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# 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good'

By Alisdair MacIntyre. From The MacIntyre Reader.

Ed. Kelvin Knight. University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

I am grateful to the editors of *Studi Perugini* for their invitation to contribute an introductory essay to this issue. But how should I respond? I have already elsewhere recounted how I found my way into the themes that have preoccupied me (see the interview with Giovanna Borradori and the interview for *Cogito*, below). And to summarize over again these and arguments from my books would be less than helpful. Philosophy in abbreviated summary is no longer philosophy. How then to proceed?

What may be useful is to confront some misunderstandings of my work, especially those that concern its political implications. Hilary Putnam, for example, has asserted that my point of view is one which, by its attitude to alternative ways of life, tends to immunize institutionalized oppression from criticism (*Renewing Philosophy*, pp. 185-6). And several commentators have mistakenly assimilated my views to those of contemporary communitarianism. One principal aim of this present paper is therefore to dispel such misunderstandings. (For an accurate and perceptive discussion of my political views see Kelvin Knight, 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism'.) But I can only explain the full extent of my differences from communitarianism in the context of a diagnosis of the defects of the dominant politics of contemporary society. To this larger task I therefore turn first.

## 1 **Philosophy and the exclusions of contemporary politics**

How should the relationship of philosophy to politics and politics to philosophy be understood? Every complex form of social life embodies some answer to this question and the societies of advanced Western modernity are no exception. A central feature of those societies is the exceptional degree of compartmentalization imposed by their structures, so that the norms governing activities in any one area are specific to that area. As individuals move between home, school, workplace, the activities of leisure, the arenas of politics, bureaucratized encounters with government, and church or synagogue or mosque, they find themselves cast

in different roles and required to express different and even sometimes incompatible attitudes. And, to the degree that one is at home in this kind of society, one will have to have acquired, not only the skills necessary for effectiveness in each of one's roles in each area, but an ability to move between areas and to adapt to the norms of different contexts. Someone who, for example, insists upon observing the same ethics of truthful disclosure in every sphere of life, holding her or himself and others accountable for their deceptions in the same way, whether it is a matter of conversation within the family, the pledges of politicians, the presentation of products by advertisers in the marketplace, or the information given to patients by physicians, will acquire a reputation not for integrity, but for social ineptitude. A compartmentalized society imposes a fragmented ethics. (On compartmentalization see further my 'What Has *Not* Happened in Moral Philosophy'.)

Unsurprisingly contemporary philosophical enquiry and contemporary politics both exhibit the marks of this compartmentalization. Each has become a specialized and professionalized area of activity, with its own specific idioms and genres, its own forms of apprenticeship, its own methods of protecting itself from anything that would put the form of its activities seriously in question. Consider how much that philosophers now write is addressed exclusively to other philosophers through the medium of the professional journal or how the teaching of philosophy has increasingly become the teaching of that philosophy that will enable those who receive it to become, if they wish, professional academic philosophers. Philosophical activity involves reflection upon concepts, theses and arguments that are central to the activities, attitudes, choices and conflicts of everyday life. But the outcome of such philosophical reflection cannot any longer play a significant part in reconstituting those activities and attitudes, in directing those choices or resolving those conflicts, just because of the barriers imposed by compartmentalization.

Just as philosophy has thereby been rendered unpolitical, so politics has been rendered unphilosophical. The rhetoric of political life sometimes suggests otherwise, but there is a large gap between that rhetoric and the types of argument that are practically effective in contemporary politics. The modern state is a large, complex and often ramshackle set of interlocking institutions, combining none too coherently the ethos of a public utility company with inflated claims to embody ideals of liberty and justice. Politics is the sphere in which the relationship of the state's subjects to the various facets of the state's activity is organized, so that the activities of those subjects do not in any fundamental way disrupt or subvert that relationship. Voters in liberal democracies are in some sense free to vote for whom and what they choose, but their votes will not be effective unless they are cast for one of those alternatives defined for them by the political elites. Conventional politics sets limits to practical possibility, limits that are characteristically presupposed by its modes of discourse, rather than explicitly articulated. It is therefore important in

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and to the political sphere that there should not occur extended argumentative debate of a kind that would make issues about these limits explicit and therefore matter for further debate. And one means of achieving this is to proscribe appeals to first principles. So in practice those who appeal in the course of political discussion to the will of God or the natural law or the greatest happiness of the greatest number or the categorical imperative will be heard only as adding rhetorical embellishments to their presentation, not as engaging in serious argument. When on occasion some set of issues from outside politics, as it is now normally understood, issues such as those raised in the United States by the civil rights movement, or by controversies over abortion, seems to make some reference to first principles inescapable, the task of the professionals of political life is to contain and domesticate those issues, so that any political appeal to first principles does not become a philosophical debate about first principles. And their success in achieving this exemplifies the degree to which politics has been successfully insulated from philosophy and philosophy from politics.

