

Modern Intellectual History

<http://journals.cambridge.org/MIH>

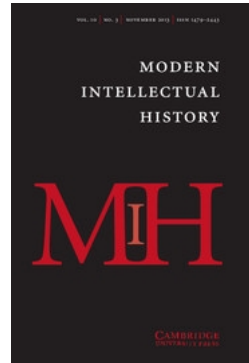
Additional services for *Modern Intellectual History*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



A WELL-TEMPERED LIBERALISM: MODERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND POLITICAL THEORY

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG

Modern Intellectual History / Volume 10 / Issue 03 / November 2013, pp 655 - 682
DOI: 10.1017/S1479244313000255, Published online: 24 October 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1479244313000255

How to cite this article:

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG (2013). A WELL-TEMPERED LIBERALISM: MODERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND POLITICAL THEORY. *Modern Intellectual History*, 10, pp 655-682 doi:10.1017/S1479244313000255

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

A WELL-TEMPERED LIBERALISM: MODERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND POLITICAL THEORY

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG

Department of History, Harvard University

E-mail: jkloppen@fas.harvard.edu

Intellectual history and the history of political thought are siblings, perhaps even twins. They have similar origins and use similar materials. They attract many of the same friends and make some of the same enemies. Yet like most siblings, they have different temperaments and ambitions. This essay explores the family resemblances and draws out the contrasts by examining two major works by one of the most prominent political theorists of the past half-century, Alan Ryan, who has recently published two big books that intellectual historians will find rewarding and provocative.¹

Alan Ryan is very good company. In person he is affable, clever, incisive, and lucid. So too on the page. For that reason the publication of these books is cause for celebration. Just as Ryan contends that examining the texts of major political theorists “stretches the imagination,” so does wrestling with Ryan’s writing. Reflecting on his sprawling, two-volume overview of Western political thought from the ancient world to the present, *On Politics*, and on the thirty-three essays that constitute *The Making of Modern Liberalism* will help intellectual historians in three distinct ways. First, these books clarify the genre distinction between political theory and the historical study of ideas. Second, they illuminate the central ideas of many major political thinkers since the ancient world. Finally, they raise questions about the purpose of studying the history of political ideas. The bulk of this essay will focus on the second of those rewards, examining many of Ryan’s substantive arguments, contesting a few of them, and raising questions about what is missing. The opening and closing sections will address issues of perennial and urgent concern to all intellectual historians.

¹ Alan Ryan, *On Politics*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to Machiavelli*; vol. 2, *Political Thought from Hobbes to the Present* (New York, 2012); Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, 2012).

GENRE

Alan Ryan has established himself as one of the leading scholars of political theory in the North Atlantic world. From his origins in a lower-middle-class English family, this self-described “scholarship boy” ascended to the heights of the Anglo-American academic world. Ryan has written or edited more than twenty books on topics in political theory ranging from the philosophy of the social sciences and the challenges of liberal education to studies of John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey. Even so, he is probably best known to most readers from his dozens of widely read reviews, unfailingly engaging and only occasionally acerbic, in the London *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *New York Review of Books*. The books reviewed in this essay fit together neatly: *On Politics* gives us Ryan’s considered judgments on everything from Socrates’ suicide to suicide bombers. The essays collected in *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, nearly five decades’ worth of finely textured treatments of individual thinkers and ideas from the past and the present, offer glimpses of the solid scholarship underpinning Ryan’s magisterial overview *On Politics*.

Ryan is forthright about the differences he sees between his methods and objectives as a political theorist and those of intellectual historians. Political theory “relies very heavily on rethinking the legacy of our predecessors” (*MML*, 2), particularly as forged in the two dozen or so texts with which political theorists remain obsessed. *On Politics* is “not exactly” or “not straightforwardly” history or philosophy. Despite its engagement with historical texts, “it is primarily concerned with the coherence and credibility of the arguments on which it focuses and only secondarily with their causal antecedents and consequences.” By contrast, “historians, even historians of ideas,” Ryan contends, “mostly reverse that emphasis.” On the other hand, political theory is “more instrumental” than philosophy and “in multiple senses, a ‘practical’ discipline rather than a ‘pure’ one” (*MML*, 2; *OP*, 1: xx).

Early in his Oxford career, Ryan studied philosophy as well as political theory. He labored hard in the vineyards of the philosophy of social science. The experience left a lasting mark. The earliest essay included in *Modern Liberalism*, a virtuoso exercise in what Ryan calls “piecemeal philosophical engineering,” makes clear that the twenty-three-year-old Ryan had mastered the bone-dry wit favored by Oxford dons and had learned the lessons of J. L. Austin’s version of ordinary language philosophy well enough to know that identifying the meaning of the word “freedom” was pretty darned difficult. His “inquiry into the logic of freedom” yielded the less-than-inspiring admission that “I have no answers to the problem of freedom.” Still, he announced confidently that nobody else did either—including Sir Isaiah Berlin (*MML*, 45–62).

Ryan's first book, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (1970, 2nd edn 1987), located the key to understanding and unifying Mill's multifaceted writings in *The System of Logic* and his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Just as Mill was intent on dismantling the claims of intuitionists such as Hamilton and applying the methods of natural science to establish the predictive quality of the social sciences on an equally sturdy foundation, so Ryan cut his teeth on "covering laws," the omega point of historical analysis conceived as a scientific discipline. Ryan's study of Mill earned critics' admiration for clarifying the philosophical ambitions and commitments behind Mill's political writings, and Ryan has continued to churn out learned work on the master of modern liberalism ever since.

By contrast, Ryan's *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (1970, now in its fifteenth printing) was attacked from two different perspectives. Maurice Natanson faulted Ryan for paying insufficient attention to the "phenomenological structure of the actor's intentional experience." Natanson's critique of the methods preferred by mainstream Anglo-American thinkers was characteristic of the arguments made by the era's Continental philosophers and interpretive social scientists, many of whom were troubled by the neo-positivism they feared was infecting the *Geisteswissenschaften*. But Ryan was also assailed from another angle. Alexander Rosenberg charged that Ryan's book was already out of date because he failed to discuss the radical new work of Paul Feyerabend and Jerry Fodor or to take into account Thomas Kuhn's revisions to his work on paradigm shifts. The assumptions and procedures of empirical social scientists were under attack.²

The controversies surrounding Ryan's early writings, now almost half a century old, still matter because these issues remain unresolved. Ryan remains comfortable within the framework of Anglo-American empiricist philosophy, surely a rich intellectual tradition, but one that limits his interest in and appreciation of the value of important European thinkers. Ryan contends that historians, even intellectual historians, are more interested in the "causal antecedents" and "consequences" of ideas than in conceptual analysis. Many intellectual historians do concern themselves with causes and consequences and contexts of various kinds, and I applaud that widening of our horizons.³ Yet the careful examination of ideas expressed in complex texts remains at the heart of our enterprise, the defining feature of most scholarship in the field of

² See Maurice Natanson's review in *American Journal of Sociology* 77/6 (May 1972), 1237–9; and cf. Alexander Rosenberg's review in *Philosophy of Science* 39/3 (Sept. 1972), 424–7.

