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The Attack on Liberalism

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Liberalism is today under attack. This attack is being fought along two fronts, and so appears to be coming from different directions, but it is actually coming exclusively from the right. One source is Islamic fundamentalism, and the other is American neo-conservatism, which in turn unites elements of Christian fundamentalism with elements of neo-Platonic political philosophy and neo-Aristotelian moral theory. Both Islamic fundamentalism and American neo-conservatism are perfectionist views, and while perfectionist attacks on liberalism are nothing new, there is a special danger in the position that liberalism currently finds itself. Although bitterly opposed to each other and divided by utterly incompatible substantive views, these two sources of attack have many similarities at a more fundamental level of political theory. To varying extents, both reject the idea that the state should be neutral toward and tolerant of competing conceptions of the good, both oppose the strict separation of religious and political authority, both place higher priority on authority and security than on negative liberty and the rule of law, both attach greater weight to faith than to reason in their pure and practical reasoning, both view the community rather than the individual as the fundamental social unit, both take a Machiavellian approach to public discourse and debate, and both have a very different attitude toward the role that equality should play in organizing and regulating our communal life. The special danger of this attack is that each source may use the existence of the other to increase the force of its own denunciation of liberalism, and the voices of those who would defend liberalism may be drowned out in the din of the invective hurled by one of its attackers against the other.

The purpose of this paper is to focus our attention on the fundamental differences between liberalism and perfectionism, no matter what its substantive content, and to defend liberalism against one of the most serious accusations that perfectionists make against it—the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism. This is an exercise in what I call *politectonics*—the study of how families of political theories clash when we abstract out to their basic themes and fundamental presuppositions. I will begin by identifying these basic themes and fundamental presuppositions, and describe some of the general criticisms that perfectionists

raise in order to put their claim that liberalism leads to nihilism in its proper context. Next, I will try to give some content to this claim, for it is often unclear exactly what nihilism is supposed to entail. I will then examine how liberalism is supposed to lead to nihilism, for there are two different strands of this particular perfectionist criticism, each arising out of different and in fact mutually inconsistent initial assumptions. First, I will attempt to rebut each strand of this attack, ignoring for the moment the strategy of using one to rebut the other. But then I will assume that one of these strands of attack is true, and explore whether we really have as much to fear from nihilism as both the opponents of liberalism and its defenders tend to believe. Finally, I will assume that nihilism is both coherent and unattractive, but challenge the assumption that perfectionism can produce anything better, for even if liberalism leads to nihilism, perfectionism leads to fanaticism, and fanaticism presents a far greater threat to international peace and individual well-being than nihilism ever could.

I. Liberalism and Perfectionism

In common speech, the word 'liberal' is often used as a shorthand way of referring to a set of substantive political positions that are typically associated with the moderate left. Used in this sense, the word 'liberalism' refers to any political theory or programme dedicated to the elucidation and promotion of these particular leftist concerns. But that is not how I will be using the word. I will be using the word 'liberalism' to refer to a collection of fundamental presuppositions or concepts that provide the background constraints within which a certain kind of political life can take place. Liberalism in this sense encompasses many different substantive and often incompatible doctrines of political morality. Liberal egalitarianism, libertarianism, and traditional conservatism are all views that can be accommodated within liberalism. One can be a liberal and be for or against greater redistribution of income, for or against greater government regulation of the market, for or against free trade with other nation-states, and on either side of any number of hotly contested social, domestic, and foreign policy issues of the day.

What unites the adherents of these opposing substantive policy positions is that at a higher level of abstraction they all share certain concerns regarding the nature of political life, and they express these concerns as conceptions of the same fundamental presuppositions. Because these presuppositions are concepts, not conceptions, however, they will not generate specific recommendations for either action or belief without further specification of how the concept should be understood. This is why liberals can come to completely opposing positions on what should be done about so many questions regarding the organization and regulation of our social life, yet still be adherents of one of the family of political theories that fall within liberalism.

Even at this higher level of abstraction, however, identifying all the fundamental presuppositions that unite the various views that fall within the family of liberalism is difficult and controversial. Those who consider themselves liberals do not agree on what should be included on this list, and neither do their critics. Any attempt to come up with a definitive description of the fundamental presuppositions of liberalism is accordingly bound to generate as much heat as it does light. But this does not mean that it is pointless to try to articulate these shared presuppositions. What we gain by trying to get a clearer picture of the nature of liberalism, regardless of whether this picture is totally accurate or complete, is a better understanding of why liberalism is under attack, and a richer sense of what distinguishes liberalism from the various forms of perfectionism that are attempting to displace it. For it is important to realize that what distinguishes liberalism and perfectionism is not that each generates different *answers* to questions about how to organize and regulate our social life—whether they do this cannot be determined until we give content to the particular liberal and perfectionist visions we wish to compare. What distinguishes liberalism and perfectionism is that each asks different *questions*—each begins with different moral presuppositions, and if we change the nature of these presuppositions, we change the whole nature of moral discourse, of what is subject to moral evaluation, and what moral evaluation even means. And when we begin with different questions, we are likely to find ourselves unable to find a common language for debate, sinking instead into the kind of irresolvable tectonic battle that can only arise when people are talking past one another and unable to see what the other is even on about. This, I fear, is the kind of battle in which we now find ourselves, and why it is so important that we try to illuminate the fundamental differences between liberalism and perfectionism despite the controversy that any such attempt will necessarily provoke.

Before I embark on this comparison of liberalism and perfectionism, however, I want to clarify the precise nature of the claims I am about to make. While I contend that liberals and perfectionists embrace different sets of fundamental presuppositions, I am not suggesting that a society must be committed to either one set or the other in its entirety to be either liberal or perfectionist. Liberalism and perfectionism can exist in degrees, and even societies that embrace all the presuppositions of liberalism or perfectionism in theory may be more or less faithful to them in practice. The various presuppositions I will identify are therefore *not* intended to be a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for establishing whether a particular political community should be labelled liberal or perfectionist, but as a way of judging *how* liberal or *how* perfectionist a particular society—or the views of a particular political theorist—may be. Indeed, one of the advantages of developing a thicker description of the differences between liberalism and perfectionism than is usually attempted is that this will provide us with a way of explaining how mixed conceptions of each view differ from each other and from conceptions that are more pure.

In a paper of this length, however, my discussion of each fundamental presupposition will by necessity be brief. Because these fundamental presuppositions are not a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, some liberals and perfectionists will disagree with the presuppositions I assign to them. I will not be able to highlight all these disagreements here, or set forth a full defence of my choices, or describe all the different ways each presupposition could be expressed, understood, or defended. All I will be able to do is sketch out a general framework within which to place the debate between liberalism and perfectionism, and convey a sense of the range of issues that a full defence of the attack on liberalism would have to address. I take the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism to be an important part of that attack, but only part. A full defence of liberalism would provide a moral argument in favour of each liberal presupposition, a critique of the arguments made against it, and an argument against the view that the perfectionist version of the presupposition is correct. The defence of liberalism I have mounted in this paper is accordingly only partial, not complete.

I should also note that the kind of perfectionism I have in mind in everything that follows is *hard* perfectionism, the kind of perfectionism for which one can find theoretical underpinnings in the work of people like Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Joseph de Maistre, Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, and Leo Strauss.¹ Hard perfectionists are committed to some specific comprehensive set of substantive moral values, and believe that we should organize our political and social life in such a way as to ensure that we live in a community composed exclusively of like-minded individuals. Their perfectionism is accordingly not merely a *moral* perfectionism—a vision of the ideal life for a person, but a *political* perfectionism, a vision of an ideal society, where state power is used to ensure the creation and proliferation of a certain type of ideal person. Hard perfectionism is therefore a certain kind of teleological theory, one that defines the good by reference to particular view of communal excellence and makes achievement of this good the central goal of political life.²

Hard perfectionists of one stripe or another hold a great deal of political power in the world today, but while the academic proponents of such views are well represented in intellectual history, they are currently underrepresented in the academy. As a result, there have been few contemporary attempts to engage the hard

¹ Some may find the inclusion of Machiavelli on this list surprising. I have done so because one can interpret his work not merely as the ultimate realist tract, an amoral elevation of means over ends, but as an expression of admiration for a particular set of ends, the ends exemplified by ancient Rome. See I Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli' in *Against the Current* (Princeton, 2001) 25–79. In any event, I mention him not because he is necessarily a hard perfectionist himself, but because his approach to politics has had such influence on the hard perfectionists who came after him.

² My definition is similar but probably broader than that employed by Rawls, for Rawls may not have intended to include conceptions of perfection that are theologically based within his definition, but only those that are based on theories of human nature or culture. See J Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev edn, Cambridge, MA, 1999) 22. Under my definition, there is no such limitation, and perfectionism can be (and often is) theologically based.

perfectionists critically. Instead, most of the contemporary academic debate has focused on the development and critique of *soft* perfectionism, a view advocated by Joseph Raz, Steven Wall, Thomas Hurka, George Sher, the so-called communitarians, and many others. Soft perfectionists reject some but embrace other liberal presuppositions, or at least claim they do. Their commitment to the use of state power to create and to maintain their particular vision of an ideal society therefore purports to be weaker than that of hard perfectionists, but stronger than that of liberals. Whether soft perfectionism is a distinct, coherent political theory and whether it has the advantages over liberalism and hard perfectionism that soft perfectionists contend it does are important questions, but I will not attempt to explore these questions or develop or defend a critique soft perfectionism here. Nothing I will say in this paper depends on foreclosing the possibility that soft perfectionism presents a viable alternative to both hard perfectionism and liberalism. It is the views of the hard perfectionists—those who reject the liberal presuppositions that even the soft perfectionists claim to accept—that I take to be most dangerous and that this paper is intended to engage. What these liberal presuppositions are, and why perfectionists reject them, are the questions we turn to next.

A. Toleration

One of the principal themes running throughout liberalism is toleration—the belief that there are a wide range of reasonable although incompatible comprehensive moral doctrines, conceptions of the good, and plans of life, and that people ought to be free to pursue whichever of these they prefer, regardless of whether the path they choose is in their best interests or to the liking of their fellow citizens. To understand what liberals mean by toleration, however, it is important to recognize that toleration is intended to be more than a pragmatic response to the problems that arise when people disagree over what morality requires. For liberals, toleration is supposed to be a moral imperative, not merely a pragmatic one, and therefore entails holding the following combination of attitudes. It requires that we view some attitude or conduct as worthy of suppression—that is, wrong in some important way and detrimental to some significant portion of society; that we believe this offensive attitude or conduct could be effectively suppressed—that is, any attempt at suppression would be neither pointless nor counterproductive; and yet believe that we should resist this impulse to suppress but not abandon it. Toleration accordingly tries to mark out some territory between a willingness to accept and a desire to suppress that is not occupied by indifference.