Politically the societies of advanced Western modernity are oligarchies disguised as liberal democracies. The large majority of those who inhabit them are excluded from membership in the elites that determine the range of alternatives between which voters are permitted to choose. And the most fundamental issues are excluded from that range of alternatives. An example of just such an issue is that presented by the threat of the imminent disappearance of the family or household farm and with it of a way of life the history of which has been integral to the history of the virtues from ancient times onwards. Good farming has required for its sustenance, and has in turn sustained, virtues that are central to all human life, and not just to farming.

Of course farming households have often failed to exhibit those virtues and farming societies have sometimes been mean-spirited and oppressive. But good farming has itself provided the standards by which bad farming and bad farmers are to be judged, through the way in which it has at its best fostered virtues of independence, virtues of cooperation in contributing to larger human enterprises and virtues of regard for the relationship of human beings to land that has been entrusted to their care. The destruction of the way of life of the household farm has therefore great significance for all of us and powerful statements of that significance - from Andrew Lytle to Wendell Berry - have not been lacking. Yet these statements have had no effective political impact, and this not because they have been heard within the political arena and then rejected. They have gone politically unheard. Why so?

There are of course issues that do receive recurrent attention within the political arena that are relevant to this final transformation of family farming into multinational agribusiness: taxes, tariffs, farm subsidies, interest rates, bankruptcy laws. What is remarkable is that, although under each of these headings multifarious issues are decided by bureaucrats, or

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debated by legislators, or lumped together with others in party programs for parliamentary elections, there has been nowhere in the entire political process where the members of modern political societies have been invited to confront systematically the question: 'What do we take the significance of this transformation to be and should we or should we not acquiesce in this loss of a whole way of life?' Questions about the value of ways of life, let alone the provision of practically effective answers to such questions, are excluded from the arenas of political debate and decision-making, even though answers to them are delivered by default, since among the effects of modern governmental decisions is their impact upon different ways of life, an impact that promotes some – the way of life of the fashionably hedonistic consumer, for example – and undermines others.

So far I have drawn attention to three salient features of the politics of the modern state: the unphilosophical nature of that politics and with it the exclusion from politics of philosophical questions concerning politics; the closely related exclusion from political debate and decision-making of substantive issues concerning ways of life; and the fact that the activities of government are such that they are not in their effects neutral between ways of life, but undermine some and promote others. To these three features it is important to add a fourth. Political debate, whether in electoral campaigns, in legislatures or in governmental bureaucracies is rarely systematic or in any depth. It is not directed by canons of enquiry or committed to following through the implications of arguments. It is instead sporadic, apt to be more responsive to immediate concerns than to the longer term, carried through by those who are both swayed by and themselves make use of rhetorical modes of self-presentation, and open to the solicitations of the rich and the powerful. Political debate, that is, is generally and characteristically the antithesis of serious intellectual enquiry.

This fourth salient feature of contemporary politics marks the frustration of the political hopes of the Enlightenment and especially of Kant. Enlightenment, on Kant's view, consists in thinking for oneself and not in thinking as directed by the authority of some other. To achieve independence in one's thinking is to make what Kant called public use of one's reasoning, that use which the scholar makes before the whole reading public ('An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'). Foucault pointed out that the verb that Kant uses here – *räsionieren* – is characteristically used by him to refer to reasoning that pursues the goals internal to reasoning: truth, theoretical and practical adequacy, and the like. Those to whom such reasoning is presented are invited to evaluate it not from the standpoint of this or that interest or purpose, but from the impersonal standpoint of reason as such. And it was Kant's hope that the modes of thought embodied in scholarly enquiry, publication and debate, modes which exemplified just such invitations to rational evaluation, would spread from the arts and sciences to religion and thereafter to the framing

of legislation and the activities of government. But this of course is not what has happened.

What we have instead in contemporary society are on the one hand a set of small-scale academic publics – scientific, historical, literary – within which the rational discourse of enquiry is carried on more or less in accordance with Kant's ideals, publics however whose discourse has no practical effect on the conduct of political life, and on the other those areas of public life in which politically effective decisions are taken and policies implemented, areas from whose discourse for the most part systematic, rational enquiry is excluded, and in which decisions and policies emerge from a strange *mélange* of arguments, debating points and the influence of money and other forms of established power. What is lacking in modern political societies is any type of institutional arena in which plain persons – neither engaged in academic pursuits nor professionals of the political life – are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate, designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on how to answer questions about the relationship of politics to the claims of rival and alternative ways of life, each with its own conception of the virtues and of the common good. And it is perhaps in terms of the idiom of the common good that these issues raised by contemporary politics are best formulated.