³ James T. Kloppenberg, "Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics," *Modern Intellectual History* 9/1 (April 2012), 201–16.

intellectual history.⁴ Ryan concedes that political theorists too must do history as a prerequisite to doing their own work, but it is history of a particular sort. Political theorists are participating in a conversation with writers from the past, so “we must take seriously the historical identity of the writers we engage with, ensuring that their ‘otherness’ is preserved” (*MML*, 2–3). But meeting that challenge is difficult for political theorists. The more attractive we find a writer, Ryan concludes, the harder it is “to preserve the necessary distance.”

Ryan seems ambivalent about the strictures imposed by the regnant orthodoxy of the Cambridge school of contextualism. He acknowledges the wisdom of the arguments made by his exact contemporaries Quentin Skinner and John Dunn concerning the importance of authorial intent:

Some sense of how the author intended his words to be taken and some sense of how the audience likely took them are needed before we can settle on what he said, at any rate in the extended sense in which the speech act being performed is an aspect of the meaning.

But Ryan insists that political theorists must take another step. An author’s intentions, even if clearly identified, are not “decisive in determining the content of an argument” to be examined critically. “To explain an argument is to settle, provisionally, on a view of its derivation from often barely visible assumptions, and to grasp its implications, not all of which the author will himself have perceived.” Indeed, biographical and contextual analysis are preliminary exercises for political theorists, whose objectives lie elsewhere. “The point of getting the biographical context right,” Ryan argues, “is that it provides our only assurance that the arguments we explain, criticize, repair, or reject really are those that the author put forward and not figments of our imagination” (*MML*, 3). Intellectual historians likewise aim to achieve understanding of the ideas under examination. Yet we do not, as a rule, go on to “repair” those ideas as Ryan does. Our practice of interpretation depends on our awareness of the differences between the past and the present, and we work hard to respect the integrity of the past even as we write for readers in the present. Ryan’s confident suppositions that “we” possess insights unavailable to our predecessors, and that our standards of argumentation and evaluation are thus better able to withstand critique, are generally not shared by historians. That difference is central to the genre distinction that separates history not only from political theory but also from most work done by philosophers and literary critics. Our attempt to see things from the perspective of those we study,

⁴ Peter Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas,” in Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History for the Twenty-First Century* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

even if we can never completely achieve it, defines the discipline of intellectual history.⁵

Ryan's writings contain numerous examples of sentences that illustrate the genre distinction between political theory and intellectual history, sentences no intellectual historian would think to write: even though liberalism is a "modern creed," powerfully shaped by the Protestant Reformation, Ryan contends that the phrase "Augustinian liberalism," for example, "is not a contradiction in terms." Why? Because Augustine wanted to limit what states could do, which means that "his political reasoning was—if the anachronism is permissible—Hobbesian" (*MML*, 9). Ryan speculates that "Locke would have sided with the [US Supreme] Court" in ruling against Native Americans seeking permission to use peyote in religious ceremonies (*MML*, 32). He describes the view that Rousseau "should have held" on freedom (*OP*, 2: 565). He explains what Mill's position "ought to have been" on the 1972 *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case concerning the education of Amish children (*MML*, 316). In the opening pages of *On Politics*, Ryan careens from Plato to Huxley, from Heidegger to Hobbes and Hitler and back. He reflects on whether "we have had a sense of fairness programmed into us by evolution" and asks whether Hobbes was addressing the prisoner's dilemma or the free-rider problem (*OP*, 57–64).

Depending on their tastes, readers will find Ryan's conversational tone and meandering analysis, which is as notable for its unexpected detours, learned allusions, and memorable turns of phrase as the repartee in an Oxbridge senior common room, either irresistibly clever, somewhat undisciplined, impressively erudite, or perhaps, as I did, all of those by turns. *On Politics* and *The Making of Modern Liberalism* exude the distinct charm of English academic life, which some American scholars find endearing and others off-putting. The books also reflect Ryan's love-hate relationship with the glossy style of prosperous American universities, less settled in their learning but more open to new people and new ideas. The subjects of Ryan's major works—Mill, Russell, and Dewey—had in common an aversion to stuffiness, hierarchy, and inherited privilege. Ryan openly shares those predilections, which account for the sprightly, puckish quality of his take on the cultures of the contemporary North Atlantic world.

⁵ James T. Kloppenberg, "Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing," *American Historical Review* 94/4 (Oct. 1989), 1011–1030; Kloppenberg, "Why History Matters to Political Theory," in Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford, 1998), 155–78; and Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism and the Practice of History: From Turner and Du Bois to Today," in Richard Shusterman, ed., *The Range of Pragmatism and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford, 2004), 197–220.

Ryan proclaims his liberal individualism early and often, and in ways that some readers may find as jarring as I did: “we do not think that what belongs to all of us belongs to each of us; we think it belongs to nobody, and we neglect it.” That may be true of most (although by no means all) citizens of Britain or the US, but is it equally true if “we” are, say, French—or Japanese? Ryan contends too that “we look to institutions to hold accountable those who wield power over their fellows so that the rights of individuals are respected.” Again, although “rights” may be paramount in Anglo-American political discourse, I wonder if readers elsewhere would agree that “modern political discussion is imbued with a concern for individual human rights” as opposed to, say, a concern with balancing those rights against citizens’ obligations (*OP*, 89, 99). I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

Because Ryan focuses on conceptual analysis, his gestures toward biography and contextualization rarely require him to grapple much with the work of historians. Even in his book-length studies of Mill, Russell, and Dewey, the spotlight almost never leaves the texts of the writers under scrutiny. He graciously cites the few historians on whose work he depends, but his interests lie elsewhere. When he does engage the work of other scholars, it is almost without exception the work of philosophers or other political theorists. He knows what he is doing, and although studying political theory may depend on historical scholarship, it does not involve doing history oneself.

