral on such issues. It does not prescribe how people should lead their lives. Because of the far-reaching freedom of choice it grants to citizens, liberalism cannot be held responsible for inequalities that result from free choices made by individuals. As long as the principles of the liberal state can be freely accepted by all citizens, liberalism neither favors nor disfavors the interests of any particular group of citizens.

3. That is an important question. And yes, it is true that we often cannot act autonomously and reasonably without being motivated by our deepest personal convictions. However, our capacities for autonomy and reasonableness set limits to what we may legitimately expect of the outcome of public deliberation. Respect for these essential capacities and their role in democratic deliberation entails that citizens should be willing to let their personal convictions and aims be trumped by legal and political forms of consensus and compromise. Note, however, that consensus and compromise should not be understood as expressing a mere *modus vivendi* of competing groups and individuals. The idea is that citizens will understand that consensus and compromise are genuine goods, that is, that they will respect them as legitimate and highly valuable aspects of a well-ordered pluralist society.

4. That is a tricky question. Classic examples of the problem can be found in discussions concerning the right to abortion or to euthanasia and the right to self-government of religious groups such as the Amish or native people such as Native Americans and Australian aboriginals. The problem is that some people indeed believe that they have valid moral reasons—reasons that they think everybody should accept—not to accept the liberal principle of autonomous and reasonable self-determination of citizens as the highest standard for a just ordering of society as a whole. Archimedean liberals offer two possible answers to this dilemma.

The first is simply to point out to these people that they are not being reasonable, that they are unwilling to recognize that we need to transcend ethical pluralism, and that we can do so only by giving priority to capacities we all share. This may seem to come down to begging the question but the idea is that, in deliberating with us about these issues, our opponents cannot but presuppose the validity of public autonomy and reasonable consensus-seeking as guiding ideals for conflict resolution. By denying this, they would engage in a performative contradiction, for they would reject the very kind of reasonable consensus-seeking that they engage in. The idea is that the contestants of our strategy do not understand the normative presuppositions of their own (communicative) actions. If we succeed in pointing this out to them, they might eventually come to accept the impartiality and acceptability of at least the basic terms of the strategy we propose.<sup>39</sup>

The second strategy is more modest. Here, the idea is that even if we accept the fact that public autonomy and reasonableness cannot be understood as an Archimedean point by all individuals and groups within liberal societies, we may find an alternative—although slightly weaker—Archimedean point in the “public culture” of liberal societies. We then are able to state that, when public issues are at stake, public autonomy and reasonableness override private conceptions of the good life because, in our liberal society, we have found that this is the best—or if you want, the least controversial—way of dealing with pluralism. It is a consequence of this approach that, as John Rawls has recently pointed out, we may reach a point at which we cannot do anything other than override the claims of our opponents without their consent.<sup>40</sup> Although this approach offers a very realistic and pragmatic solution to problems of pluralism, it is true that it also has an illiberal ring to it.

I think that these answers to our commonsensical questions, which I have tried to present as fair-mindedly as possible, are only partly convincing. More precisely: the first is convincing, the second is slightly less convincing, the third is problematic, while the fourth shows that there is something seriously wrong about the self-understanding of Archimedean liberals.

1. The liberal Archimedean is right in pointing out to us that our first question is based on a misunderstanding of the aims of normative political theory. The empirical fact that some groups benefit more from existing liberal societies than others does not show that normative liberal theories merely try to sustain that unjust status quo. After all, such theories often explicitly try to point out to



what extent these existing societies do not succeed in living up to the normative core of their constitutive documents and legal and political institutions. However controversial the idea of the priority of autonomy and reasonableness may seem to be to some, there seems to be nothing wrong with the attempts of many theorists to show that if we want to stick to this priority in our public language, we had better look for ways in which all citizens could fully live up to it.

2. It follows from this, that liberalism is not a conservative doctrine. It genuinely tries to stand for the interests of all citizens. However, the stress on freedom of choice and autonomous self-determination may be more controversial than it seems to be at first sight. Liberalism allows some citizens to devote themselves to making a fortune on Wall Street, while others choose to work for Amnesty International or Greenpeace (trying to counteract, among other things, some of the less favorable consequences of the financial speculations of many of their fellow citizens). In this sense, it is a tolerant doctrine, which aims to let citizens decide for themselves how they want to lead their lives and how, if at all, they want to contribute to the common good. But the liberal framework that allows for freedom of choice and for autonomous self-determination, and that finds its principle of legitimacy in the hypothetical agreement of all citizens to its basic terms, will have to presuppose that these values (will eventually) be wholeheartedly embraced by all citizens. This highly demanding criterion of legitimacy, it seems to me, is the Achilles heel of Archimedean liberalism.