But perfectionists argue there is no territory here to be claimed. They deny that there are non-instrumental reasons for resisting a desire to suppress that are not also reasons for accepting that to which we object. And they contend that if no such reasons actually exist, then toleration is not a distinct moral attitude that anyone could actually hold, but simply another way of saying that a plurality of

incompatible sets of moral judgements are equally correct or, more nefariously, that *no* set of moral judgements is correct. In the former case, the liberal commitment to toleration reduces to value relativism; in the latter, to value nihilism; but in either case to positions that perfectionists vigorously reject.³

Perfectionists also deny there is even a pragmatic, consequentialist case to be made in favour of toleration. Rather than being a *modus vivendi*, allowing groups that hold incompatible comprehensive moral doctrines to coexist within a single community, perfectionists see toleration as a recipe for self-destruction. While no liberal contends that government's commitment to toleration should be unlimited—as Rawls notes, 'justice does not require that men stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence', liberals do contend that in a well-ordered society, even the intolerant should be tolerated unless they pose a significant threat to the institutions of liberty.⁴ But perfectionists argue that the threat posed by the intolerant is almost never clear until it is too late, and therefore government cannot afford to employ suppression only as a last resort. Moreover, a liberal society is likely to be composed of such a diversity of views that it will be difficult for it to deal decisively with such threats even after they become apparent. A liberal society is accordingly going to be slow to react, and may never be able to muster the necessary unanimity and resolve to deal forcefully and effectively with those who threaten even its most cherished values. This makes toleration not a guarantee of social peace and stability, but an open invitation to evil, one that threatens the long-term sustainability of a community's preferred way of life.

B. Neutrality

Another principal theme of liberalism is the belief that government should remain neutral in some meaningful sense between various competing comprehensive moral doctrines, conceptions of the good, and plans of life. Indeed, many perfectionists view neutrality as the commitment from which all other liberal commitments are derived.⁵ But it is important to note that while liberalism's commitment to neutrality complements its commitment to toleration, it is conceptually distinct from it. Toleration does not entail neutrality—government could tolerate a number of viewpoints while still promoting whatever one it deems best.⁶ Similarly, neutrality does not entail toleration. One could be neutral between various forms of life simply because one found them equally agreeable.

³ For some recent discussions of these arguments, and possible responses to them, see P Jones, 'Making Sense of Political Toleration' (2007) 37 *British Journal of Political Science* 383; G Newey, *Virtue, Reason, and Toleration* (Edinburgh, 1999); D Heyd (ed), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, (Princeton, 1996); S Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (London, 1989).

⁴ See Rawls n 2 above, 192.

⁵ See, eg G Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁶ Indeed, many soft perfectionists advocate exactly this—toleration without neutrality. See, eg V Haskar, *Equality, Liberty, and Perfectionism* (Oxford, 1979) 290.

Because none of these forms of life were in any way objectionable, there would be no need for toleration.

Regardless of whether neutrality is the mother of toleration or conceptually distinct from it, however, it has attracted a great deal of perfectionist ire. Perfectionists argue that in light of its commitment to neutrality, liberalism is empty. 'There exists absolutely no liberal politics', Carl Schmitt complains, 'only a liberal critique of politics'.⁷ Rather than offer a positive moral programme for society, all liberalism offers is permissiveness. But if everything is permitted, perfectionists ask, how are we to decide what morality requires us to do? By failing to provide guidance on this question, liberalism leaves society free to drift into moral relativism, subjectivism, and ultimately nihilism.⁸

Liberals believe that the combination of tolerance and neutrality will produce value pluralism, not value nihilism. But values have to come from somewhere before there can be a plurality of them. While liberals rely on the family, on religious and educational institutions, and on culture to provide the necessary moral guidance to society, perfectionists contend that the requisite set of values cannot be generated by non-governmental sources alone. Perfectionists, however, would not just have government *support* private value-generating institutions, they would make government the *arbiter* of moral values, for they believe it is essential that government put forward a positive substantive moral programme if citizens are to develop the moral attitudes and virtues necessary for the creation of an ideal society. Private institutions would accordingly not be free to promote whatever values they saw fit, they would be free (indeed required) to promote only those values with which the government happened to agree. What values these would be would depend on the particular perfectionist vision the government happened to embrace—the sets of values promoted by an Islamic fundamentalist society, an American neo-conservative society, and a Marxist society would of course all differ radically. But at the tectonic level, the content of these values is not important. What is important is that perfectionists believe liberalism's commitment to neutrality represents an abdication of government's inherent responsibility to be the moral leader of society.

C. Liberty and Authority

Yet another theme of liberalism is its concern for individual liberty. As a result of this concern, liberals oppose granting unlimited authority to government, although the degree to which government authority should be limited is very controversial within liberalism. Some liberals—libertarians and traditional conservatives, for example—advocate very strict limits on government power, while

⁷ C Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, (George Schwab (trans), Chicago, 1996) 70.

⁸ See, eg L Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953) 4–5; S Rosen, *Nihilism* (New Haven, 1969) xiii.

liberal egalitarians believe that government should and indeed must be allowed to regulate a wide variety of human activities. But even those who advocate a generous role for government regulation believe that such a role has to be justified, for all liberals attach great importance to negative liberty—the extent to which our ability to do that which we have the capacity to do is free from interference by other human agents.⁹ Whether such interference is justified depends on whether the particular liberty involved is absolutely protected against interference, and if not, whether such interference generates a sufficiently large compensating moral benefit. Liberals may disagree as to the circumstances in which balancing is appropriate and the relative weights to be assigned to the various moral costs and benefits when it is, but they all agree that no interference can take place without considering these questions.

Perfectionists, in contrast, are more concerned about limitations on government authority than they are about limitations on individual liberty. These concerns may be expressed in a variety of ways, but in the American context, they have surfaced as a series of aggressive arguments for a broad interpretation of the constitutional scope of executive power. First, there is the argument for the unitary executive, which claims that the President has absolute authority over all aspects of the executive branch, and that Congress is accordingly without power to create ‘independent’ administrative agencies or to require that members of these agencies testify before Congress free from centralized political control.¹⁰ Second, there is the argument for what is in effect executive supremacy, which claims that the President has unreviewable authority to take a certain kind of action, or rather to take any action that is motivated by a certain kind of reason, such as the protection of national security, a conveniently elastic justification that can seemingly be applied to an enormous range of executive actions.¹¹ Third, there is the argument for executive immunity, which seeks to increase the scope of the executive’s unreviewable authority even further by imposing limits on the oversight power of the courts and stripping them of various kinds of jurisdiction.¹² Indeed, neo-conservatives tend to view the role of the judiciary as exceedingly

⁹ See, eg I Berlin, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ in I Berlin, *Liberty* (H Hardy (ed), Oxford, 2002) 166–217.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the argument for the unitary executive, see SG Calabresi and SB Prakash, ‘The President’s Power to Execute the Laws’ (1994–5) 104 *Yale Law Journal* 541.

¹¹ For example, while a deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of the Legal Counsel, Berkeley law professor John Yoo argued that ‘in the exercise of his plenary power to use military force, the President’s decisions are for him alone and are unreviewable.’ See KJ Greenberg and JL Dratel (eds), *The Torture Papers* (Cambridge, 2005) 24 n 32. And indeed, President Bush has used this alleged grant of constitutional authority to ignore a huge swath of laws, including statutes prohibiting torture, secret detention, and warrantless surveillance, statutes protecting ‘whistle-blowers’ and requiring the provision of various kinds of information to Congress, and even environmental and affirmative action laws, whenever he deems this necessary for the protection of national security. See C Savage, ‘Bush Challenges Hundreds of Laws: President Cites Power of His Office’ *Boston Globe* (30 April 2006).

¹² For a discussion of the relationship between the argument for the unitary executive and the argument for Congressional authority to enact jurisdiction-stripping legislation, see SG Calabresi

narrow—the courts are there primarily for resolving disputes between the legislative and the executive, not to protect citizens from them both. According to Richard Posner, for example, as long as these two branches of government agree on a proposed course of action (even when both branches are controlled by the same party), the courts should generally just sit back and allow elected officials to proceed as they see fit.¹³

While neo-conservatives offer textual arguments in support of these various claims, their underlying political perfectionism is more likely to be what is driving their concerns. For perfectionists, limitations on authority are of great concern because the role of government is not merely to maintain the community's physical integrity, but to enforce its values, and it takes far greater authority to accomplish this than to patrol the community's streets and borders. While the enforcement of these values may be an infringement of negative liberty, this is not morally significant to perfectionists because the liberty to reject the values they wish to inculcate is not a liberty they believe people should enjoy. Rather than a conception of negative liberty, perfectionists effectively if not expressly embrace a conception of positive liberty—the view that people can and should be forced to embrace a prescribed set of values because only by doing so can they realize their full potential, and only through such self-realization can they truly be free.¹⁴ Granting government greatly expanded or even absolute authority therefore has no moral costs for perfectionists, only moral benefits, at least as long as that authority is exercised in a fashion that is consistent with the values that they believe government is obligated to promote. It is therefore not the degree of government authority that perfectionists find morally significant, but its objectives and effects.

D. Security and the Rule of Law

Yet another theme of liberalism is that no one should be regarded as above the law, and that exceptions to the rule of law cannot be justified simply by asserting that such exceptions are required by national security. This does not mean, however, that liberals believe we should allow our own legal processes to be used to undermine the founding ideals of our political community. Just as there are limits to toleration, there are limits to the degree to which liberals will place compliance with formal legality over the need to defend society from outright attack.

and KH Rhodes, 'The Structural Constitution: Unitary Executive, Plural Judiciary' (1992) 105 *Harvard Law Review* 1153.

¹³ See R Posner, *Not a Suicide Pact: The Constitution in a Time of National Emergency* (Oxford, 2006) 10.

¹⁴ For an explication and defence of positive liberty, see, eg C Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty' in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge, 1985) 211–29.

A constitution is not a suicide pact.¹⁵ Perfectionists are accordingly not the only ones prepared to recognize 'a non-legal "law of necessity" that would furnish a moral and political but not legal justification for acting in contravention of the Constitution [and would] trump constitutional rights in extreme situations.'¹⁶ But perfectionists are much more willing to find that this necessity test has been met, and much more likely to adopt broader exceptions to established principles of legality when it has.¹⁷

There are several reasons for this. First, as a practical matter, perfectionists tend to see themselves as surrounded by enemies, partly because identifying one's enemies is one of the ways that a perfectionist community defines itself, and partly because perfectionist communities are more easily distinguished from each other and from liberal communities because of their embrace of a specific set of substantive values. Because perfectionists are more conscious than liberals of having enemies, security concerns are simply more salient for perfectionists than they are for liberals. Indeed, to perfectionists, liberals seem maddeningly oblivious to the prevalence of evil in the world and the threat such evil poses to their own community. And if liberals cannot even see who their enemies are, how can they be relied on to take timely and effective defensive action?¹⁸

Second, perfectionists view law as the servant of authority not its master. In a liberal society, the rule of law is sovereign, but in a perfectionist society the sovereign is 'he who decides on the exception.'¹⁹ While there are often instrumental reasons for those in power to obey the law, the primary moral obligation of government in a perfectionist society is to maintain the physical and cultural integrity of its political community and keep it pure. The exercise of power in furtherance of such objectives is therefore by definition both morally right and necessary, even when this is technically in violation of the law. For perfectionists, maintaining security is an overpowering moral notion that is to be broadly construed, and the rule of law must give way, even when they are the only ones able to see that this is what maintaining security demands.