Yet the distinction will nevertheless strike some intellectual historians as overdrawn. Ryan himself occasionally admits as much. He acknowledges that it is impossible to write a history of ideas “that is not in some sense present-centered.” No matter how hard we try to “set aside our own interests and preoccupations to get into the skins” of our ancestors, “the results will display the shadow or afterimage of what it is we have set aside.” Although we can aim at “generosity and flexibility” and “with luck” achieve partial success, “a godlike perspective in which all times and places are equally transparent” must remain beyond our reach (*MML*, 280).

If we intellectual historians conceive of our projects as a species of hermeneutics, we will appreciate the inevitable and salutary dynamic that carries us into the past and then back to our own day, the ceaseless to-and-fro that Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey identified as the essence of all historical interpretation. Rather than employing the ideas of our own day as the unproblematic standards by which we judge the past, however, Dilthey urged practitioners of the *Geisteswissenschaften* to engage in “immanent critique,” the rigorous analysis of assumptions—and the application of standards—drawn from the period under study. Even though we historians cannot, and should not try to, shed our own cultural skins, we can work toward the goal of identifying the differences between our ways of thinking and those of the mighty dead. It

is not always so clear, I think, that we have their number. Examining their ideas historically might help us rethink our own. I will return to this question too in my conclusion.

ARGUMENTS

For a book that covers two and a half millennia, *On Politics* is ingeniously and skillfully organized. The central themes stay in focus not only because of the recurring cross-references forward and, much more often, especially in volume two, backward. Ryan launches his account by contrasting the rival political conceptions of Hebrews, Persians, and Greeks. Throughout both volumes he subtly but insistently reminds readers of the differences between three distinct world views that he can introduce through these different ancient cultures. First, if religious obligations are paramount, politics seems unimportant. That assumption underlay the Old Testament, much early Christian thought, and some later forms of religious enthusiasm. Second, if politics is all about power, as Greek observers thought it was for the Persians Darius and Xerxes, then governments can safely operate without concern for their subjects. Finally, if politics is a central activity in human life—as Aristotle, for example, clearly believed—then all citizens should engage actively in the public sphere and participate in decision-making. At least some Greek city states quite self-consciously did just that, off and on, from the late sixth century through the late fourth century BCE.

Ryan's chapters on Greece and Rome introduce the principal topics of both *On Politics* and the essays in *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, topics such as citizenship and slavery, monarchy and democracy, assemblies and courts of law, and vexed political ideas such as freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice. Sticking with such familiar themes enables Ryan to present the central ideas of dozens of thinkers in a package that can be characterized as conventional for the best of reasons: it mirrors the forms taken by most Western political theory from the ancient world to the present.

Ryan's cast of characters too is unsurprising, and that mostly for good reason. Since the ancient world, white males have enjoyed privileges, which they justified to themselves by denying the capacities of everyone else, that gave them a monopoly on the power and prestige necessary for producing influential works of political theory. Some readers will criticize *On Politics* for simply perpetuating that unfortunate tradition. Ryan mentions Christine de Pizan and nods toward Mary Wollstonecraft. He devotes a few solid pages to Martinique-born Frantz Fanon and Egyptian Sayyid Qutb. But he does not address the more fundamental questions raised by feminists and writers of color about the roles played by gender and race in shaping Western political thought. Given the passionate commitment of Ryan's hero John Stuart Mill to the causes of antislavery and women's rights,

one might have expected Ryan to pay more attention to these issues. To be fair, he devotes no less attention to them than have most white males writing about political theory in the last two and a half millennia. Ryan concedes that the opening of privileged positions to women and nonwhites in recent decades is among the signal features of modern liberal democracies that “we” can all applaud. Many readers, though, will wonder whether he might have examined in greater detail those responsible for the ideas of gender and racial equality now so widely endorsed—and the reasons why lingering prejudices still impede the achievement of those goals.

From Ryan’s liberal vantage point, the recent turn toward inclusiveness is “so obviously worthy of celebration that adding my voice to the chorus seems otiose” (*OP*, xviii). That perspective also positions him to register cautionary notes concerning some of what he considers the more questionable enthusiasms of recent scholarship. The now-standard contrast between our tepid representative democracies and the supposedly more robust democratic culture of Athens, for example, with its use of sortition to fill at least some positions, its annual elections, and the direct participation of its citizens in much decision-making, can obscure the centrality of slavery and the unquestioned legitimacy of imperial conquest in the ancient world. To Pericles’ funeral oration Ryan juxtaposes the equally familiar Melian dialogue. The ancient Greeks’ pitiless cruelty toward non-citizens and toward their conquered enemies is a feature of ancient democracies that Ryan wants readers to understand, in part because the intolerance and warmongering of so many republican regimes serves as a leitmotif of *On Politics*. Inasmuch as Athens was true to its political principles in condemning Socrates to death, Ryan concludes, we should think twice before we embrace those principles.

We are now less tempted by Plato and Aristotle, Ryan contends, because their conviction that there exists a single best form of life, and that only certain people are capable of it, seems to us so obviously unattractive. He reminds readers that Socrates irked Athenians in part because he challenged the assumption, common in Greek culture at least since the *Iliad*, that gratifying our impulses constitutes the highest good and that “the unbridled pursuit of self-interest constitutes success” (*OP*, 64). Plato and Aristotle, albeit in different ways, challenged the assumption that humans are what Ryan terms “self-interested ‘utility maximizers’” (*OP*, 80–81). Both offered alternative conceptions of the good life and the institutions and sensibilities conducive to attaining it. But each considered his own conception superior to all others, and both took for granted the inevitability of hierarchies now deemed intolerable. We modern liberals, Ryan concludes, reject such ideas as “authoritarian” (*OP*, 108–9).