For, if this account of contemporary politics is in outline correct, then we now inhabit a social order whose institutional heterogeneity and diversity of interests is such that no place is left any longer for a politics of the common good. What we have instead is a politics from whose agenda enquiry concerning the nature of that politics has been excluded, a politics thereby protected from perceptions of its own exclusions and limitations. Enquiry into the nature of the common good of political society has become therefore crucial for understanding contemporary politics. For until we know how to think about the common good, we will not know how to evaluate the significance of those exclusions and limitations.

## 2 Rival conceptions of the common good

The notion of the common good has been used in so many different ways and for so many different purposes that some preliminary considerations are in order. First, we may justifiably speak of a common good in characterizing the ends of a variety of very different types of human association. The members of a family, the members of a fishing crew and the members of an investment club, the students, teachers and administrators of a school and the scientists at work in a laboratory all share aims in such a way that a common good can be identified as the end of their shared activities. Secondly, among these there are cases in which the common good of an association is no more than the summing of the



goods pursued by individuals as members of that association, just because the association itself is no more than an instrument employed by those individuals to achieve their individual ends. So it is, for example, with an investment club, by means of which individuals are able to avail themselves of investment opportunities requiring capital sums larger than any one of them possesses. Participation in and support for such associations is therefore rational only so long as and insofar as it provides a more efficient method of achieving their individual ends than would alternative types of activity open to them.

There are also however kinds of association such that the good of the association cannot be constructed out of what were the goods of its individual members, antecedently to and independently of their membership in it. In these cases the good of the whole cannot be arrived at by summing the goods of the parts. Such are those goods not only achieved by means of cooperative activity and shared understanding of their significance, but in key part constituted by cooperative activity and shared understanding of their significance, goods such as the excellence in cooperative activity achieved by fishing crews and by string quartets, by farming households and by teams of research scientists. Excellence in activity is of course often a means to goods other than and beyond that excellence, goods of types as various as the production of food and the making of reputations. But it is central to our understanding of a wide range of practices that excellence in the relevant kinds of activity is recognized as among the goods internal to those practices.

The achievement of excellence in activity characteristically requires the acquisition of skills, but without virtues skills lack the direction that their exercise requires, if excellence is to be achieved. So it is characteristic of such practices that engaging in them provides a practical education into the virtues. And for individuals who are so educated or are in the course of being so educated two questions arise inescapably, questions that may never be explicitly formulated, but which nonetheless receive answers in the way in which individuals live out their lives. For each individual the question arises: what place should the goods of each of the practices in which I am engaged have in my life? The goods of our productive activities in the workplace, the goods of ongoing family life, the goods of musical or athletic or scientific activity, what place should each have in my life, if my life as a whole is to be excellent? Yet any individual who attempts to answer this question pertinaciously must soon discover that it is not a question that she or he can ask and answer by her or himself and for her or himself, apart from those others together with whom she or he is engaged in the activities of practices. So the questions have to be posed: what place should the goods of each of the practices in which we are engaged have in *our* common life? What is the best way of life for *our* community?

These questions can only be answered by elaborating a conception of the common good of a kind of community in which each individual's

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achievement of her or his own good is inseparable both from achieving the shared goods of practices and from contributing to the common good of the community as a whole. According to this conception of the common good the identification of my good, of how it is best for me to direct my life, is inseparable from the identification of the common good of the community, of how it is best for that community to direct its life. Such a form of community is by its nature political, that is to say, it is constituted by a type of practice through which other types of practice are ordered, so that individuals may direct themselves towards what is best for them and for the community.

It is important to observe that, although this type of political society – let us recognize that in it which is Aristotelian by calling it a *polis* – does indeed require a high degree of shared culture by those who participate in it, it is not itself constituted by that shared culture and is very different from those political societies whose essential bonds are the bonds of a shared cultural tradition. A *polis* is at least as different from the political society of a *Volk* as either is from that of a liberal democracy. A *polis* is indeed impossible, unless its citizens share at least one language – they may well share more than one – and unless they also share modes of deliberation, formal and informal, and a large degree of common understanding of practices and institutions. And such a common understanding is generally derived from some particular inherited cultural tradition. But these requirements have to serve the ends of a society in which individuals are always able to put in question through communal deliberation what has hitherto by custom and tradition been taken for granted both about their own good and the good of the community. A *polis* is always, potentially or actually, a society of rational enquiry, of self-scrutiny. The bonds of a *Volk* by contrast are prerational and nonrational. The philosophers of the *Volk* are Herder and Heidegger, not Aristotle.

Enough has now been said for it to be possible to sketch the part that different conceptions of the common good play in different types of political justification. Political justifications are those arguments advanced to show why we, as members of some particular political society, should or should not accept as having legitimate authority over us the commands uttered by someone claiming executive authority over or in that society or the laws uttered by someone or some body claiming legislative authority over or in that society. Consider now the part played by different conceptions of the common good in different types of political justification.