Finally, a preoccupation with security among the masses enhances government authority, and this is instrumentally useful in a perfectionist society because greater authority means greater ability to enforce whatever perfectionist vision those in power happen to embrace. As Machiavelli advised, 'it is best to keep men poor and on a permanent war footing, for this will be an antidote to the two great enemies of active obedience—ambition and boredom—and the ruled will

¹⁵ This remark was originally made by Justice Jackson in his dissent in *Terminello v City of Chicago* 337 US 1, 37 (1949).

¹⁶ Posner, *Not a Suicide Pact* n 13 above, 12.

¹⁷ For a critique of some of the policies of the Bush administration and an argument that the national security measures it has advocated are far broader than necessary to deal effectively with the threat we actually face, see R Dworkin, 'The Threat to Patriotism' *New York Review of Books* (29 February 2002). For a defence of these measures, see Posner n 13 above.

¹⁸ See, eg J Kekes, 'The Prevalence of Evil' in *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 1997) 23–45.

¹⁹ C Schmitt, *Political Theology* (George Schwab (trans) Chicago, 2005) 5.

then feel in constant need of great men to lead them.²⁰ Perfectionists accordingly have incentives to emphasize if not exaggerate potential threats to a community's security, for this gives them access to tools to suppress internal opposition that would otherwise not be available to them and thereby supports the ultimate realization of their perfectionist programme. In this case, Machiavellian methods of maintaining power and what is conceived of as furthering the good of a perfectionist society coincide.

E. Identification of the Fundamental Social Unit

Another theme of liberalism is its identification of the individual as the fundamental social unit. This is not to say that liberals do not recognize the value of community, or that they do not believe that community identity is something that government should foster and support. On the contrary, liberals commonly hold both views. But liberals value community because a sense of community identity is a necessary background condition for individuals to develop their own concept of personal identity and thrive. In other words, community identity and values are cherished because they are instrumental to the formation and realization of individual identity and values. Under liberalism, the community is derivative of the individual not the other way around.

It is because they view the individual as the fundamental social unit that liberals value personal autonomy so highly. From their concern for personal autonomy, liberals then derive a whole range of moral limits designed to ensure separation between the public and the private spheres of life.²¹ But while liberalism's commitment to personal autonomy is important, it is not as foundational as many critics of liberalism believe.²² Liberals do not begin with a concern for autonomy, but with the presupposition that the individual is the fundamental social unit, and it is from this presupposition that their concern for autonomy is derived.

Perfectionists, in contrast, begin with the presupposition that the community is the fundamental social unit. Consider, for example, this statement by Sayyid Qutb, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood whose writings provide the intellectual underpinning for some of the most radical elements within Islamic fundamentalism:

[The] Muslim community does not denote the name of a land in which Islam resides, nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time. It is

²⁰ See Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli' n 1 above, 61.

²¹ This distinction between the public and the private is accordingly political, not analytic. See, eg R Hale, 'Coercion and Distribution in a Supposedly Non-coercive State' (1923) 38 *Political Science Quarterly* 470.

²² See, eg S Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge, 1998) esp pt 2.

the name of a group of people whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source.²³

For those who hold this view, the community is not an aggregate of individuals; individuals are instantiations of their community, whose collective characteristics are repeated like fractal geometry in every one of its essentially identical individual parts. Communities do not derive their identities from the individuals that make them up; individuals derive their identities from the communities of which they are part. The individual is not prior to the community; the community is prior to the individual. There is no separation between the private and the public—the individual exists and persists only as a part of a communal being, ‘as a river that flows into the ocean does indeed persist in the midst of the waters, but without name or personal identity.’²⁴

Given the presupposition that the community is the fundamental social unit, a community can exist even if it has no members. This is how, for example, Qutb can state that the Muslim community has been extinct for centuries, ‘crushed under the weight of those false laws and customs which are not even remotely related to the Islamic teachings, and which, in spite of all this, calls itself the “world of Islam”’. According to Qutb, the entire modern world, whether it calls itself Muslim or non-Muslim, is in a state of *jahiliyyah*, or ignorance of the divine guidance. It has therefore become necessary for a small ‘vanguard’ to initiate a movement of Islamic revival, to lift this veil of ignorance and bring the wayward home to their community, which can then reassert its rightful place as the leader of the world.²⁵ For perfectionists like Qutb, the primary role of morality is accordingly not the protection of the individual and his autonomy, as liberals seem to believe, but the protection of the community and the bonds that hold the community together.

There is much more that needs to be said about the nature of these competing views and their respective ramifications, but I will not attempt to do so now. I will merely note that neither view of the fundamental social unit should be understood as an empirical claim. In other words, neither view is based on empirical observations about how individuals see themselves as constituted in the world, although arguments for each view often include such claims.²⁶ Each view is a presupposition, an ordering from which various moral questions can be derived, based on decisions about how one should define the realm within which morality is to operate. The decision to accept one presupposition or the other does not depend on contingent facts about human psychology and self-identification, and therefore is not subject to attack by reference to this kind of empirical evidence. The only kind of empirical evidence that might be relevant to this decision is evidence regarding

²³ S Qutb, *Milestones* (Beirut, 1980) 11.

²⁴ Joseph de Maistre, *Study of Sovereignty*, book 1, ch 10, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Joseph de Maistre* (Paris-Lyon, 1884–93) vol 1, 376, as translated by I Berlin. See I Berlin, ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’ in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton, 1990) 91–174, 126.

²⁵ See Qutb, *Milestones* n 23 above, 9–22, 101–3.

²⁶ See, eg M Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1998).

the consequences of holding each presupposition, for such evidence could be used to construct a moral argument in favour of one and against the other. Whether such an approach would be appropriate, however, is itself a controversial question, one that I will unfortunately have to leave until another time.

F. The Separation of Religious and Political Authority

Another theme of liberalism is that it is hostile to the conflation of religious and political authority. The role of religion within liberalism is to provide moral, not political, guidance to the individual. Religious leaders are within their role when they provide instruction on the Word of God and on the moral values that can be found therein, but they trespass on the political if they use their religious authority to instruct the faithful how to vote or otherwise direct them to adopt controversial political positions they have not arrived at independently themselves. And while religious leaders are not disqualified from holding political office within liberalism, if elected or appointed they must not delegate the political power conferred upon them to some external authority, but must exercise their power according to their own conscience and in accordance with the wishes of all those that they have been elected or appointed to represent.

Of course, the separation of religious and political authority presupposes that it is possible to separate the private from the public, a presupposition that as we have seen many perfectionists reject. Perfectionists are accordingly much more comfortable with mixing religious and political authority, as long as this is done to promote values with which they happen to agree. They are happy for religious leaders to publicly adopt controversial political positions and to use their religious authority to marshal the faithful in support of these positions, a phenomenon that is becoming more and more common in American politics and is largely responsible for bringing the neo-conservatives to power. It is also, of course, a phenomenon that has been going on for years in the Muslim world, most notably in Afghanistan and Iran.

For some perfectionists, this conflation of political and religious authority is simply a matter of expediency, a tool for consolidating their political power, and not a consequence of their personal religious views. For others, however, it is conceptual, the result of a deep commitment to the role of religion in the organization and regulation of political and social life. Strauss, for example, viewed religion instrumentally, as the cement that held a community together.²⁷ Maistre, in contrast, believed there could be no society without a state, no state without sovereignty, no sovereignty without infallibility, and no infallibility without

²⁷ See S Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York, 1997) 37. This is apparently also the attitude toward religion of Karl Rove, the political mastermind behind George Bush's rise to power. See J Moore and W Slater, *The Architect: Karl Rove and the Master Plan for Absolute Power* (New York, 2006).

God, from whom all legitimate authority was derived.²⁸ Qutb also saw a conceptual unity between religion and politics, and believed that separating the two had created a 'hideous schizophrenia' that left secular society exhausted, with no resources left to guide human life,²⁹ a view that continues to be a central tenet of Islamic fundamentalism and is also prominent among many current members of the Christian right.³⁰ And while some perfectionist (eg communist) political communities are hostile to all forms of religion and religious authority, this is because they see religion as a political competitor rather than as something that can be separated from and exist independently of the direction of political life. Regardless of the form that perfectionism takes, perfectionists accordingly see political and religious authority as inextricably intermixed. If the exercise of religious authority can help move a political community toward perfection, there is no reason why it should not be used to do so. And if it cannot, it need not be tolerated, but should simply be suppressed. In either case, the only moral question presented is whether those with religious authority will support or hinder the perfectionist political agenda that those in power happen to embrace.

G. The Role of Public Discourse and Debate

Part of the reason why liberals object to the conflation of religious and political authority is that such a combination distorts the role that liberals assign to public discourse and debate. Liberals believe that all members of a political community should have an opportunity to participate in political decision-making under conditions of full information, and that the purpose of public discourse and debate is to persuade others of the rightness of one's position by resorting to arguments that one's opponents could not reasonably reject.³¹ But this process is subverted when political action is simply directed by religious leaders rather than based on an individual's own assessment of the strength of the arguments presented. The conflation of religious and political authority is therefore objectionable to liberals because it is often used as a tool for cutting off debate, while perfectionists view this as simply another method of ensuring that a political community conforms to their vision of the ideal.

Not only do perfectionists often resort to religious authority as a tool for cutting off debate, they also embrace the noble lie—Plato's idea that the common people are incapable of seeing the truth even when it is laid out before them and

²⁸ See Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 134.

²⁹ See S Qutb, *Islam: The Religion of the Future* (Kuwait, 1992) 34–60. For useful discussions of Qutb's concept of the relationship between religious and political life, see S Khatab, *The Power of Sovereignty* (New York, 2006) 7–47, 119–71, and S Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb* (New York, 2006) 164. For the views of Shiite fundamentalists on this issue, see Ayatollah R Khomeini, *Islamic Government* (New York, 1979), in which the Ayatollah sets forth his conception of the unity of religion and politics and argues for outright clerical rule.

³⁰ See K Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York, 2000).

³¹ See, eg TM Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

therefore may be manipulated and led by falsehoods whenever necessary to do so. Machiavelli, for example, believed 'to speak the truth is sensible only when one speaks to wise men',³² and Nietzsche also embraced 'the Platonic notion of the noble delusion'.³³ And, of course, a similar sentiment lurks behind Strauss's theory of esoteric writing—the view that all the work of the great classical political philosophers was written in a kind of code designed to convey the truth to the enlightened few but conceal it from the masses.³⁴ While liberals consider such Machiavellian techniques a violation of the moral limits on public discourse and debate, perfectionists do not believe that the use of such methods presents a moral question. Under perfectionism, effective instruments of policy are by definition morally acceptable, not just because the ends justify the means, but because perfectionists disagree with the view that states of affairs necessarily include the means that were required to produce them. For perfectionists, in a world defined by ends, means are simply not subject to the same kind of a moral evaluation.

Perfectionists also tend to reject persuasion as an objective of political interaction altogether. They criticize liberals for engaging in 'perpetual discussion' when what is required is decisive action.³⁵ 'Values can only be asserted or posited by overcoming others, not by reasoning with them', claims Allan Bloom.³⁶ Rather than view their opponents as individuals to be persuaded, perfectionists tend to view them as carriers of disease, threatening to infect the body politic. One does not deal with carriers of disease by trying to persuade them to get better; one simply does whatever is necessary to isolate and eliminate them from the body, thereby preserving the purity of the community. The only acceptable objective of political interaction for perfectionists is accordingly decisive victory, the kind of victory in which one's opponents are not just defeated, but dominated and destroyed, no matter what the stakes. There is no need for intellectual engagement and debate, for this might lead to compromise, and compromise is not an option. The only choice is conquest or capitulation.