Ryan carefully distinguishes Roman from Greek political ideas. His deftly drawn portraits of Polybius and Cicero introduce concepts that pop up repeatedly in his accounts of early modern and modern political thought, notably Polybius’

idea of the “mixed regime” and Cicero’s insistence that without citizens’ commitment to the common good, even the best institutions will fail to check the erosive effect of the pursuit of private interests. Roman *libertas* meant freedom under law. It was negative in that it protected the individual from penalties other than those enshrined in law, positive in that it offered “an entitlement to occupy office and make the laws that governed the Roman state” (*OP*, 130).⁶

Just as Ryan’s accounts of Greek and Roman ideas and institutions set the stage for what is to come, so his treatment of Augustine and Aquinas in the context of early Christian thought introduces crucial considerations without which modern political ideas are incomprehensible. In the centuries between the *City of God* (427), which Augustine completed as the Visigoths were sacking the North African city of Hippo where he served as bishop, and the sixteenth-century outbreak of the Reformation, Roman Catholicism served as “the one unifying force” in Europe (*OP*, 188). Without trying to hide his contempt for religion, which Ryan is confident he shares with all modern liberals, he provides a clear and cogent account of the relation between Augustine’s and Aquinas’s theology and their political ideas and explains the reasons why they exerted so much influence in medieval Europe.

During the years between Augustine and Aquinas, Ryan points out, “thinkers saw society as a Christianized whole, and they did not view politics as a distinct activity with its own rules and purpose” independent of God’s will. Ryan unsettles the simple story of authority originating in God, a view descended from Walter Ullmann’s enduringly influential *History of Political Thought in the Middle Ages*. Like the practice of feudalism, the practice of politics was more complicated than the theory. Even granting God’s omnipotence and the derivation of all earthly authority from his rule, John of Salisbury contended in 1159 that a king’s authority exists only when the king is just. Once Aquinas’s fellow Dominican William of Moerbeke translated Aristotle’s *Politics*, among the texts recovered by Islamic scholars and introduced in Europe during the twelfth century, Christians could begin to theorize a distinction between the domains of theology and politics.

Less elevated struggles for power between the papacy and secular princes eroded the idea of a single hierarchy descending from God through the Pope to the Holy Roman Emperor and then to ordinary people. Aquinas insisted that authority, to be just, had to conform to natural law. Although he did not pursue the implications if it did not, rumblings about the gap separating Christian ideals from the practices of secular and Catholic authorities alike began to grow.

⁶ Ryan’s account of Roman political ideas is useful also because it helps explain why Quentin Skinner has embraced the adjective “neo-Roman” in preference to “republican” in his recent writings about the emergence of the modern liberal tradition. See Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

Some readers may find themselves floundering in Ryan's concise accounts of the eleventh-century investiture controversy, the thirteenth-century conflicts that fractured the Catholic Church, and the struggles between Renaissance popes and Renaissance princes. Intellectual historians, however, will appreciate his implicit acknowledgment that developments in political thought cannot be disentangled from those in social and political history. Ryan painstakingly explicates the ideas of late medieval writers such as Dante, Marsiglius of Padua, and Bartolus of Sassoferrato even though he concedes they had little immediate impact. They advanced arguments challenging the authority of monarchs and princes who did not rule in accordance with the ideas of Aristotle and Aquinas, who argued that state power exists only for the purpose of enabling individuals to pursue lives of moral excellence. From the eleventh through the early sixteenth centuries, Ryan contends, scattered critics clamored for Christian versions of Roman *libertas*.

In the final chapters of volume one, Ryan discusses the thinkers whose ideas gave birth to the modern world. Humanists such as Erasmus, Thomas More, Michel de Montaigne, and Christine de Pizan ventured distinct interventions aiming to shrink the gulf separating political practice from Christian principles. Machiavelli, by contrast, began with a different premise: if we take men as they are, how can we rebuild regimes that approximate the glory that was Rome. Although none of these individuals inhabited a republic, all of them questioned the boundaries of authority and planted seeds that blossomed later, when the Church's hold on power slipped and alternative ways of thinking about politics helped facilitate new practices of politics.

More immediately influential were the ideas of reformers Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and their more radical brethren. Their ideas were hardly new. They invoked St Paul or St Augustine; they meant to be calling Christians back rather than urging them forward. But the consequences of their ideas were revolutionary, Ryan argues, because secular authorities, following the lead of Henry VIII, proved willing for the first time since Constantine to "take control of the religious life of their own states" against the claims of the papacy (*PO*, 322). The political consequences of the reformers' ideas varied wildly. Luther counseled obedience, Calvin self-government by the regenerate, and radicals such as Thomas Müntzer forms of popular sovereignty that their critics mistook for anarchy.

Strikingly, Ryan implicitly endorses the argument of Brad Gregory's controversial study *The Unintended Reformation*.⁷ Before the sixteenth century, as Gregory contends, Europe was united under Catholic Christianity; afterwards there was only conflict, between sects and between states. Although the secular Ryan celebrates the cultural consequences that the Catholic Gregory laments,

⁷ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

including, above all, the liberal toleration of diversity and the division between public and private spheres, they agree that the Reformation fractured European culture irreparably. Like many of Gregory's critics, I believe he overstates the degree of unity before the Reformation; Ryan is vulnerable to the same charge. But however one evaluates that sixteenth-century pivot, their central point stands: the Reformation sparked wars of religion that transformed European culture permanently.

The second volume of *On Politics* begins with Thomas Hobbes, the first political theorist of the modern world. Ryan agrees with Gregory that the Reformation opened the door to modernity, by which he means not only religious upheaval but also a new global consciousness, an enhanced role for science, economic growth, new military technology, novel ways of thinking about government, and a newly emergent realm of private life. (*OP*, 408; *MML*, 485.) Ryan, like so many contemporary Anglo-American scholars, considers Hobbes "the greatest of British political thinkers, and the boldest, most exciting, and most compelling writer on politics in the English language" (*OP*, 413; cf. *MML*, 221–5). Whatever one makes of that contestable claim, Ryan is surely right that Hobbes was the first Western writer since the ancient world to conceive of humans as merely complicated machines and to reduce their aspirations to the simple satisfaction of desires, above all self-preservation, which explains why humans came together to form government and why government must be absolute. Ryan shows that Hobbes was reacting against the sixteenth-century wars of religion and the more proximate horror of the English Civil War. In the wake of those catastrophes, he reasoned, individuals must stop pretending to possess rights against their government. The price of peace, for Hobbes (as for Montaigne), was obedience.

From Hobbes's bracing absolutism Ryan turns to Locke. He incorporates much of the recent scholarship establishing beyond question the decisive role played by Locke's devout Christian faith. "Locke invokes God as creator and legislator from the outset," Ryan correctly observes, and throughout his detailed analysis Ryan emphasizes "how thoroughly his own religious convictions permeated Locke's work" (*PO*, 466). Because men are "sent into the world by [God's] order and about his business," in Locke's words, and because legitimate government, authorized by God's purpose, aims "only for the public good," attempts by C. B. Macpherson and others to make Locke responsible for the exploitative culture of capitalism misconstrue Locke's central ideas (*OP*, 461, 462).