There is, for example, the claim that political authority is justified insofar as it provides a secure social order within which individuals may pursue their own particular ends, whatever they are. Individuals need to cooperate, both in order to pursue their own particular ends effectively and in order to sustain the security of the social order. But all such cooperation is a means to their individual ends. The conception of the common good invoked in this type of justification of political authority is

such that the common good is arrived at by summing individual goods. It is a conception at once individualist and minimalist. And justifications which employ it have this important political characteristic: that to the extent that they are believed in a political society, that political society is endangered by them, and this for two reasons.

First, if this is the justification for the acceptance of political authority, then rational individuals will attempt to share fully in the benefits provided by political authority, while making as small a contribution as possible to its costs. It will be rational to be a 'free rider', so long as one can avoid whatever penalties are imposed by political authority for free riding. Secondly, it will correspondingly be contrary to rationality, thus understood, to accept an undue share of the costs of sustaining political authority. But no political authority can be sustained over any extended period of time, unless some of those subject to it are prepared to pay an undue share of those costs and this in the most striking way, since the sustaining of political authority requires that some of those subject to it should be prepared, if necessary, to die for the sake of the security of the political and social order: soldiers, police officers, firefighters.

It follows that no political society can have a reasonable expectation of surviving, let alone flourishing, unless a significant proportion of its members are unconvinced that the only justification for accepting and upholding political society and political authority is individualist and minimalist. Only if they believe that there is some other and stronger type of connection between their own ends and purposes and the flourishing of their political society do they have good reason to be willing, if necessary, to die for the sake of that flourishing. And indeed, only if they believe that there is just such another and stronger type of connection, do they have sufficient reason to resist the temptation to act as 'free riders' on occasions in which they could do so without penalty.

An individualist and minimalist conception of the common good is then too weak to provide adequate justification for the kind of allegiance that a political society must have from its members, if it is to flourish. And any political society whose members hold themselves and one another to account in respect of the rational justification of their actions, including their collective political decision-making, will have to be one in which rational argument can sustain the claim that their practices and institutions exhibit a connection between the goods of individuals and the common good sufficient to afford a justification for their political allegiance. But we must not picture this connection between individual goods and the common good as something that might exist apart from and independently of the rational activity of the members of that society in enquiring and arguing about the nature of their goods. For it is a connection constituted by practically rational activity. Practical rationality is a property of individuals-in-their-social-relationships rather than of individuals-as-such. To be practically rational I must learn what my good is in different types of situation and I can only achieve that through inter-

action with others in which I learn from those others and they from me. Our primary shared and common good is found in that activity of communal learning through which we together become able to order goods, both in our individual lives and in the political society. Such practical learning is a kind of learning that takes place in and through activity, and in and through reflection upon that activity, in the course of both communal and individual deliberation.

When I speak of practical learning and practical enquiry, I refer to that type of learning and enquiry that takes place in the course of asking and answering practical deliberative questions about some subject matter, whenever there is a serious attempt to answer those questions as adequately as possible and to diagnose and to remedy whatever has been defective in one's past answers. Practical learning and enquiry are therefore features of various kinds of activity. It is found among farmers and fishing crews, in the work of households and in the practice of crafts. What is learned does not have to be formulated explicitly in words, although it may be so formulated. But it cannot take place without some significant transformation of activity. And where deliberation is integral to some type of activity, as it is to any politics of the common good, practical enquiry will be embodied in that type of reflective deliberation to which rational participants in such a politics are committed. Indeed politics will be that practical activity which affords the best opportunity for the exercise of our rational powers, an opportunity afforded only by political societies to whose decision-making widely shared rational deliberation is central, societies which extend practical rationality from the farm and the fishing fleet, the household and the craft workplace, to its political assemblies. It follows that no *Volk* can be such a society. It also follows that, if the political characteristics of advanced Western modernity are as I suggested earlier, and if, as I am now suggesting, claims to political allegiance can be justified only where there is the common good of communal political learning, then modern states cannot advance any justifiable claim to the allegiance of their members, and this because they are the political expression of societies of deformed and fragmented practical rationality, in which politics, far from being an area of activity in and through which other activities are rationally ordered, is itself one more compartmentalized sphere from which there has been excluded the possibility of asking those questions that most need to be asked.

### 3 Liberalism and communitarianism

Political philosophy in our culture is an academic and not a political activity. There are of course important parallels between the discussions in each sphere. Issues of rights, of utility, of legitimate authority and the like are central to both and in both the same principles are on occasion invoked and attacked. Yet it is only rarely, due to some quite unusual

conjunction of circumstances, that something said in political philosophy has any effect on something done in politics. And even when it appears that this has happened, it is always wise to ask whether whatever it was that was done in politics would not have been done anyway, no matter what had been said in political philosophy.