H. The Relative Priority of Reason and Faith in Pure and Practical Reasoning

Whether it is a consequence of their insistence on strict separation between religious and political authority or a cause, liberals elevate reason over faith in their pure and practical reasoning, at least with regard to matters that are political,

³² See L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, 1958) 34.

³³ See Strauss, *Natural Right and History* n 8 above, 26.

³⁴ See L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, 1952) 22–37. For an extended discussion of Strauss's theory of esoteric writing, see S. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York, 1988), ch 2.

³⁵ See, eg Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* n 7 above, 71–2, and Schmitt, *Political Theology* n 19 above, 63.

³⁶ A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1978) 202.

not personal. In part this is because of their attitude toward public discourse and debate, for the realm of reason is often the only domain in which those of different faiths can meet and find a common basis for discussion and agreement. But it is also a consequence of the overall approach liberals take to understanding their experience of the world. Liberals search for rational, natural explanations for all phenomena, social as well as natural, and even when this search ends in uncertainty they tend to resist the lure of supernatural explanations and rely on probabilistic reasoning to arrive at decisions about which action or belief is most appropriate to embrace.³⁷ Given their approach to pure and practical reasoning and their commitment to debating political issues under conditions of full information, liberals are committed to public education, and believe that public education should be secular, free from both religious influence and control.

Perfectionists, in contrast, distrust liberalism's commitment to reason and the scientific method.³⁸ 'All intellectuals are bad', Maistre tells us, 'but the most dangerous are the natural scientists'.³⁹ Perfectionists see the scientific method and its corresponding exaltation of reason as a threat to authority, and therefore to stability and order. But more importantly, perfectionists see reason as claiming a unique relationship to truth that is undeserved. To Maistre, 'reason is in reality the feeblest of instruments, incapable alike of altering the behaviour of men or explaining its causes'.⁴⁰ Faith is the great motivator, and therefore the better source of knowledge about the world. And faith is not subject to rebuttal by experience, so the mere fact that there is no evidence to support a faith-based belief, or overwhelming evidence against it, is not a decisive reason for concluding that it is not true, a view that other perfectionists also seem to hold. Indeed, Berlin's assessment of Maistre could apply with equal force to the approach taken by many neo-conservatives today:

Maistre is a dogmatic thinker whose ultimate principles and premises nothing can shake, and whose considerable ingenuity and intellectual power are devoted to making the facts fit his preconceived notions, not to developing concepts which fit newly discovered, or newly visualized, facts. He is like a lawyer arguing a brief: the conclusion is foregone—he knows he must arrive at it somehow, for he is convinced of its truth, no matter what he might learn or encounter.⁴¹

³⁷ See, eg J Waldron, 'The Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism' (1987) 37 *The Philosophical Quarterly* 127, 134–5.

³⁸ For a history of perfectionist hostility toward science and the scientific method, see S Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, (Cambridge, MA., 1993) esp 23–5 and 247–52.

³⁹ See Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 114–120.

⁴⁰ Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 122. Maistre, of course, is simply part of a long tradition of religious hostility to reason that has many adherents, including among the contemporary Christian right. See generally M Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York, 2006) esp pp 86 and 127.

⁴¹ Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 162.

For perfectionists, faith reveals truth, or at least all important truth, and reason merely serves to confirm or to disguise it.⁴²

Note, however, that relying on faith rather than reason to provide decisive reasons for action and belief does not necessarily mean relying on religious faith. For perfectionists, government is a form of religion, and political faith no different than any other.⁴³ While the faith on which perfectionists rely often has a religious source, it may also be an expression of some non-religious myth, such as the infallibility of the governing elite, or the natural superiority of their race, gender, ideas, nation, culture, or 'the market'. In either case, one simply believes and then follows this belief until it is fulfilled. Lack of success is not a sign of error but of lack of commitment. One cannot be wrong, merely halfhearted or incompetent, an explanation that is becoming increasingly popular among neo-conservatives for what has gone wrong with the American intervention in Iraq, but which they treated with barely disguised contempt when it was offered by those attempting to defend communist perfectionism from neo-conservative attack.

I. Equality

The final theme of liberalism that I wish to highlight is its commitment to equality. Liberals are often accused of being insufficiently committed to economic equality by perfectionists on the left, but overly preoccupied with economic equality by perfectionists on the right, an inconsistency that many liberals take as evidence that they have got their commitment to economic equality just right. But a commitment to *economic* equality is not, in fact, one of the fundamental presuppositions of liberalism. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, the limited ability of liberal societies to produce greater economic equality is an effect of certain other presuppositions or, more precisely, the product of these presuppositions and certain inherent features of human nature.⁴⁴ At the tectonic level, the difference between liberalism and perfectionism does not lie in their respective commitments to economic equality, but in their respective commitments to *moral* and therefore *political* equality.

⁴² For example, the Bush administration has consistently been willing to disregard and even suppress scientific evidence that runs counter to what its neo-conservative members believe. See C Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York, 2005); Union of Concerned Scientists, 'Scientific Integrity in Policymaking: An investigation into the Bush Administration's Misuse of Science' (March 2004) and 'Scientific Integrity in Policymaking: Further Investigation into the Bush Administration's Misuse of Science' (July 2004). And neo-conservative hostility to reason is not limited to topics within the natural sciences—it applies with equal fervour to topics within the evaluative or social sciences as well. See, for example, the discussion of the history of neo-conservative disdain for the intelligence community's assessments of the dangers posed by the Soviet Union and Iraq in S Hersh, 'Selective Intelligence' *The New Yorker* (12 May 2003).

⁴³ See Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 125–6 (quoting Maistre), and C Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Ellen Kennedy (trans), Chicago, 1988) 76 (quoting Mussolini).

⁴⁴ See MR Reiff, 'The Politics of Masochism' (2003) 46 *Inquiry* 29.

There are two spheres within which these commitments operate: among members of one's own political community; and between members of one's own political community and outsiders. Liberals believe that all people have equal intrinsic moral worth, regardless of the political community to which they happen to belong. Liberals may nevertheless give the interests of members of their own political community greater weight in their moral reasoning, but this is because they find all-things-considered reasons for doing so, not because they see the interests of outsiders as intrinsically less valuable. Perfectionists, in contrast, do not believe that all people have equal intrinsic moral worth. Perfectionists believe that anyone who is not a member of their political community—regardless of whether this community is defined along racial, religious, national, or ethnic lines—is of lesser moral worth, like an animal or artifact, or perhaps of no moral worth at all.⁴⁵ Perfectionists may find instrumental reasons for giving the interests of outsiders equal moral weight in their moral reasoning, but they see no intrinsic reason for doing so.

Within their own political community, liberals believe that government must treat everyone's interests with equal concern and respect.⁴⁶ Exactly what this means is very controversial within liberalism, but no matter how it is cashed out, perfectionists are against it—they reject the idea that the interests of every individual are to be given equal weight in deciding what is right to do.⁴⁷ Of course, given their belief that the community rather than the individual is the fundamental social unit, perfectionists believe that the interests of the community (defined as something other than simply the sum of the interests of its members) always trump the interests of the individual. But even when a conflict involves just the interests of individuals, these interests need not be treated equally. Given variations in human temperaments, talents, and abilities, some will naturally have a greater capacity to achieve perfection than others. Those who are perceived as being members of this elite group will accordingly be entitled to special privileges, for it is by encouraging the development of such individuals that the community moves itself closer to perfection.⁴⁸

There are perhaps other presuppositions that could be added to the list of those on which liberalism and perfectionism differ, and perhaps some of those I have included could be derived from others on the list and therefore should not be set forth as fundamental presuppositions in their own right. I do not contend that my list is necessarily exhaustive, or that it is reduced to only its most elemental

⁴⁵ Aristotle, for example, thought that some men were natural slaves, 'intended by nature to be governed'. See Aristotle, *The Politics* (S Everson (ed), Cambridge, 1988) 1256b 22–26.

⁴⁶ See, eg R Dworkin, 'Liberalism' in S Hampshire (ed), *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁴⁷ See, eg A MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988) 98.

⁴⁸ While soft perfectionists often try to build egalitarian assumptions into their perfectionist vision and thereby avoid the charge of elitism, hard perfectionists do not shy away from the charge of elitism—they embrace it. See R Arneson, 'Perfectionism and Politics' (2000) 111 *Ethics* 37, 39–42.

components. But we do now have a basis for comparison, and a sense of how liberalism and perfectionism differ at the tectonic level, and this should be all that is required to place the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism in its proper context. And now that this is done, we can move on to a more detailed examination of that claim.

II. Liberalism and Nihilism

If we were to summarize the specific complaints that perfectionists level at the various liberal presuppositions we have examined, we might say that the perfectionist attack on liberalism has five general themes. First, liberalism is weak and indecisive, unable to recognize or deal effectively with evil, and therefore incapable of maintaining internal stability and order and, even more importantly, of securing the physical and moral integrity of the community from external threats. Second, liberalism is morally decadent, encouraging the belief that everything is permitted and undermining the authority of those best situated to provide moral guidance to society, obscuring rather than illuminating the one true path to creation of the ideal political community. Third, liberalism is overly individualistic, promoting relentless self-obsession and encouraging the satiation of base personal desires while making no attempt to recognize much less re-enforce the shared background assumptions and bonds of community that hold society together and form the basis of what we call the common good. Fourth, liberalism is excessively rationalistic, or at least rationalistic in the wrong way, looking to reason for direction when what is required is a faith-based act of will, but denying that reason plays a role when it comes to ordinary moral decision-making. And finally, liberalism is incoherent, for the ends it purports to embrace are either individually impossible to fulfill or inconsistent with one another and therefore impossible to fulfill as a set, raising social expectations that cannot be satisfied and ensuring that society will be plagued by internal conflict and division.

Exactly how the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism maps onto these various criticisms is unclear. Depending on what nihilism turns out to be, the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism could simply be a shorthand way of saying that liberalism has one or more of these problems in the extreme, or it could be a separate and independent criticism, a claim that liberalism produces a society that is not merely weak, decadent, overly individualistic, rationalistic in the wrong way, and plagued by internal conflict, but one in which morality plays no role at all. In either case, however, the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism is a fundamental part of the perfectionist attack, for it is what gives that attack its force—it lends urgency to all the other perfectionist complaints, and gives us reason to reject liberalism outright rather than try to tinker with it and overcome whatever lesser shortcomings its perfectionist critics may have accurately identified.