Indeed, Ryan dismisses the entire controversy concerning a "liberalism" said to originate in Locke and a "republicanism" hearkening back to the civic engagement of the Greek city states. Both Macpherson's critique of Locke and the celebrations of Athenian democracy by scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin in the 1960s sent the academy down a false trail. First, Locke did not celebrate

hardy individualists against the community but instead stressed their duties to natural law and to each other. Second, the republics of Pericles and Machiavelli were exclusionary, hierarchical, and expansionist—hardly models for the ideals of the post-World War II New Left.

In a splendid 1989 article entitled “Locke on Freedom: Some Second Thoughts,” which he makes clear also contains multiple later rethinkings, Ryan dissolves the liberal-republican debate by demonstrating that it rests on fundamental misunderstandings of Locke, modern liberalism, ancient republican regimes, and the democratic forms of government that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “Locke’s account of political power stresses that authority exists only in order to promote the common good,” and legitimate governments “must therefore be guided by the maxim *salus populi suprema lex est*” (*MML*, 294). If by republican government we mean “constitutional, public-spirited government whose authority stems from its commitment to the public good,” government “calculated to reconcile freedom and authority in the sense that individuals are never required to obey the arbitrary will of another”—what Skinner would later dub “neo-Roman”—then “Locke’s whole theory of government, in fact, leads in a republican direction because of its emphasis on law and consent” (*MML*, 246, 247). As Ryan accurately observes, the actual regimes of ancient Greece and Rome depended on slavery rather than equality and aspired to conquest rather than peace. Moreover, critics caricatured early modern liberal individualism: “Quakers are famously public spirited and rich in good works,” and “New England town meetings,” although perhaps rarely “quite as impressive as we would like to believe,” nevertheless “do not come a poor second to the agora in Thebes or Corinth” (*MML*, 251).

In “Locke on Freedom,” Ryan historicizes the criticism he wants to explore, and the result clarifies Locke, liberalism, republicanism, and the mischaracterizations of all three that made these debates from the 1960s through the 1980s so sterile. For that reason intellectual historians will find such essays rewarding. In some of his other essays, however, and frequently in *On Politics*, Ryan indulges the Anglo-American analytic philosopher’s penchant for thought experiments, which breed like rabbits when he is reflecting broadly on questions of rights, obligations, and the proper role of government. Anyone who has spent much time in philosophy journals or seminars knows that, for professional philosophers, the fanciful example usually trumps mere historical evidence. Although historians may fault Ryan for offering more abstract than actual illustrations, all writers indulge in such exercises occasionally (rabbits, anyone?), and most readers are likely to welcome Ryan’s exercises of wit and imagination as a break from the careful exegesis and critical analysis of difficult texts.

The history Ryan invokes in *On Politics* is rarely much more than a stage set. His theorists stride forward and give their speeches, to which he appends thoughtful

and illuminating critical commentary. But precious few minor players appear, and the scenery is painted in very broad strokes. Ryan does his best to locate his stars in their historical settings, albeit briefly, yet intellectual historians are unlikely always to be satisfied—probably because Ryan is not really writing for us. Ryan reckons that his readers will share his own preference for conceptual analysis over contextualization. Historians may find the less fanciful but more carefully grounded arguments, such as those in “Locke on Freedom,” more persuasive.

Given the persuasiveness of that essay, it seems odd that the chapter on Locke in *On Politics* is followed by one entitled “Republicanism.” That decision seems to endorse a long-standing but, in my view, mistaken convention distinguishing Locke from James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and Montesquieu. Only when Ryan notes, toward the end of his discussion of Sidney, that our distinction between liberals and republicans would have made no sense to these thinkers themselves, does he acknowledge how misleading his own chapter title is. Like Locke, these thinkers believed that the exercise of liberty requires both a limited set of powers for government and a virtuous citizenry. They argued that any legitimate state derives its authority from the people. For that reason they contended that the people should participate in government by electing those who would exercise power. Because they dispensed with the Athenian preferences for sortition and direct government by all citizens, Ryan declines to call these thinkers “democrats.” In their writings, however, as in Locke’s, the arguments for popular sovereignty nascent in late medieval critiques of rulers who neglected the common good at last came to fruition.

Ryan notes that Harrington, and especially Sidney and Montesquieu, were, along with Locke, widely read in England’s North American colonies. He neglects to note, however, that those colonies, through their legislative assemblies, were already practicing self-government of the sort recommended by “republican” theorists. Like Montesquieu, those who gathered in town meetings and colonial legislatures admired the balance and moderation of England’s government, and like him they wanted to combine ancient republican civic virtue, as celebrated by Sidney, with the freedom from extralegal government they associated with the rights of Englishmen. But unlike the English and French theorists they were reading, they were already developing a rich fund of experience concerning the workings of popular sovereignty.

Ryan’s chapter “The American Founding” pays little attention to the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence. As a result, he overlooks the decades of self-government that prepared Americans to establish a separate nation. Instead he emphasizes the debts they owed, first, to eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers and Locke, whose *Second Treatise* “issued in the views of the American revolutionaries” (*OP*, 460); second, to the English version of classical republicanism espoused by Harrington and Sidney; and third, to the

Calvinist and Augustinian Christianity that most Americans embraced. In short, Ryan accepts the hybrid nature of American political thought even if he pays less attention to the ways in which American practices of self-government underlay, jibed with, and reinforced those principles.

I dissent from only a few features of Ryan's account. I think he sells short the revolutionary writings of the young John Adams and exaggerates the influence of Cicero, who is said to have shaped Thomas Jefferson's arguments in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and James Madison's in *The Federalist*. Overall, however, Ryan's treatment of the central arguments in the American Revolution is accurate and effective. He frames the founding in terms of the tension between three individuals: Jefferson, champion of decentralized democratic government and agrarian economy; Alexander Hamilton, who preferred centralization and commercialization; and the ingenious moderate Madison, who offered a compromise that satisfied no one. Yet Madison's vision of a complex federal republic, combining features of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, yielded durable and malleable institutions capable of developing along with the rapidly changing nation. Ryan shrewdly observes that those who criticized the Constitution—and resisted Madison's defense of it—rarely compared it to the problems of the nation's government under the Articles of Confederation, which is as true now as it was in the 1780s and 1790s.