It is therefore one thing to criticize liberalism as a philosophical theory and quite another thing to engage in conflict with contemporary liberal politics. It is true that contemporary liberal politics owes a good deal to past theorizing. For the formative periods of liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were periods in which the relationships of philosophy and politics were other than and closer than they are now. But the actualities of contemporary liberal politics – and I use the word ‘liberal’ inclusively here, so that it covers the whole spectrum of liberalisms from that of American self-styled conservatives to that of European self-styled social democrats – are not only in crucial respects different from the politics hoped for by the great prophetic theorists of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberalism but also at odds with the guiding principles of contemporary liberal theory. It is therefore not at all impossible to elaborate positions that are plainly incompatible with at least some versions of liberal theory, but nonetheless quite at home in the realities of contemporary liberal politics. Just this, I want to suggest, is the case with the theses of the movement that is identified by the name ‘communitarianism’.

The principal exponents of communitarianism have defined their own positions by contrast with some central theses advanced by liberal theorists. Where liberal theorists have emphasized rights, communitarians have stressed relationships. Where liberal theorists have appealed to what they take to be universal and impersonal principles, communitarians have argued for the importance of particular ties to particular groups and individuals. And where liberal theorists have characteristically held that it is for each individual to arrive at her or his own conception of her or his good, communitarians have been anxious both to establish the existence of irreducibly social goods and to argue that a failure to achieve such goods will result in a defective social order.

It is easy to frame each of these two positions so that it not only contrasts with, but is set in sharp opposition to the other. And liberal critics of communitarianism have usually presented matters in this way. But there are certainly some versions of liberal theory and some formulations of communitarian positions which are such that the two are not only not in opposition to each other, but neatly complement one another. Communitarianism from this latter point of view is a diagnosis of certain weaknesses in liberalism, not a rejection of it. And consequently it is unsurprising that just as liberal theorists disagree among themselves about their own positions, so too they disagree about the implications of communitarianism. Yet the outcome of these debates at the level of theory may not be of great significance. For at the level of contemporary politi-

cal actuality the key issues have already been settled. What is it about contemporary politics that makes this so?

Modern states retain the allegiance of those heterogeneous, overlapping and sometimes competing social groups to which their subjects belong by negotiating temporary settlements with those groups, whenever failure to achieve settlement with them would exact too high a price for the state to pay. But, in so doing, those engaged in government and in politics have to adopt a range of varying and sometimes incompatible stances, appealing to different and sometimes incompatible values, here giving market considerations an overriding value, there denying them this weight, here accepting governmental responsibility for this or that aspect of social life, there disowning it, here expressing respect for custom and tradition, there flouting them in the name of modernization. Modern government, that is to say, needs and has a ragbag of assorted values, from which it can select in an *ad hoc* way what will serve its purposes in this or that particular situation with this or that particular group. So it shows different faces and speaks with different and often enough incompatible voices in different types of situation. It is therefore no accident that contemporary politics is a politics of recurrently broken promises or that successful contemporary politicians are so often open to charges of flagrant inconsistency. A willingness to break promises and to shift positions has become, not a liability, but one aspect of what in the social life of modernity is accounted the chief of the virtues, adaptability.

The values defended by liberalism are of course among those indispensable to the governments of advanced modernity. Even those who flout them must pay lipservice to them. But the values of communitarianism are also to be found in the state's ragbag of values and they were there long before the name 'communitarianism' was given to them. So alongside the commitments of modern governments to universal principles that safeguard rights and confer liberties, there are the commitments of the same governments to uphold family ties and the solidarities of a variety of groups. And alongside the commitments of modern governments to extending the scope of market economies, there are a variety of commitments to sustain institutions whose workings are inimical to market relationships. What happens when in some particular situation one set of commitments conflicts with another? The answer is that there is no higher-order set of principles to which appeal can be made to resolve such conflicts. There are instead outcomes determined by shifting coalitions of interest and power within the limits set by and for those elites who determine – although not at all at will – the range of choices confronting governments.

So in the politics of modern government communitarian values coexist, sometimes uneasily, sometimes quite happily, with liberal values and it is only at those extremes of the political spectrum at which consistent adherence to principle entails political impotence that allegiance to liberalism is allowed to entail the rejection of communitarianism or vice versa.

A communitarian politics is at home within the contemporary institutional framework imposed by the state and the market and, just because it is thus at home, its conception of the common good is limited by that framework. Communitarians are apt to place great emphasis on their rejection of any merely individualist conception of the common good. But the communitarian conception of the common good is not at all that of a kind of community of political learning and enquiry participation in which it is necessary for individuals to discover what their individual and common goods are. Indeed in every statement by the protagonists of communitarianism that I have read the precise nature of the communitarian view of the relationship between the community, the common good and individual goods remains elusive. And that it should remain elusive is perhaps a condition of communitarians accommodating themselves, as they have in some cases so notably done, to the realities of contemporary politics.