To get a sense of the seriousness that perfectionists attach to the charge that liberalism leads to nihilism, consider the following. For Nietzsche, nihilism is 'the will to nothingness, the great nausea' that leaves man 'suicidal'.⁴⁹ For Strauss, nihilism is 'the contemporary rejection of natural right', the view that 'every preference, however evil, base, or insane, has to be judged before the tribunal of reason to be as legitimate as any other preference', a view that represents 'the second crisis of modernity—the crisis of our time'.⁵⁰ For Qutb, nihilism is a 'disease', an absence of vital values that has left mankind 'on the brink of the precipice', in danger of 'complete annihilation'.⁵¹ And similarly grim descriptions of the danger that nihilism poses to contemporary society can be found throughout the writings and other pronouncements of the followers of both Strauss and Qutb.⁵² So while any defence of liberalism would need to go beyond the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism before it could be complete, responding to the charge that liberalism leads to nihilism is the place where any defence of liberalism must start.

A. What is Nihilism?

The first thing we must do before we can defend liberalism against the charge that it leads to nihilism is get clearer about exactly what nihilism is supposed to be, for those who make the charge are often not very clear about this themselves. First, by associating liberalism with nihilism, perfectionists could be claiming that liberalism leads to the belief that life is meaningless, that it has no purpose or value. We might call this the existential conception of nihilism, since it is popular with that group of philosophers commonly referred to as existentialists.⁵³ The reason why this might be the conception of nihilism that perfectionists have in mind is that if one believed that life had no value, one might not be very concerned with preserving it, and this seems to be what many contemporary perfectionists

⁴⁹ F Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed), Cambridge, 1994) 71, 94, and 127.

⁵⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History* n 8 above, 5, 42, and 253.

⁵¹ Qutb, *Milestones* n 23 above, 7. While Qutb does not use the word 'nihilism' when he refers to the absence of vital values in modern society, it is apparent from his writings that some form of nihilism is what he has in mind, and not merely *jahiliyyah*, or ignorance of the divine guidance.

⁵² See, eg I Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, 1995) 101, 103 (describing 'self-destructive nihilism' as the 'enemy', the one 'authentic and permanent possibility that any society had to guard against'); A Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* n 36 above, 155–7 (describing nihilism as 'the soul's basement', characterized by 'a chaos of instincts or passions' and 'existential despair'). Indeed, just as the world is steeped in *jahiliyyah* and nihilism to the followers of Qutb, for Straussians, 'the world is full of nihilists'. A Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, 2004) 120. See also Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* n 27 above, 7–9, 19 and C Zuchart and M Zuchart, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago, 2006) esp 236–9.

⁵³ See, eg A Camus, *The Rebel* (A Bower (trans), London, 1953); J-P Sartre, *Nausea* (L Alexander (trans), New York, 1964): Nietzsche also sometimes refers to nihilism as the belief that life is meaningless or valueless. See B Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, 2006) 21–53, esp 23–33.

are thinking when they blame liberalism for the cavalcade of horrors that characterized the first half of the 20th century. And believing that life had no value would certainly explain why modern man might be depressed and 'suicidal', as Nietzsche claims.

There is a problem, however, if we assume that the existential conception of nihilism is what perfectionists are referring to when they claim that liberalism leads to nihilism. To believe that life has no value, one must have a theory of value, for otherwise one would have no basis for judgement. But this is precisely where liberalism is supposed to have gone wrong—it lacks a sufficiently substantive theory of value, which is why perfectionism is supposed to be an improvement upon it. So if nihilism is the belief that life has no value, it is hard to see how liberalism could lead to this. And if liberalism does contain a sufficiently substantive theory of value, it is hard to see why liberals would be especially likely to become nihilists, for there is no reason to believe that their theory of value would necessarily be one that life could not fulfill. The existentialist conception of nihilism accordingly cannot be what perfectionists have in mind, for it cannot be causally tied to some inherent feature of liberalism.

Alternatively, the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism could be an epistemological claim about the ability of people in a liberal society to access or otherwise determine what their values are. On this interpretation, nihilism is not the belief that life has no value, but a form of malaise, a sense that life *does* have value combined with the frustrating feeling that the source and nature of this value is beyond our ability to comprehend. As C Wright Mills observed, when people know what they value and do not feel that what they value is under threat, they experience *well-being*. When they know what they value but *do* feel under threat, they experience *fear*, and in extreme cases *panic*. When they do not feel under threat but do not know what they value, they experience *apathy*. And when they do not know what they value yet still feel under threat, they experience *anxiety*.⁵⁴ On the epistemological conception, a nihilistic society would accordingly be steeped in either apathy or anxiety, depending on whether it perceived itself as under threat.

There is some reason to think this is what perfectionists might have in mind when they speak of nihilism because they do claim that liberalism's lack of an overriding substantive theory of value leaves a political community alternatively indifferent and indecisive, paralyzed by internal conflicts, and characterized by a great deal of unproductive existential angst. But the crisis in which modern liberal society finds itself is not merely a *psychological* crisis, according to most perfectionists, it is a *moral* and *political* one, one that is directly caused by conceptual errors and inconsistencies, not indirectly caused by epistemological difficulties. The problem is not that people in a liberal society are unable to figure out what their values are, but that such people are led to believe there are no values to be found. It is moral leadership that people require, perfectionists contend,

⁵⁴ See CW Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, 1959) 17–8.

not simply a better education in the mechanics of moral reasoning. Apathy and anxiety may accordingly be symptoms of the crisis of modernity, but they are not the cause. While it comes closer to describing what perfectionists think ails liberalism, the epistemological conception of nihilism still fails to capture precisely what perfectionists claim has gone wrong.

A more promising alternative is to interpret the charge that liberalism leads to nihilism as a claim that liberalism leads to the belief that there are no objective values, meaning that liberalism suggests that values are not 'real', not 'part of the fabric of the world', and that evaluative statements accordingly cannot be either true or false. Understood in this way, the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism becomes a claim that liberalism encourages a certain metaphysical view about the ontological status of moral judgements, and value nihilism reduces to value subjectivism. There is some reason to believe that this is what perfectionists have in mind when they claim that liberalism leads to nihilism because there is textual support for this view in many of their writings. Nietzsche, for example, claimed that moral values are 'false projections' onto a world that is empty of them, and that when we make moral judgements, we simply 'fashion something that had not been there before.'⁵⁵ And Leo Strauss expressly referred to nihilism as the belief that there are no objective values.⁵⁶

It is not at all clear, however, that what these and other perfectionists identify as the consequences of moral nihilism are consequences that moral subjectivism alone could possibly entail. Indeed, it is not at all clear that embracing moral subjectivism would necessarily have *any* effect on the way people function in or experience the world. For example, while moral judgements cannot be true or false in the same way that judgements about physical facts can be true or false if moral judgements are subjective, they can still be true or false in a meaningful sense—they can be more or less well-supported by reasons.⁵⁷ Subjective judgements can therefore still be the subject of disagreement, for people can disagree as to what counts as a reason for action or belief, the weight to be assigned to the reasons that do count, and how conflicting reasons are to be balanced against one another. Subjective judgements can also function like objective judgements in every other way—they can form the basis of a conception of the good, allow us to distinguish right from wrong, and enable us to implement a coherent plan of life. There is accordingly no reason to believe that embracing moral subjectivism would change the way anyone actually behaves, or leave people feeling that they are disabled from subjecting others to moral criticism.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See F Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Walter Kaufman (ed), New York, 1967), s 12(B); F Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Bernard Williams (ed), Cambridge, 2001), s 301.

⁵⁶ See eg Strauss, *Natural Right and History* n 8 above, 37.

⁵⁷ For further discussion of this view, see Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* n 31 above.

⁵⁸ This, for example, is Hare's view. See RM Hare, 'Nothing Matters' in Hare, *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1972) 32–47, esp 40–41. For a recent discussion of Hare's view, see D Parfit, 'Normativity' in R Shafer-Landau (ed), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics: Volume I*

But perhaps there is a deeper problem that moral subjectivism creates. While it may be true that subjective moral judgements can be based on reasons at the applied level, one must have a moral theory to determine what counts as a reason for what, and moral subjectivism seems to imply that the selection of a moral theory at this higher level of abstraction cannot be based on reason, but must be based on unfettered self-interested desire alone. And according to some perfectionists, if the selection of a moral theory cannot be justified by reason, then its applications cannot either. Roberto Unger, for example, argues that what is wrong with liberalism is that it ultimately reduces to a 'morality of desire' that 'provides no standards for preferring some desires to others'. Having accepted the 'moral impotence of reason' at this higher level, liberals are accordingly committed to 'absolute moral scepticism', for a moral theory that cannot be selected by reason cannot justifiably be considered a *moral* theory at all.⁵⁹

There are two problems, however, with associating nihilism with this view. First, the same criticism could be levelled against perfectionism. Once one has embraced a particular perfectionist view, one has a basis for using reason to make moral judgements. But on what is the selection of a particular perfectionist view to be based? Whatever conditions characterize this pre-moral choice situation and whatever criteria for choice apply, they apply with equal force to the position of the objectivist and the subjectivist. Remember, the disagreement between the objectivist and the subjectivist is not about the content of morality, but about its ontological status—that is, whether moral truths exist independently of our ability to recognize them. There is nothing about this disagreement that gives the objectivist more tools of reason in the pre-moral choice situation than the subjectivist. So if reason is unavailable to the subjectivist at this level, it is unavailable to the objectivist too. If this means subjective moral judgements cannot meaningfully be said to be true or false, or right or wrong, then objective moral judgements have these problems too.

No doubt this is why many perfectionists expressly *deny* that reason is available in the pre-moral choice situation, and criticize liberals for thinking that it is. Indeed, rather than deplore the unavailability of reason at this level, these perfectionists celebrate it. Schmitt, for example, argues that the unavailability of reason at this level is precisely why dictatorship as a form of government is justified—political leadership requires the ability to make decisions without resort to reason, decisions that are absolute, irrevocable, and 'created out of nothingness'.⁶⁰ And as we have already seen, a similar contempt for the idea that there is a role

(New York, 2007) 325–80, 325–30. While Parfit disagrees with Hare's claim that the difference between moral objectivism and subjectivism is trivial, he agrees that embracing one view rather than the other would not have any discernable effect on the way people actually behave or experience the world.

⁵⁹ R Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge & Politics* (New York, 1975) 52. Strauss, of course, held a similar view. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History* n 8 above, 42, 49, 62–3, and 74.

⁶⁰ See Schmitt, *Political Theology* n 19 above, 66.

for reason in the selection of moral theories can be found throughout the work of Maistre.⁶¹ So even if moral subjectivism did disassociate morality and reason at this higher level of abstraction, this cannot be what these perfectionists have in mind when they claim that liberalism leads to nihilism.

Second, it is not at all clear that moral subjectivism *does* disassociate morality and reason at this higher level of abstraction. Reason has a role to play even here, for requirements of coherence, consistency, and universalizability impose limits on the moral theories we may select. People in the pre-moral position are therefore not subject to the unrestrained forces of raw self-interested desire, but to the rational forces of enlightened self-interest, and there is no reason to believe that these forces will produce mostly unacceptable versions of morality. Indeed, the entire Kantian project, both in its original and its various contemporary forms, is devoted to developing a moral theory using the facilities of reason alone. And if the requirements of coherence, consistency, and universalizability do not eliminate all but one moral theory from consideration, this merely means that as far as reason is concerned, a plurality of moral theories are equally defensible, a result that supports the liberal pluralist approach to political morality and suggests that the anti-pluralist perfectionist approach is incorrect.