Ryan accepts the standard view that Madison deliberately and deftly distinguished the new republic from a democracy, a distinction I believe descends from debates among political scientists and classicists since the 1950s rather than the 1780s. Then the difference was far less pronounced and common usage far more muddled. I do agree with Ryan's insistence that the idea of representative democracy was hardly new in the 1780s. It was well known in the ancient world, widely discussed in late medieval Europe, and fought over in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The desirability, as well as the necessity, of representation was taken for granted in eighteenth-century debates, even though people disagreed about whether those elected were *delegates* to be instructed or *representatives* empowered to deliberate and use their own independent judgment. Rather than adopting that common eighteenth-century practice, Ryan instead follows the lead of Mill, who in 1861 sharply distinguished "democracy," which alarmed him, from "representative government," which he endorsed. Today most scholars, although we tend to reverse Mill's preferences, adopt his distinction and apply it anachronistically to eighteenth-century debates.

Although it was Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that ignited Mill's anxieties about democracy, it was the practices of representative government and the culture that nourished those practices that Tocqueville himself characterized as democracy. The idea that a bright line necessarily divides genuine democracy, which involves the use of lotteries and direct popular government by all citizens,

from representative democracy, or government that makes use of elected officials as well as participation by citizens in a wide range of activities from juries to town meetings, is more common today than it was in the eighteenth century. Neither Jefferson nor the Antifederalists, neither Thomas Paine nor Condorcet, neither Mary Wollstonecraft nor Marie-Olympe de Gouges, shared the concept of a hard-and-fast distinction between direct and representative democracy, or expressed the disdain for the latter, that has become all but canonical in the last fifty years among political scientists, legal scholars, and even many historians (who should know better). I share the widespread dissatisfaction with the tepid forms of civic engagement characteristic of twenty-first-century democracy, but the idea that the United States in the late eighteenth century could have been a direct rather than representative democracy would have struck contemporaries as unfathomable. The standard contrasts between Federalists and Anti-federalists, and between Hamilton and Jefferson, accurately capture the conflicts among people who had different visions of civic engagement and the power of the national government, but no one on either side of the Atlantic doubted that the United States was the world's first democracy.

The contrast with which Ryan closes this chapter, between Jefferson's radical, self-governing ward republics and Madison's temperate federal scheme, will not hold up for two reasons. First, although Jefferson did prize local government, he also wholeheartedly embraced the federal framework and the power of the national government, which he considered necessary and put to use as president. Second, Madison considered himself a lifelong democrat, who served willingly and without reservations as Jefferson's first lieutenant in the emerging Democratic Republican party of the 1790s, as Secretary of State in Jefferson's cabinet, as Jefferson's successor as president, and who welcomed the expansion of the franchise in Virginia in the 1820s even as he fretted about the cultural decline of the new nation. No matter how vociferously they argued with each other, Jefferson and Madison, like John Adams and most of the founders other than the anomalous Hamilton, considered liberal rights, republican virtue, religious freedom, and representative democracy as inseparable parts of, and indispensable to, the American project.⁸

Among the European thinkers whom these Americans read, Ryan points out, was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Ryan is right to go against the grain in contending that "their ambitions were not as different as commentators sometimes suggest" (*OP*, 573). The differences we perceive between Rousseau and Locke, Harrington,

⁸ For a detailed elaboration of this argument see James T. Kloppenberg, *Tragic Irony: The Rise of Democracy in European and American Thought* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

Sidney, and Montesquieu, on the one hand, and between Rousseau and the American founders, on the other, are attributable more to the filters imposed on Rousseau's work by intervening centuries of commentary than by Rousseau's own writings. Ryan's analysis of Rousseau is as complex and difficult to summarize as is Rousseau's multifaceted *oeuvre*. Challenging as it is to extract the principal themes that unify the writings of a thinker as challenging as Rousseau, it is not impossible. In light of Ryan's successful achievement of that goal in *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, it is notable that he resists the idea of coherence in the writings of Rousseau.⁹

As Ryan notes, the celebration of "natural man" usually attributed to Rousseau's *First Discourse* is incorrect; together with the *Second Discourse* it shows instead Rousseau's conviction that historical development, although necessary and irreversible, provided modern man both with new capacities for virtue and with far greater temptations toward vice. Putting together *Emile* with the *Social Contract*, as Ryan does briefly, yields a coherent picture of Rousseau's ideals. In Rousseau's own words in the *Social Contract*, "impulsion to appetite alone is slavery, but obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty" (*OP*, 562). Persuading *Emile* to internalize the moral law is his tutor's highest ambition; designing a state in which citizens together frame such laws, then obey them, is the objective of the *Social Contract*. Ryan comes close to admitting as much when he acknowledges that the general will can be seen simply as the basic law. The challenge is not to identify it, because it is simply the common good, but instead to recognize it and put it into practice, which is difficult, if not impossible, because modern individuals are blinded by pride to their genuine interests as citizens and members of a community. Patrick Riley has persuasively tied the general will to an older ideal stretching back to early Christianity and the location of perfect freedom in obedience to God's will.¹⁰ Ryan instead ties it to Cicero (*OP*, 560). In either case, there is nothing particularly obscure or ominous about it unless one observes, as Ryan does, that later "horrors were perpetrated in the name of these ideas," from the Terror in the French Revolution to twentieth-century totalitarianism, and then blames Rousseau for those horrors. I had thought recent examinations of Rousseau's work, and Ryan's accurate linkage of Rousseau's ideas

⁹ The most successful attempt to establish the coherence of Rousseau's philosophy remains the work of his most reliable translator, Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, 1968).

¹⁰ Patrick Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau* (Princeton, 1988); and for a searching comparative analysis that locates the idea of the general will in a much broader discourse, Patrick Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy: A Critical Exposition of Social Contract Theory in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

to those of Cicero and the architects of the US Constitution, might have absolved his ghost of responsibility for such abominations. Evidently not.