#### 4 The politics of local community

My arguments so far have resulted largely, if not entirely in negative conclusions. How are we to move beyond these? Any more adequate account of political community and authority will have to begin from a somewhat fuller account of political justification.

Political reflection is a relative latecomer on the human scene. And, when it does emerge, it must inevitably at first be local reflection, reflection upon local political structures, as these have developed through some particular social and cultural tradition, and moreover reflection guided by and limited by the conceptual and argumentative resources of that same tradition. As such reflection develops into philosophy, it continues debates and enquiries that are framed in terms that are in crucial ways specific to its own tradition – consider the differences between Confucian political reflection, the discussions in the *Mahabharata* and the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle – but the questions that are thus framed in local terms are understood to have universal import and the answers supplied to those questions in local terms give expression to universal claims.

It could not be otherwise. For there is no culture whose inhabitants treat their own norms and their own conceptions of the human good as having merely local significance and local authority. Anthropologists, historians and philosophers may sometimes be relativists, but those about whom they write never are. So that when philosophers come to evaluate those norms and those conceptions, they confront the task of evaluating them as norms for which it is claimed that it would be right and best for all human beings to live by them and as adequate conceptions of the human good, and not of the Greek, or the Indian, or the Chinese good. So local philosophies, each with its own specific conceptual and argumentative resources, its own conception of reason, must pose such ques-

tions as: What are *the* norms appropriate for human beings as such? What is the human good? What is reason as such? And these turn out to be political as well as philosophical questions.

For every political and social order embodies and gives expression to an ordering of different human goods and therefore also embodies and gives expression to some particular conception of the human good. Hence when philosophers enquire about goods and the good, and most of all when they enquire about the common good of political society, and about what kind of political society it is in which human beings can best come to an understanding of their good, they necessarily put to the question the political order of their own society.

Correspondingly, when the representatives of the political order claim authority for their legislative, executive and judicial acts, they can now justify their claims only by showing that the exercise of their political authority accords with norms that serve the common good and the human good. There are indeed types of political justification that antedate the rise of philosophy, but the rise of philosophy transforms the nature and standards of political justification, by opening up questions to which political authority must either respond or discredit itself. Among these questions one is central: under what conditions are individuals able to learn about their individual and common goods, so that questions about the justification of political authority can be asked and answered through rational enquiry and debate? What form of social and political life makes this possible?

It will have three sets of characteristics. First, it will be a type of community whose members generally and characteristically recognize that obedience to those standards that Aquinas identified as the precepts of the natural law is necessary, if they are to learn from and with each other what their individual and common goods are (see my 'Natural Law as Subversive: The Case of Aquinas'). In such a society the authority of positive law, promulgated by whatever means the community adopts, will derive from its conformity to the precepts of the natural law and from the acknowledgment of that conformity by plain persons. And plain persons will thereby exhibit their understanding that truthfulness, respect for, patience with and care for the needs of others, and the faithful keeping of promises, are required of us, just because without relationships governed by these norms they will not be able to learn what they most need to learn. But strict observance of these norms of a kind that involves a practical understanding of their point and purpose, rather than a mere fetishism of rules, requires the cultivation and exercise of the virtues of prudence, temperateness, courage and justice. So the life of such a society will embody to some significant extent a shared practical understanding of the relationships between goods, rules and virtues, an understanding that may or may not be articulated at the level of theory, but that will be embodied in and presupposed by the way in which immediate practical questions receive answers in actions.



This type of shared understanding is one familiar to most of us in a variety of local social contexts. We rely on it in many of the everyday enterprises of family and household life, in schools, in neighborhoods, in parishes, on farms, in fishing crews and in other workplaces, and, that is to say, in all those practices and projects in which immediate decision-making has to presuppose rationally justifiable answers to such questions as 'How does my good relate to the good of others engaged in this enterprise?' and 'How does the good to be achieved through this enterprise relate to the other goods of my and their lives?' Where that understanding is absent, is indeed excluded, is in the activities that have come to be labeled 'politics' in the contemporary meaning of that term. So paradoxically the life of so-called politics is now one from which the possibility of rational political justification is excluded, while in many local contexts that possibility remains open. Reflection on why this is so directs our attention to a second set of characteristics that a society must possess, if it is to be one in which individuals are able through practice to learn about their individual and common goods.

Such societies must be small-scale and, so far as possible, as self-sufficient as they need to be to protect themselves from the destructive incursions of the state and the wider market economy. They need to be small-scale, so that, whenever necessary, those who hold political office can be put to the question by the citizens and the citizens put to the question by those who hold political office in the course of extended deliberative debate in which there is widespread participation and from which no one from whom something might be learned is excluded – that is, from which no one is excluded. The aim of this deliberative participation is to arrive at a common mind and the formal constitutional procedures of decision-making will be designed to serve this end. Once again I am not describing something alien to everyday experience. This is a kind of deliberative participation familiar in many local enterprises through which local community is realized. What is less familiar is the claim that these local arenas are now the only places where political community can be constructed, a political community very much at odds with the politics of the nation-state.