There is nevertheless one further possibility to consider. Perhaps the problem with moral subjectivism is not that it leads people to believe that nothing matters, but that it leads them to believe that nothing matters very much. In other words, what moral subjectivism does is undermine our commitment to our values. Subjectivism is therefore problematic because it weakens the force of moral judgment, and a society that is only weakly committed to its values is open to moral drift and ultimately to capture by charismatic moral zealots whose commitment to their own values is, in contrast, fierce. But where are these zealots supposed to come from? If they can be produced by a liberal society too, then perfectionists have to explain why the commitment of most but not all people in a liberal society is likely to be weak, for there is no problem if many people have a strong commitment to their values or if no one does. And why should we assume that those who are fiercely committed to their values are likely to be committed to values we should objectively reject? Unless there is some reason to believe that these values are most likely to be pernicious, there is no cause for concern. And finally, even if there were cause for concern, why is the solution to turn everyone into zealots rather than to limit the influence of the zealots who manage to insert themselves into our midst? The solution perfectionists propose simply assumes that perfectionism is correct.

If a subjectivist conception of moral nihilism is not sufficient to show that nihilism would have the profoundly negative effects that perfectionists associate with it, there is only one possible candidate left. When perfectionists charge that liberalism leads to nihilism, they must mean that liberalism leads to the belief

⁶¹ See Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above.

that that there are no values, where 'values' is understood to include *both* subjective and objective values. Not only does this conception of nihilism directly incorporate the central complaint that perfectionists make against liberalism and capture the tone in which this claim is usually conveyed, there also appears to be a plausible causal mechanism to explain how liberalism might lead to this kind of nihilism. In fact there appear to be two. I will say more in a moment about whether these purported causal mechanisms are as plausible as they seem, but before we get to this, there are two other problems that I want to address.

B. Is Nihilism Coherent?

First, is the belief that there are no values coherent? What would it be like to hold such a view? Could anyone actually do so? If you believed that there were no values, what criteria would you use for making decisions? Suppose, for example, you were a nihilist and hungry. Would you get up and get something to eat? Or would you, like one of the characters in Beckett's *Endgame*, simply have a detached, bemused attitude toward your hunger, unable to determine whether this feeling was something you wanted to encourage or suppress?⁶²

In answering these questions, I will first assume that the unitary theory of value is correct. Under the unitary theory of value, there are not moral, prudential, and aesthetic values, there are simply values, or to put it differently, all values are moral values in some meaningful sense. If nihilism is understood as the belief that there are no values, subjective or objective, and the unitary theory of value is correct, then if one were a nihilist one could not have values of any kind. But it is not clear how we could eliminate all forms of value from an agent yet still leave the agent with the ability to engage in practical reasoning. Indeed, as Rawls notes, without at least a thin theory of the good, it is not clear how one could evaluate options or make rational choices about anything.⁶³ It is not even clear how one could *think*.

To see why, consider the following. The desire-based account of value says that something has value because we desire it. But if I have no values, the desire-based account of value will not do, for if I have desires I must have values and thus I could have neither if I am a nihilist and the desire-based account of value is true. And with neither desires nor values, what source of reasons for action would remain? Without some explanation for this, it does not appear that the nihilist would be able to respond intelligently to the world or function in it in any meaningful way. The nihilist could only act or react on instinct, out of habit, or perhaps simply on some randomized basis irrespective of stimulus. On this conception, the nihilist would be reduced not merely to the functionality of an animal, but to something less than this. He would be a primitive organism, incapable of forming

⁶² See S Beckett, *Endgame* (New York, 1958) 36.

⁶³ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* n 2 above, s 60, 347–50.

ends or rationally selecting means to deal with his environment, and therefore at the mercy of the principles of evolutionary biology, which would alone determine whether his instinctual genetic programming was sufficient for him to survive.

The result is no different if we assume that the buck-passing account of value rather than the desire-based account is true. Under the buck-passing account, having value simply means having properties that give us reason to value whatever has those properties.⁶⁴ If a nihilist has no values, then either reasons to feel otherwise do not exist, or if they do exist, the nihilist is unable to see them and therefore cannot act on them in any event. Under the buck-passing account, the nihilist could only have reasons for action that arise out of properties that did not provide reasons to attach value or disvalue to some action. But it is not clear that any such reasons would exist. To believe that there were, one would have to believe in the buck-passing account of value but the desire-based account of reasons, under which desires can provide reasons for action. It is not clear, however, that anyone could coherently hold such a combination of views. Sorting this out would be a complex matter, too complex to fully explore here, but examples of contemporary theorists who embrace this combination of views are certainly difficult to find. Those theorists who accept the buck-passing account of value all seem to embrace a value-based account of reasons, under which desires do *not* provide reasons for action except perhaps in some trivial or exceptional cases, and they reject the idea that a functional set of reasons for action could be provided by desires alone.⁶⁵ In any event under either the desire-based account of value or the buck-passing account, once one has removed values, it is not clear that there is anything left. At least it is not clear that whatever *is* left is enough to leave the nihilist equipped to engage in practical reasoning. And if that is true, then nihilism is not a belief about the world that anyone could actually maintain.

But suppose we reject the unitary theory of value, and accept that there is something that we can characterize as the moral point of view, where this is taken to mean something more than simply the view that one theory of morality is superior to whatever other theories are on offer. If we accept the existence of a specifically moral point of view, value can be moral, prudential, or aesthetic. Under this view, the moral nihilist is not without values, he is simply without *moral* values. Such an individual has no conception of the greater good, but he does have a

⁶⁴ See, eg Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* n 32 above, 95–8.

⁶⁵ See, eg J Raz, 'Incommensurability and Agency', reprinted in *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford, 1999) 46–66; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* n 31 above; D Parfit, 'Rationality and Reasons' in D Egonsson, J Josefsson, B Peterson, and T Ronnow-Rasmussen (eds), *Exploring Practical Philosophy: From Action to Values* (Burlington, Vt. 2001) 17–39. For an argument in favour of a 'hybrid' view under which *all* values and *some* desires can provide reasons for action, see R Chang, 'Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?' in R Jay Wallace, P Pettit, S Scheffler, and M Smith (eds), *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford, 2004) 56–90. Even Chang, however, does not contend that desires alone can supply the full panoply of reasons necessary for practical reasoning; she merely suggests that *some* reasons for action can be desire-based rather than value-based and that neither account of reasons is entirely correct.

conception of his personal good, of what would make his own life go better, and of aesthetics, of what constitutes beauty. The moral nihilist is therefore simply someone whose actions are driven by his unrestrained self-interest, or by the pursuit of beauty, or by some combination of the two. Such a nihilist can still have desires, as long as these are limited to desires for prudential or aesthetic goods, and he can still have reasons for action, for these can be provided either by these desires or by properties that make whatever has them good for him personally or aesthetically good.

While the claim that there is a moral point of view is controversial, it is at least possible that such a point of view exists.⁶⁶ And if we allow for non-moral value, a conception of nihilism that denies both objective and subjective moral value would be coherent. But if perfectionists rely on the existence of a moral point of view to make their conception of nihilism coherent, they have another problem. If they allow the moral nihilist to have prudential and aesthetic values, it is once again no longer clear that nihilism would be bad for us. At least it is no longer clear that the consequences of embracing nihilism would be as bad as most perfectionists seem to claim.

C. Is Nihilism Bad for Us?

To argue that moral nihilism is bad for us even if it does not constitute total nihilism, perfectionists have to claim that there is something profoundly morally disturbing in a society where everyone is dedicated to the pursuit of non-moral values. But if self-interest is a non-moral value, then this is a difficult argument to make, for many theorists argue that pursuing one's enlightened self-interest is actually what morality requires, or at least that pursuing one's enlightened self-interest and doing what morality requires would often and perhaps even always produce the same kind of behaviour.⁶⁷ Of course, versions of morality that reduce to pursuing one's enlightened self-interest might be overly individualistic, and this is indeed a criticism that perfectionists raise against liberalism, but this is a very different category of complaint than the charge that liberalism leads to nihilism. Nihilism, after all, is supposed to bring us to the brink of a precipice. If nihilism is to be the ultimate horror that perfectionists make it out to be, they must do more than show that it would produce a society that is overly individualistic; they must show that it would produce some sort of moral and political catastrophe.

One way to do this, I suppose, would be to claim that the moral nihilist might not be driven by his perception of his self-interest, but by his conception of aesthetic value. It is not inconceivable that someone motivated purely by a

⁶⁶ For a sceptical discussion of the existence of a moral point of view, see J Raz, 'On the Moral Point of View' reprinted in *Engaging Reason* n 65 above, 247-72.

⁶⁷ See, eg A Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1950).

conception of aesthetic value might be capable of some rather frightening conduct indeed. The emperor Heliogabalus, for example, is rumoured to have had people slaughtered because he thought that red blood on green grass looked beautiful.⁶⁸ And then there is the Joker, the character played by Jack Nicholson in the film *Batman*, who engaged in a series of violent and horrific murders because of what he saw as their aesthetic value. Of course, one can deny that such acts would have the aesthetic value that Heliogabalus and the Joker supposedly attached to them, but if someone were to believe that murder was a beautiful act and did not have any moral values that would prohibit such conduct or any concerns about how committing such acts might affect his own life or life prospects, he might indeed try to make his idiosyncratic aesthetic vision a reality. At the very least, a world full of Jokers would be a world in which it would be exceedingly dangerous to live.

But there is no reason to believe that moral nihilists *are* likely to be Jokers. First, there is no explanation for why being driven solely by aesthetic value would necessarily or even regularly lead to such abhorrent conduct. Indeed, on some interpretations, Nietzsche saw the pursuit of aesthetic value as the way forward for overcoming nihilism, not as the reason why nihilism was bad for us. So even if moral nihilism did leave people inclined to engage solely in the pursuit of aesthetic value, it is not clear why perfectionists would necessarily be overly concerned about this. Second, to desire to engage solely in the pursuit of aesthetic value, moral nihilists would also have to lose their prudential values, and therefore no longer be motivated by the pursuit of what they saw as their self-interest, long-term or otherwise, for prudential values would often if not always restrain those otherwise inclined to pursue some murderous aesthetic vision. So unless perfectionists can explain why moral nihilists are also likely to be prudential nihilists but not aesthetic nihilists, it is not clear that nihilism would bring us anywhere near the brink of the precipice on which liberal society supposedly is teetering.

Indeed, it is not even clear that *total* nihilism would do so, even though this would leave us unable to engage in practical reasoning. Like moral nihilists, total nihilists could not deliberately do evil, for they would have no basis for determining what evil was. But total nihilists could not even deliberately act selfishly, for they would have no basis for determining what their self-interest was, and they could not deliberately seek out aesthetic value either. Indeed, it is hard to see how they could do anything 'deliberately' at all. Of course, the common good that evolutionary biology alone would produce might be very different from the common good of most perfectionist visions of the ideal, but it is not clear that this cost would outweigh the benefit of eliminating the possibility that a society or elements within it might deliberately turn to evil. Total nihilism is bad only

⁶⁸ See RM Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963) 161.

if instinctive or otherwise non-evaluative choices are more often evil than good, but it is not obvious that this would necessarily be true.