The reason for this persistent confusion of Rousseau's ideas with these later developments, of course, is the tragic puzzle of the French Revolution. Ryan differentiates 1789 from 1688 and 1776 because it became, especially in 1793–4, a social rather than political upheaval. Its failure meant that “French political institutions were seen as illegitimate by much of the population,” not only in France but elsewhere, “for the next century and a half” (*OP*, 636), and that result must be explained. To that end Ryan turns to Edmund Burke, whose account of the Revolution made him the whipping boy of the left from his day to ours, but whose account Ryan describes as “highly plausible.” Burke's critique of revolutions extended beyond the French case, which is why conservatives continue to revere him. He emphasized their cost, their offense against tradition and order, and their corrosive effects on religion, which he described as the glue that holds societies together. Upping the ante were the reactionaries who took their cue from Joseph de Maistre, the champion of the old regime who expanded Burke's charges to encompass not only the Enlightenment but modernity more generally. De Maistre laid down the first principle of the political Counter-Enlightenment: things had been going downhill ever since the humanists first counterposed reason to the authority of tradition, and the time had come to put a stop to such nonsense.

More interesting to Ryan (and most of his likely readers) were the enthusiasts who saw the French Revolution as more similar to than different from the American Revolution. That view, Ryan remarks drily, “has been out of fashion for some time” (*OP*, 645). Thomas Paine, the lightning rod of the American Revolution who survived the Terror only because the chalk mark dooming him to the guillotine was put on the wrong cell, has become the darling of both the right and the left in contemporary America. Libertarians lionize him for originally celebrating small government, but Ryan shows why Paine's later work renders their praise misplaced. “Paine's case for confiscatory levels of taxation on very high incomes in order to pay for a welfare state” is less well known than it should be. It is a case, Ryan notes, that “needs to be made more often than it is today” (*OP*, 638).

Ryan's chapters on Hegel and Marx are fascinating, not least because he manages to make sense of their central political ideas without once describing the dialectics on which both of their philosophies depend. Although Ryan does not explain why he adopted that curious strategy, it forces (or enables) him to avoid the technical jargon into which accounts of their ideas usually descend. Instead, Ryan provides lucid presentations of Hegel's views on history and the state, along with this helpful paraphrase of his idea of freedom:

The absence of coercion by others is a condition of freedom, but freedom itself is autonomy, prescribing to ourselves the rules we follow. Since a coherent system of rules is the only one we can live by, freedom is ultimately a matter of following the rules that reason prescribes.

If that formulation is familiar—from Cicero, Locke, Madison, Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant—it is no accident. The neo-Roman conception of freedom hovers above Ryan’s *On Politics* almost as Hegel’s owl of Minerva hovered over his world history. I will return to it in my conclusion.

Ryan’s chapter on Marx does not follow immediately after his chapter on Hegel, as is conventional, perhaps because he wants to place Marx’s critical philosophy in the context of Mill’s and Tocqueville’s expressions of anxiety about democracy and to use their ideas as a preface to his chapters on twentieth-century social and political criticism. Although that makes sense in the architecture of *On Politics*, I want here to point out that Ryan presents Marx very much as a young Hegelian rather than as a proto-Bolshevik. He opens the chapter on Marx by announcing that he intends to “pretend, so far as possible, not to know that the revolution of 1917 ever happened.” I can only wonder why he did not adopt that wise strategy in his discussion of Rousseau and 1793.

Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, rather than his later writings on revolution or economics, provide the focus for Ryan’s account. His writing here may not satisfy specialists precisely because he veers away from Marx’s own intricate critiques of Hegel and the young Hegelians, but readers unfamiliar with (or mystified by) Marx’s early work will find the crisp writing on these pages very helpful. Without elaborating on the details or explaining the “cash nexus” or Marx’s crucial concept of man as *Gattungswesen* (species being), Ryan leads the reader through Marx’s theory of alienation. By the end of the chapter it is clear why Marx considered individuals in a market economy estranged from the products and the process of their labor, from each other, and from themselves. Moreover, it is clear why Marx considered a socialist revolution the inevitable consequence of capitalist development and why he believed humans would flourish, and politics would vanish, in a noncompetitive environment.

Not that Ryan himself is persuaded. The vision of people working with rather than competing against each other, and seeing each other as ends rather than means, he finds “either implausible or alarming” (*OP*, 779). But readers will at least have a pretty good idea what Marx had in mind before Ryan dismisses his ideal of universal cooperation. Moreover, they will have been given reasons to reconsider their own assumptions concerning self-interest, the rationality of competition, and the hidden assumptions of capitalism. Ryan’s conclusion, although it will not satisfy any neo-Marxists among his readers, nevertheless concedes that “many worse things have happened to human beings than living in the kind of timeless utopia envisaged by Marx” (*OP*, 806).

Ryan's discussions of Mill and Tocqueville, placed between those on Hegel and Marx, strike me as the pivotal chapters in *On Politics*. As noted, Ryan has written major studies of Mill, and he observes correctly that Mill cannot be understood without appreciating Tocqueville's influence on him. Ryan skillfully narrates Mill's education by the principal philosopher of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, and his chief lieutenant, Mill's father James Mill. He examines the young John Stuart's existential crisis and his resolution, following the Romantic poets' lead, to supplement his father's and Bentham's excessive rationalism by incorporating the emotions into his philosophy. Mill's own writings thus deviated from utilitarianism by adding a qualitative standard to the "quanta" of pleasure Bentham had proposed in order to measure his *summum bonum*, the greatest good of the greatest number.

But the exact nature of Mill's amendments, however, remains fuzzy. Ryan takes for granted that all of us modern liberals have become consequentialists too. If so, we must come to terms with Mill's attempt to clarify and amplify the utilitarian standard he inherited from his teachers—and with his failure to indicate precisely what he meant. Ryan contends that for the mature Mill, "autonomous self-development is the true goal of modern humanity" (*OP*, 717), yet it is not clear that such a standard remains utilitarian.

Mill's work contains both of what Ryan characterizes in *The Making of Modern Liberalism* as the two competing varieties of liberalism. "Classical" liberalism is committed to restraining government in order to insure the rights of the individual; *On Liberty* stands among the most ringing proclamations of that principle. Yet *On Liberty* also points toward the "modern" or "new" liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its commitment to using government to ensure that individuals can actually exercise the rights they possess in the abstract. Ryan makes clear that he takes Mill's appeal to "man as a progressive being" and the Romantic commitment to the individual's development "in all its 'manifold diversity'" as the heart of "modern" liberalism (*MML*, 25–6). Can this tension between liberalism old and new be resolved? I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* reflects the impact of Tocqueville's writings. Mill's detailed and appreciative reviews of both volumes of *Democracy in America* helped make Tocqueville's book a classic. Because modern government requires expert administration, Mill reasoned, the direct democracy of ancient Greece would have disastrous consequences in the modern world. For that reason the electorate's engagement should be confined to choosing their representatives. Yet as Ryan points out, paradoxes abound: Mill's compelling argument for woman suffrage depended on his claim for women's capacity, not the adequacy of their political experience. His argument for plural voting by better-educated citizens (a position he held only briefly) was inconsistent

with his conviction that all citizens are qualified to participate in electing representatives. Mill further recommended replacing Britain's "first-past-the-post" electoral system with ranked orders of preference, an alternative dismissed as impractical at the time that has since become standard operating procedure in a number of places (*OP*, 722–4). Finally, late in his life Mill championed a version of democratic socialism that veered sharply away from his father's and Bentham's liberal doctrines of laissez-faire and free trade, which he embraced in his youth. His mature ideal centered instead on workers' control for the same reason Mill offered as a rationale for expanding the franchise: those involved in a process—whether political or economic—should help determine what is to be done.