3. The demanding character of this criterion becomes clearer once we accept the fact that people cannot but act from personal convictions about what is right and what is good. This means that, whatever the precise Archimedean qualities of public autonomy and reasonableness are thought to consist of, liberalism can only be considered a legitimate doctrine if the "moral character" of all citizens of a liberal society is structured in such a way that they can wholeheartedly accept the priority of public autonomy and reasonableness in the public life of that liberal society. Archimedean liberals cannot simply reply to this that their normative theories reflect on the principles of legitimacy of an ideal liberal society, that is, a society in which all citizens would be able to accept this priority. A convincing ideal notion stays in close contact with empirical reality. And the empirical reality in which liberal theorists stand clearly shows that not all citizens of liberal societies show the personality traits of the ideal liberal citizen. The conceptions of personal and collective freedom of

some not necessarily unreasonable groups and individuals—orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, Native Americans, Australian aboriginals, and so on—are sometimes clearly at odds with liberal principles of moral, legal, and political order and legitimacy. This raises the question as to how Archimedean liberals could ever be true to their aim to allow all citizens to lead a good life.

4. The two answers to this problem we just saw indicate the seriousness of this problem. The first answer states that we should always be willing to deliberate with nonliberal citizens, but only on the premise that they are willing to accept that—by engaging in deliberative attempts at conflict resolution—they are using a formal vocabulary that is biased toward (liberal understandings of) public autonomy and reasonableness. The second answer basically states the same, although it understands the moral grammar of liberal deliberation as a culturally situated good. These answers are certainly not to be condemned. Both are given with understandable reluctance and come with the explicit guarantee that liberalism will always treat “dissidents” with the utmost respect. However, what worries me about these answers is that they seem to beg the question. The unquestionable belief in the correctness of our way of consensus-seeking, of the values central to our public culture, has a very dogmatic ring to it. It seems to say something like: “We propose a way of including you in our just order; we know that, as a human being, you are capable of acting autonomously and reasonably, of distinguishing public aims and purposes from private ones, so please feel free to join us.” In many ways, this is a very humane and tolerant strategy. But it overlooks the very real possibility that those who do not fit easily into the liberal framework might have important and valid reasons not to accept that liberal framework. Such reasons are deliberately ignored by Archimedean liberalism.

We may conclude that Archimedean liberalism tries to take pluralism seriously by sidestepping its most inflammatory building blocks. In practice, this strategy has some major advantages. Most importantly, it gives liberalism the opportunity to grant citizenship rights universally, without having to scrutinize the ethical beliefs of all citizens. This is a highly valuable aim of liberalism that should not be abandoned. Yet, from a philosophical perspective, with a view toward finding out what liberalism’s relation to pluralism consists of, the Archimedean approach appears to be deeply problematic. Most importantly, because of its basic terms and assumptions, Archimedean liberalism seems to make it impossible for itself to look at pluralism in an open-minded and self-critical way.

In the course of this study we will find that there is a more viable way to think about the relationship between liberalism and pluralism. It starts by genuinely accepting the fact that liberalism has a problem with pluralism. And this not just in the sense of acknowledging that there indeed are empirical cases in which the limits of liberal tolerance seem to have been reached, but rather in the sense of acknowledging that—as a matter of the ethical orientations of members of liberal societies—the tension between, on the one hand, general liberal principles of public autonomy, reasonableness, and state neutrality and, on the other hand, nonpublic ideals of individual and collective self-realization is at the heart of liberalism. If we accept the fact that liberalism can only be a viable doctrine so long as there are individuals who are willing to let their ethical beliefs be trumped by liberal standards of public reason and public autonomy, then we also have to accept the fact that liberalism is not the ethically neutral and undemanding doctrine it is often purported to be. For the willingness to let one's most deeply felt beliefs be trumped by the overriding values of public autonomy and reasonableness will have huge consequences for the hierarchical ordering of one's ethical orientations.

For any self-critical brand of liberalism, this must mean that it should understand conflicts that spring from pluralism not primarily as problems caused by individuals or groups who refuse to be fitted into the allegedly ethically neutral liberal framework. It should rather look at such conflicts as conflicts that liberalism cannot help but generate itself. Indeed, I hope to show that the liberal aim to grant all citizens the equal right to lead a good life is—paradoxically—both rather unrealistic and highly valuable. It is unrealistic because it seems that there are not always decisive reasons that can show why everybody should affirm those ideas of a good and valuable life that liberalism cannot help but presuppose and foster. But it is highly valuable because for us—liberals, that is—there is no better way to think about public issues than the one articulated in the highest liberal aim. It is necessary to abide by the liberal aim, because it is the aim that underlies our deepest personal and political self-understandings. Yet, if my articulation of this problem is more or less correct, it seems that we will have to seriously ask ourselves whether we understand the negative and even exclusionary consequences of our allegedly ethically neutral doctrine well enough to be true to liberal ideals.

I will defend the thesis that it is best to admit straightforwardly that liberalism is—both in its moral foundations and in its effects on

the lives of individuals—not an ethically neutral doctrine. Only if we admit this, will we be able to gain valuable knowledge concerning the limits and scope of this political doctrine. I will argue that liberalism should not so much be embarrassed by the tensions and conflicts it simply cannot transcend and reconcile, but that it should rather take them seriously as essential characteristics of its own normative framework that have a tremendous heuristic value. The idea is that by acknowledging the inescapability of these conflicts and tensions, liberalism will be able to both generate a more adequate self-understanding and come up with more promising ways to deal with them. In my account, the idea that liberalism is a tragic doctrine will play an important role. I will now turn to this idea.