D. Two Roads to Nihilism

Let us assume, however, that nihilism is a belief that people could actually hold and that the consequences of this would be as unattractive as perfectionists like to claim. Even so, the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism still has problems, for it is unclear how liberalism is supposed to lead to nihilism, defined as the belief that there are no values. Indeed, there are two branches to this particular perfectionist criticism, and each branch offers a very different explanation for how nihilism is reached.

The first branch has its roots in Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued that nihilism was the natural result of the relentless pursuit of truth, the search for natural, rational explanations of all phenomena.⁶⁹ Those who follow this path must inevitably come to the conclusion that there are no values, for indeed there are no values. Nietzsche took this simply as a fact, and although he implied it was to be mourned rather than applauded, he did not believe this process could be reversed, only overcome. Nihilism was simply the existential state in which modern liberal society found itself, a fact on the ground that had to be dealt with rather than ignored. Exactly how Nietzsche thought nihilism could be overcome is a matter of some controversy, but while the details of exactly what he might have had in mind remain a bit obscure, it is his diagnosis of the cause of nihilism that is of interest to us here, not the content of what he thought would be the cure.

Following in the Nietzschean tradition, one strand of modern perfectionism argues that it is liberalism's obsession with reason and the pursuit of scientific truth that leads to nihilism. This leads to nihilism because the belief that there are no values is *true*—there are indeed no values—and if one pursues the truth relentlessly enough it is only a matter of time before one will discover that this is so. But this is not a truth that is good for the masses to know. Not in the sense of good versus evil, but in the Nietzschean pre-moral self-referential sense of good versus bad. It is not *good* for the community, for to have a community one must have culture, and to have culture one must have values. What matters is not whether these values are true, but whether they are sufficiently comprehensive and well-defined to give a community a particular cultural identity. Only then can a community exist, and only if he is embedded in and supported by a community can an individual achieve anything of substance. The paradox of modern life is accordingly that to overcome nihilism we must believe in values we know not to be true.⁷⁰ This is hard enough for the most sophisticated among us; for the masses, it is probably impossible. Without the purportedly absolute

⁶⁹ See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* n 49 above.

⁷⁰ See Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* n 36 above, 202–3.

objective values that perfectionism provides, there is no hope of surviving the crisis that liberalism has created. For the Nietzscheans, truth is the enemy of moral certainty, but moral certainty is the cement that holds a community together. We must accordingly defeat nihilism, not because it is false, but because its defeat is necessary.

The second branch of the claim that liberalism leads to nihilism has its roots in Hegel, and specifically in Hegel's criticism of Kant's theory of freedom. For Kant, individual autonomy was central, and so Kant argued that government should restrict freedom only when necessary to ensure that all people have equal freedom. But Hegel argued that Kant's notion of equal freedom was empty.⁷¹ All freedoms do not have equal importance, and therefore one needs a conception of the good or a sense of the shared background assumptions and practices of a particular community before one may begin to conceive of what freedom means. And this conception of the good or sense of shared background assumptions is something that only perfectionism can provide.

The Hegelian branch of perfectionist criticism accordingly focuses on liberalism's commitment to neutrality and its corresponding unwillingness to endorse any specific set of substantive values, and claims that like Kant's theory of equal freedom, liberalism is empty. Because it is empty, liberalism must inevitably lead those who embrace it to believe there are no values. But unlike the Nietzscheans, the Hegelians see the belief that there are no values as *false*—there are indeed values, although those within this branch of perfectionism disagree about where these values are to be found. Some believe they are to be found in the Word of God, others that they can be derived by the light of reason alone, or found in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, or that they simply are the values that all or most members of a community happen to share. But the fact that these critics disagree as to where the requisite set of values is to be found is not important. What is important is that they all agree that such values do *exist*, and that what is wrong with liberalism is that it leads people to believe the contrary.⁷²

Nihilism, of course, cannot be both true and false. Perfectionists are accordingly divided when it comes to explaining how liberalism leads to nihilism. It is merely because both groups arrive at the same conclusion that the fact that they do so for inconsistent reasons has remained unnoticed. Once we bring this into focus, however, it becomes apparent that one branch of this perfectionist criticism can be used to undermine the other. If nihilism is true—if there are indeed no values—then the Hegelian branch of criticism loses its force, since this depends on proving that nihilism is false. In contrast, if nihilism is false—if there are indeed values, but liberalism falsely suggests there are not—then the Nietzschean branch loses its force, for there would be no reason to believe that a

⁷¹ See GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (AW Wood (ed), Cambridge, 1991) s 135.

⁷² See M Lilla, 'The Closing of the Straussian Mind' *The New York Review of Books* (4 November 2004) (characterizing Strauss's view in *Natural Right and History*).

relentless pursuit of the truth would lead to nihilism. On the contrary, it should lead to a form of perfectionism, to the discovery of the one true set of objective values, whatever these might be.

But there are also independent reasons to challenge both branches of criticism. If there are no values, as the Nietzschean-inspired critics contend, then there are no values, regardless of whether we believe in perfectionism or liberalism. All perfectionists can do is offer a set of values that falsely claim objective status, making perfectionism a form of error theory, which seems inconsistent with the very nature of perfectionism itself.⁷³ But many liberals claim there *are* objective values, and they do so without embracing a perfectionist agenda—in other words, without committing to any particular set of values or even to the belief that only one true set could exist, for values could be plural yet objective.⁷⁴ Defending perfectionism against this claim places the Nietzscheans in an awkward position, for they must argue that pluralism is false while maintaining that objectivism is true even though they believe that it is not.

The Hegelian-inspired claim that liberalism leads to nihilism runs into serious problems too. Recall that this branch of perfectionism claims that liberalism is empty because it does not endorse a specific comprehensive set of substantive values. But how does the lack of such an endorsement lead to the belief that there are no values? To think that it might flies in the face of everything we know about human nature. The belief that there are no values seems to be something that people are naturally designed to resist, for if this were not the case such a belief would be far more common than it is. Only the most extreme set of experiences could possibly produce such a belief, and even then, people who witness or are subjected to the most abominable acts often survive with their values intact. To think that people could be led to the belief that there are no values because this might be an *implication* of liberalism's lack of endorsement of a specific comprehensive set of values is to assign such an implication a degree of persuasive power that could not reasonably be expected to obtain.

But more importantly, it is unclear why anyone would think that liberalism's failure to endorse a comprehensive set of values might be understood as implying that there are no such values to endorse. A suitcase may be empty, but that does not lead anyone to believe that there is nothing that could be placed inside it. Liberalism is like that suitcase—it is a container for the substantive values of multiple comprehensive conceptions of the good, a way of providing for the non-destructive interaction of competing sets of belief. The fact that it does not come pre-stocked with a full set of substantive values provides no reason to believe that such substantive values do not exist. Indeed, if there were no further substantive values for liberalism to contain, there would be no reason for such a container to exist. Contrary to what its Hegelian-inspired critics contend, the fact that the

⁷³ For more on error theory, see JL Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London, 1977).

⁷⁴ See, eg WA Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2005).

values endorsed by liberalism are limited to the realm of the political actually implies that further substantive values *do* exist, not that they do not.

But even if liberalism's lack of endorsement for a specific set of substantive values did imply that there were no such values, this would not constitute an argument for perfectionism, for the same criticism could be levelled against perfectionism with equal force. While those who embrace the fundamental presuppositions of perfectionism all embrace *some* comprehensive moral doctrine, there is nothing in these fundamental presuppositions that specifies *which* particular comprehensive moral doctrine this must be. At the tectonic level, perfectionism is empty too, which is why perfectionism can take on many forms. So if this is a problem for liberalism, it must also be a problem for perfectionism. In either kind of society, people still have to select a comprehensive moral doctrine, and pressure to select a particular comprehensive moral doctrine arises only after the beliefs of the particular society are given content. True, in a perfectionist society, this pressure comes directly from the government, but in a liberal society there will be pressure too—not only from relatives and friends, but also from teachers, religious leaders, and public figures. Even if these people do not try to impose their values on us, they will nevertheless have great influence on us as long as they are people we respect. Some people may choose nihilism in either kind of society despite this pressure to conform, but there is no reason to believe that people are more likely to be nihilists in one kind of society than the other. So whichever branch of perfectionist criticism we embrace, its central claim—that liberalism leads to nihilism—is highly questionable at best.

But even assuming that liberalism does lead to nihilism and that nihilism is as unattractive as perfectionists make it out to be, this does not amount to an indictment of liberalism. It is at best only the first part of an indictment. It is a consequentialist argument against liberalism, and like all consequentialist arguments, it has moral force only if the consequences of the proposed alternative—embracing perfectionism—would be better. As we shall see in the next section, however, there is substantial reason to believe that in the long term—and very often in the short and medium term too—this will not be true. Whatever the consequences of embracing liberalism, the consequences of embracing perfectionism are likely to be worse.

III. Perfectionism and Fanaticism

Perfectionists tend to make their case against liberalism agonistically. In other words, they illustrate liberalism's supposed defects, and then simply claim that perfectionism is preferable because it avoids these problems. Of course, there is nothing wrong with making a case agonistically in politics or philosophy. Indeed, resort to this form of argumentation is common among liberals too. So it is not surprising that liberals tend to respond to perfectionist attacks simply by

arguing that liberalism does not suffer from the defects that perfectionists have supposedly identified, and if it does, that perfectionism suffers from these same defects too. Given their similar approach to defining the issues between them, the battle between liberalism and perfectionism is almost always fought exclusively on liberalism's turf. Perfectionists make a positive rather than an agonistic case for perfectionism only rarely, and liberals never seem to wonder whether perfectionism might have problems of its own, problems that are unrelated to its inability to capture what liberals believe is attractive about liberalism.

The claim that liberalism leads to nihilism is no exception to this pattern and practice of debate. Both perfectionists and liberals have tended to assume that if liberalism leads to nihilism, the case against liberalism has been won. The focus of both camps has accordingly been on this claim, rather than on whether perfectionism suffers from some even more distasteful defect. The result is that perfectionists have enjoyed a strategic advantage in their battle with liberalism, for they have been able to avoid any examination of the consequences that embracing perfectionism might bring and any comparison between these consequences and the consequences of embracing liberalism. If we do make such a head-to-head comparison, however, the perfectionist attack on liberalism looks much more dubious indeed.

A. The Instability of Perfectionist Communities

One characteristic of perfectionism that is often not acknowledged is that it is inherently unstable. All perfectionist communities have a vision of an ideal society, a society composed of those and only those who embrace a specific comprehensive set of substantive values. Often, perfectionist movements start by specifying these values very generally, but regardless of the specificity with which they begin, as they mature and attract more and more adherents they will naturally come under increasing pressure to define themselves more finely. After all, the whole point of perfectionism is to strive toward an ideal, and the closer one gets to this ideal, the more detailed one's perfectionist vision can become. But the more specific a perfectionist vision becomes, the more people it will exclude, for fewer and fewer people will be able to meet its ever more demanding requirements. Perfectionist communities accordingly have a tendency to implode, like a collapsing star, until ultimately only a handful of extremists are left to fight it out among themselves for the mantle of being the only 'true' or 'pure' members of the community.