Two aspects of the difference between them should be stressed. First, the politics of small-scale local community politics cannot be a separate compartmentalized, specialized area of activity, as it is for the politics of advanced modernity. More generally, the forms of compartmentalization characteristic of advanced modernity are inimical to the flourishing of local community. The activities of local communities will indeed be differentiated into different spheres, those of the family, of the workplace and of the parish, for example. But the relationship between the goods of each set of activities is such that in each much the same virtues are required and in each the same vices are all too apt to be disclosed, so that an individual is not fragmented into her or his separate roles, but is able to succeed or fail in ordering the goods of her or his life into a unified

whole and to be judged by others in respect of that success or failure. One and the same set of individuals and groups will encounter each other in the context of a number of very different types of activity, moving between one sphere and another, so that individuals cannot avoid being judged for what they are. And in politics especially individuals show themselves as deserving the confidence of others as holders of political office by the integrity of their own pursuit of both their own good and the common good in a variety of spheres, and especially those of the home and the workplace, as well as in their specifically political abilities. Where adaptability is now the key virtue of the dominant and conventional forms of politics, integrity is the key virtue of the politics of local community.

Once again the difference from the politics of the modern state is striking. For this latter is a politics in which the techniques of self-presentation, the techniques of advertisement in the market place, are characteristically used to project images behind which candidates for public office can conceal aspects of their reality. The candidate has become to some degree a fictional construction, a figure constructed by public relations experts, speech-writers, manipulators of opinion and cosmetic artists, very much as a film star is or used to be. The problem here is not only that of the gap between image and reality. It is that the ambitious candidate tends all too often to become whatever an effective image requires her or him to become.

We have then identified two sets of characteristics that must be possessed by any society in which there is a possibility of rational political justification, and with it of rational politics: first, it must have a large degree of shared understanding of goods, virtues, and rules and, secondly, it must be a relatively small-scale society whose relationships are not deformed by compartmentalization. But there is also a third set of conditions to be satisfied. The deliberative and other social relationships of such a society are systematically violated by some of the most notable effects of large-scale so-called free market economies (see on this the Introduction to the second edition of *Marxism and Christianity*). Such economies are misnamed 'free markets'. They in fact ruthlessly impose market conditions that forcibly deprive many workers of productive work, that condemn parts of the labor force in metropolitan countries and whole societies in less developed areas to irremediable economic deprivation, that enlarge inequalities and divisions of wealth and income, so organizing societies into competing and antagonistic interests. And under such conditions inequality of wealth ensures inequality in access to the sources of both economic and political power.

Genuinely free markets are always local and small-scale markets in whose exchanges producers can choose to participate or not. And societies with genuinely free markets will be societies of small producers - the family farm is very much at home in such societies - in which no one is denied the possibility of the kind of productive work without which they

cannot take their place in those relationships through which the common good is realized. Such societies can never of course aspire to achieve the levels of economic and technological development of advanced modernity. But from the standpoint of those who give their allegiance to such societies the price to be paid for limitless development would involve a renunciation of their common good. Indeed the conception of the common good presupposed by large-scale so-called free market economies is necessarily an individualist one, although the 'individuals' are sometimes corporate entities. So that the conflict between the kind of local community that I have been characterizing and the international and national economic order is at the level of practice, as well as that of theory, a conflict between rival conceptions of the common good.

### 5 A response to some misunderstandings and objections

We are now in a position to understand better what it is that makes some types of social relationship oppressive. Some measure of inequality – it must not be too large – is not necessarily oppressive. And that some people rather than others should exercise power through political office is not necessarily a mark of oppression. What is always oppressive is any form of social relationship that denies to those who participate in it the possibility of the kind of learning from each other about the nature of their common good that can issue in socially transformative action. It is this that makes relationships between slave-owners and slaves oppressive and it is no accident that defenders of slavery from Aristotle to the apologists for slavery in the American South have felt compelled to assert what is plainly false, that their slaves do not possess the capacity for rational learning. And so it is too with certain other forms of oppression. The justification of the oppression of women has characteristically represented them as inferior to men in rationality. The justification of European imperialist annexations of territory has characteristically represented its native inhabitants as lacking the rational powers to develop it.