The implosive forces at work within perfectionism can be found in perfectionist movements on both the left and the right. Marxist movements, for example, have historically been plagued by factionalism, often splitting over trivial matters of policy, shedding members, and directing as much of their energy toward internal purification as toward external expansion and success. Compounding this problem is the fact that like all perfectionist movements, Marxist groups are

more concerned about obedience than they are about acceptance, and therefore tend to eschew the kind of deep intellectual engagement that would be necessary to overcome scepticism in favour of simple indoctrination. Among the obedient, the degree of commitment to perfectionist values is accordingly likely to be thin. Indeed, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 can be seen as the ultimate example of this self-defeating weakness in perfectionism's internal architecture. Instead of amassing greater and greater numbers of true believers as these societies matured, they eventually came to be populated by almost no true believers at all.

Similar examples of these implosive forces can be seen in Islamic fundamentalism. What began as a movement claiming to speak on behalf of the entire Muslim political community is now divided between Sunni and Shiite factions and to some extent between Arab and non-Arab factions as well.⁷⁵ And while still relatively united, American neo-conservatism is also beginning to splinter and divide, with various former champions accusing one another of betraying the core values of the movement.⁷⁶ Without the built-in constraints for dealing with the disagreements over values and policy that are bound to arise as a perfectionist movement develops and matures and encounters new and more complex problems, constraints that only liberalism can provide, the movement has more and more difficulty maintaining its internal cohesion. Even without pressure from its external enemies, such a movement will inevitably begin to devour itself as it pursues greater purity and perfection.

Exacerbating this problem is the tendency for perfectionist communities to be hijacked by Machiavellians who use the pursuit of perfection and the excuse of purification that perfectionism provides as a route to personal power. Stalin is perhaps the most conspicuous example of this, but history is replete with others. The disintegration of the Balkans can be attributed to this, as people like Slobodan Milosevic used a nationalistic brand of perfectionism as a way of capturing the imagination of the masses and manipulating the democratic process to bring them personal power. Joseph McCarthy and his henchmen in the United States were arguably as much Machiavellians as true believers, and depending on how cynical one wants to be about the motives of those involved, some American neo-conservatives might be put into this category as well. In any event, there is no denying that it is far more difficult to sort Machiavellians from perfectionists than it is to sort Machiavellians from liberals.

But internal instability is not the only problem that makes perfectionist communities less attractive than liberal ones. If it were, we could simply isolate any

⁷⁵ See, eg E Wong, 'Sectarian Divide: On Web, a Sunni-Shiite Split on Hezbollah' *New York Times* (22 July 2006) A8. For a history of the sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shiite fundamentalism, see V Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York, 2006).

⁷⁶ See, eg F Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, 2006).

particularly unattractive brand of perfectionism and until it eventually burns itself out. Unfortunately, in addition to the implosive forces they tend to face, perfectionist movements also have a marked tendency toward violence.

B. The Perfectionist Affinity for Violence

To understand why perfectionist political communities have a tendency toward violence, it is important to distinguish perfectionism as a set of fundamental presuppositions that govern the structure of political life from perfectionism as a specific comprehensive set of substantive moral values. I do not contend that the mere embrace of a specific set of substantive values makes anyone prone to violence. Everyone, even those who live in a liberal society, will embrace some set of substantive values. It is the embrace of perfectionism as a political structure that leads to violence, not the nature of the specific set of values that a particular perfectionist community happens to adopt.

The reason for this has to do with the way that perfectionist political communities define themselves. The driving force behind perfectionist politics is the friend/enemy distinction, which means that perfectionist political communities tend to define themselves negatively, by defining what they are not.⁷⁷ Note that I am not suggesting that perfectionist political communities lack a positive moral programme. On the contrary, putting forth a positive moral programme is an essential part of any perfectionist agenda. I am merely suggesting that their positive moral programme is predominantly *reactionary*, drawing most of its specificity and organizing force from that which it rejects rather than from some underlying set of independently derived free-standing principles. Indeed, as a matter of practical if not conceptual necessity, perfectionist communities *need* enemies, for without the cohesive force and the compelling sense of mission that facing a threat from a supposedly powerful enemy provides, a perfectionist movement is unlikely to be able to capture the imagination of the populace and acquire and maintain any real political power. Hitting on the *right* enemy—one that can not only be portrayed as powerful but that can also be made to seem sufficiently foreign and unfathomable that any natural inclination toward empathy can be easily suppressed—is accordingly the key to any perfectionist movement's success. Islamic fundamentalists, for example, were largely marginalized until they switched their attention from the near enemy (the corrupt and oppressive and largely secular governments in their own countries) to the far (America, the great Satan).⁷⁸ And American neo-conservatives nearly became irrelevant after the Soviet Union and its 'evil empire' inconveniently self-destructed, reclaiming

⁷⁷ See Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* n 7 above. Schmitt's view of the friend/enemy distinction as the driving force of politics was also held by Leo Strauss, and through him passed on to many of his neo-conservative disciples. See Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* n 27 above, 23.

⁷⁸ See FA Georges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge, 2005).

their former influence and power only after 9/11 when they redefined themselves as the enemy of terrorism and the inscrutable 'axis of evil'.

The problem is that built into the friend/enemy distinction is the constant threat and inherent possibility of violent conflict.⁷⁹ Enemies are naturally viewed with suspicion, so a perfectionist community will tend to interpret the ambiguous actions of its enemies as aggressive and act pre-emptively before such enemies have an opportunity to grow stronger. Indeed, the friend/enemy distinction often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the mere act of designating some one or group as an enemy is an act of vilification, and vilification is a provocative act, thereby increasing the chances that those so designated *will* behave aggressively and requiring the designating community to respond in kind. This, for example, appears to be at least part of the dynamic that is currently driving relations between the United States and Iran.

But the tendency toward violence is not merely the unintended consequence of the perfectionists' division of the world into friends and enemies. It is also a necessary consequence of the conceptual commitment to a perfectionist political outlook. To embrace perfectionism as a political morality is to commit oneself to the creation and maintenance of a specific culture. Cultures, however, do not exist in isolation. The very idea of culture implies a multiplicity of them. Unless they are able to remain isolated from one another, cultures will necessarily compete for influence both between and within political communities. Indeed, in the modern age, technological advances have effectively made it impossible to prevent one culture from interacting with another. But without the mechanism for peaceful interaction that liberalism provides, without the ability to accommodate competing conceptions of the good, cultural interaction is equivalent to an attack by one cultural community on the other. This, no doubt, is what Allan Bloom means when he says, 'liberal democracies do not fight wars with one another, *cultures* fight wars.'⁸⁰ Cultures that are allowed to interact cannot help but be influenced by one another. Absent suppression of competitors, a perfectionist culture accordingly cannot hope to be kept pure. And suppression, of course, usually requires or provokes violence, and often both.

This is why violence is so often mythologized and celebrated by those who have a perfectionist point of view. 'Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those inspired by great mythical images to join battle', says Schmitt.⁸¹ 'The whole earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but a vast altar upon which all that is living must be sacrificed without end, without measure, without pause, until the consummation of things, until evil is extinct, until the death of death', says Maistre.⁸² And it would

⁷⁹ Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* is laced with statements to this effect, but see especially 32–7.

⁸⁰ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* n 36 above, 202 (emphasis added).

⁸¹ Schmitt, *Crisis in Parliamentary Democracy* n 43 above, 71.

⁸² Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism' n 24 above, 111 (quoting Maistre).

be a mistake to dismiss such statements as mere perfectionist hyperbole. For perfectionists, war is the natural means by which competing cultural myths come to have purchase in the world. Indeed, for perfectionists, having a culture *means* engaging in war with other cultures.⁸³ The *jihad* against the West is accordingly not just a matter of cultural self-defence, brought on by contingent circumstances that might have developed in some other way, it is a conceptual necessity, a perfectionist *act of creation* for the radical Islamic fundamentalist community. The War in Iraq, in turn, is not just a (misguided) response to this *jihad*, it is a perfectionist act of creation of a different sort, one designed to both express and sustain America's new neo-conservative identity.

In addition to the conceptual connection between perfectionism and violence, perfectionists also often have powerful instrumental reasons to resort to violence. Perfectionist communities tend to thrive under conditions of low-intensity armed conflict, for this justifies the community's internal emphasis on security and its subjugation of the rule of the law, increases the willingness of the masses to cede authority to the governing elite, and makes the community more cohesive and narrowly focused on protecting its ideals. And while the complete destruction of its enemies can have a destabilizing effect on a perfectionist community by removing this incentive for community cohesion, it is difficult to keep such conflicts under control. Chances are that the tension between a perfectionist community and its enemies will eventually erupt into all out war.

Perfectionist political communities are also a danger to their own members as well as to outsiders. Internal enemies must be purged if the community is to remain pure, and while ex-communication or expulsion is sometimes enough to accomplish this, calls for suppression of internal opposition will often take a more ugly, violent, turn. As Stalin said, 'Death solves all problems: no man, no problem', a view that has adherents among perfectionists groups of all sorts, including at least some on the contemporary Christian right.⁸⁴ Violent suppression may even be used against the innocent, such as in show trials, as another way of promoting internal unity and cohesion. Indeed, given their view that the community rather than the individual is the fundamental social unit, sacrificing the innocent individual for the good of the community does not present the same sort of moral problem for perfectionists that it would for liberals. Under liberalism, the individual is often inviolable, even when the good of one is outweighed by the good of many. Under perfectionism, however, the individual and the community do not exist on the same moral plane. The sacrifice of an individual in such a situation has the same relative moral significance as the sacrifice of an animal or a work of art.

What all this means is that even if nihilism were coherent, even if liberalism necessarily or often leads to it, and even if nihilism were as unattractive as

⁸³ See Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* n 36 above, 202.

⁸⁴ See Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming* n 40 above, 160.

perfectionists make it out to be, this would not constitute an argument against liberalism. Whatever the consequences of embracing liberalism might be, the consequences of embracing perfectionism are even worse. Indeed, it was fanaticism, not nihilism, which was responsible for the parade of 20th-century horrors that perfectionists typically try to blame on liberalism. The Nazis were perfectionists, not nihilists, and even if it were true that there was some inherent defect within liberalism that made the rise of Hitler possible, one cannot claim that liberalism is more responsible for the horrors generated by the Nazi brand of perfectionism than perfectionism itself. Whatever the defects in liberalism, it can produce a tolerable quality of life even when its implementation is only rough and imperfect; by definition, perfectionism cannot. In any head-to-head consequentialist comparison between liberalism and perfectionism, it is liberalism not perfectionism that comes out on top.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Cambridge Forum for Legal and Political Philosophy, the University College London Colloquium on Law and Philosophy, and the Manchester Centre for Political Theory. I would like to thank all those in attendance for their comments and suggestions. I would especially like to thank Peter Jones and Jonathan Quong for providing me with extensive and very helpful written comments on earlier versions of the paper, and Sorin Baiasu, Adrian Blau, Geoffrey Brennan, Kimberley Brownlee, Harriet Davidson, Ross Harrison, Christoph Kletzer, Matthew Kramer, John O'Neill, John Oberdiek, Hillel Steiner, and Stephen de Wijze, for their many helpful comments and suggestions and for much stimulating discussion, all of which led to substantial improvements to the paper.

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