Although I have not drawn attention to it, the argument that has led us to this point is one that has drawn systematically on the conceptual and argumentative resources of a Thomistic Aristotelianism. But while it is important to notice this, it is also important to notice how much of this account of political community and political justification is at odds with Aristotle himself, and not only because it rejects his exclusions of women and slaves from citizenship. For Aristotle believed falsely that the life of productive labor of a farmer, for example, was incompatible with the political life (*Politics*, 1328b33–1329a2). And here he needs to be corrected, on the basis of his own principles, by drawing upon another tradition, one also stemming from the ancient world, that agrarianism, to which I referred earlier – its charter document is Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* – which has understood that the virtues of the farmer and of the fisher-

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man are the same virtues needed in the politics of small-scale community. And some of the positions for which I have contended in this paper constitute just such a correction. But still more is needed by way of correction, and a philosopher who can provide much of what we need at this point is Marx, Marx himself, that is, rather than those Marxist systems that have been apt to obscure Marx. The questions that we now need to put of Marx's texts are significantly different from those most often posed in the past, whether by those participating in or by those opposed to the movements of social democracy and communism (on this see 'The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken', above). And they are questions - about the relationship, for example, of the ineradicable defects of the so-called free market economy to the nature of social activity - answers to which are badly needed by any form of Aristotelianism that aspires to contemporary relevance.

It is one of the marks of a community of enquiry and learning that, while it cannot but begin from the standpoint of its own cultural and social tradition, what it is able to learn, in order to sustain itself, includes knowing how to identify its own incoherences and errors and how then to draw upon the resources of other alien and rival traditions in order to correct these. And Hilary Putnam's misinterpretation of the political content of my positions can now be seen to derive not only from failing to understand what they imply about oppression, but also from resolutely ignoring what I have written about the relationships between different and rival traditions of enquiry. Nonetheless there is a much more plausible objection to my positions than Putnam's that is closely related to his.

I have asserted not only that the kind of small-scale political community that deserves our rational allegiance will characteristically have a high degree of shared cultural inheritance, but also that its life will have to be informed by a large measure of agreement not only on its common good, but on human goods in general. And not only liberals may find this alarming. For this may seem at first glance to be a kind of community that could have no room for individuals or groups who do not share the prevailing view of human goods. But this is a mistake, and not only because nothing that I have said precludes the existence within such a political society of individuals and groups who hold and are recognized to hold radically dissenting views on fundamental issues. What will be important to such a society, if it holds the kind of view of the human good and the common good that I have outlined, will be to ask what can be learned from such dissenters. It will therefore be crucial not only to tolerate dissent, but to enter into rational conversation with it and to cultivate as a political virtue not merely a passive tolerance, but an active and enquiring attitude towards radically dissenting views, a virtue notably absent from the dominant politics of the present. This is a lesson to be learned from our own Christian past. For among the worst failures of Christianity has been the inability of Christian societies, except on the rarest of occasions, to listen to and learn from the dissenting Jewish

Handwritten notes at the bottom of the page, including phrases like "revolution", "dissent", "Christianity", and "Jewish".

communities in their midst, an inability that has been both a consequence and a cause of the poisonous corruption of Christianity by anti-Semitism.

A very different accusation that has been and will be leveled against my political positions is that I am recommending a politics of Utopian ineffectiveness. It is impossible, so such critics will say, to change anything worth changing in the modern world except by engaging in the conventional politics of the nation-state, since too many of the problems of local communities are inextricably bound up with national and international issues. This objection moves from true premises to a false conclusion. Any worthwhile politics of local community will certainly have to concern itself in a variety of ways with the impact upon it of the nation-state and of national and international markets. It will from time to time need to secure resources from them, but only, so far as is possible, at a price acceptable by the local community. It will from time to time have to concern itself with the conflicts between and within nation-states, sometimes aligning itself with this or that contending party in order to assist in defeating such politically destructive forces as those of imperialism or National Socialism or Stalinist communism. But it will always also have to be wary and antagonistic in all its dealings with the politics of the state and the market economy, wherever possible challenging their protagonists to provide the kind of justification for their authority that they cannot in fact supply. For the state and the market economy are so structured as to subvert and undermine the politics of local community. Between the one politics and the other there can only be continuing conflict.

To this it may be replied in turn that these responses to misinterpretations and objections are much too brief to be convincing to those who advance them. Indeed they are. In this paper all that I have attempted is to state rather than to defend a set of positions, and even so to state them only in outline. Those statements provide, I hope, a starting-point for further debate and enquiry and this in at least three areas. First, the diagnosis of the ills of contemporary politics needs to be extended and deepened. Secondly, it is important to note that the conflict between the politics of local community and the dominant modes of contemporary politics is not only a conflict between rival conceptions of the common good. It is also a conflict between alternative understandings of practical rationality and we need a better philosophical account of what is at stake in this conflict than has hitherto been provided. And finally it is important to examine instructive examples of the politics of local community in a variety of social and cultural contexts, so as to learn better what makes such politics effective or ineffective. There is both philosophical and political work to be done.