Reflecting on Mill's misgivings about democracy leads Ryan into a detailed analysis of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and his *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Ryan traces the differences in content and tone between the two volumes of *Democracy* and explains why Tocqueville moved from a more upbeat analysis of American political institutions to more somber reflections on the deeper implications of democratic culture. He also shows how and why Tocqueville constructed the concept of "self-interest properly understood" (which Ryan for some reason transforms into "good individualism"—as opposed to "bad individualism") to explain the success of American self-government. As individuals participate in public life, Tocqueville argued, simple self-interest is transmuted into public spirit. Thus the United States owes its vibrant democracy to its political institutions, such as town meetings and juries, and its voluntary associations, ranging from religious congregations to civic groups. These are the engines driving the vibrant political culture in volume one and the proto-totalitarian progenitors of majority tyranny in volume two.

Ryan ties such practices to English towns and contrasts them with the corrupt institutions of the French *Ancien Régime*. He does not, however, examine the crucial differences—which Tocqueville emphasized—between the United States and England. In the absence of a state church, rival dissenting sects could jockey for position. In the absence of a native aristocracy enjoying a monopoly on power and privilege, the constant churning of population and frequent rotation of office holders created a topsy-turvy world. Yet Tocqueville eventually began to worry about the loss of tradition and hierarchy in the egalitarian democracy he encountered. That anxiety prompted him to warn against the threat posed by a tyrannical majority that would demand conformity, stifle independent thinking, and smother individuality. Those anxieties proved contagious.

Tocqueville explained the French Revolution by showing how the expanding power and prestige of the monarchy since Louis XIV had reduced the aristocracy and the higher clergy to the status of parasites at the court in Versailles. Because that development dovetailed with the hollowing out of the middling ranks of

French society, France experienced a dangerous—and ultimately explosive—increase in inequality from the early seventeenth century through the late eighteenth. Lacking the traditions of political engagement that Tocqueville had seen in the US, however, France had nothing solid to put in place of the easily toppled monarchy. As a result the nation disintegrated into warring tribes that remained at each other's throats throughout the nineteenth century. Tocqueville unapologetically endorsed French empire, Ryan concludes, in part because he thought national expansion might restore, as it had done for earlier empires, the sense of unity and shared purpose destroyed by the Revolution.

Ryan's unusual grouping of Hegel together with Mill and Tocqueville, which some readers will deem idiosyncratic, makes sense in the context of his persuasive reinterpretation of another classic text in the liberal canon. Benjamin Constant's familiar contrast between ancient and modern liberty is usually taken to show why modern liberals resist the robust civic obligations imposed by ancient democracies. But Ryan offers an incisive reading: Constant was "clear that the choice was not between ancient and modern liberty, but between ancient liberty *without* modern liberty"—i.e. without individual rights that liberals wanted to secure against government intrusion, which Constant "thought that the purist republicans had hankered after during the Revolution"—and "ancient liberty *with* modern liberty." In short, Constant believed that "modern liberty could not be preserved unless we took ancient liberty seriously." In other words, "unless enough politically active people thought of themselves as citizens with not only a right but also a duty" to participate in the civic realm, at least in part "to keep their rulers in check, their liberties of speech, religion, occupation, domicile, and the like would not be secure" (*MML*, 12, original emphasis). Ryan thereby brings together the ancient republican emphasis on participation, on the one hand, with the modern liberal concern with rights, on the other. He argues persuasively that his pivotal nineteenth-century figures Hegel, Mill, and Tocqueville, like Locke before them and Dewey after them, not only did not separate civic participation from individual rights, but also believed that the two must be intertwined in a healthy polity.

In the remaining chapters of *On Politics*, grouped together as "The World after Marx," Ryan opts for a different strategy. He abandons the close analysis of particular thinkers and ideas and opts for a more essayistic, thematic approach that veers away from political theory in the direction of social criticism and cultural commentary on the twentieth century. Separate chapters examine the problem of mass society, imperialism, and anticolonialism, varieties of socialism and fascism, the challenge of democracy, and prospects for global peace. In these chapters, which seem more like essays thirty-four to forty in *The Making of Modern Liberalism* than a continuation of *On Politics*, Ryan's style is more discursive and his analysis more diffuse.

Ryan's discussion of mass society shows the indebtedness of twentieth-century critics to the arguments of Tocqueville, Mill, and Marx. Will the people come to resemble the mobs mobilized by the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, or Nazis, or will they be anesthetized and manipulated by powerful elites? Conservatives have offered one set of answers, radicals another. Ryan prefers the ambivalence of Tocqueville, Mill, and Max Weber, whose diagnosis of the consequences of rationalization and disenchantment left him deeply uneasy about the fate of popular government. Near the end of his life, however, Weber made clear that, despite his wariness about the discrepancy between the dynamic of modernization and the demands of democracy, he never abandoned hope. "We 'individualists' and supporters of 'democratic' institutions," he wrote in an essay of 1906, "are swimming 'against the stream' of material developments. Anyone who wishes to be the weather-vane of 'developmental trends' might as well abandon these outdated ideas as quickly as possible." Notwithstanding the momentum of modernity, Weber himself refused to renounce his commitments to individualism and democracy. Although Ryan's discussion of Weber hews to the conventional wisdom—that his pessimistic diagnosis of a world ruled by bureaucracy and instrumental rationality opened the door to Carl Schmitt's decisionism and thus to Hitler—I remain convinced that the evidence reveals another Weber, a scholar no less ambivalent about the prospects of popular government than Tocqueville but still a cautious, tortured advocate of representative democracy in a nation even less well equipped for it than post-Revolutionary France.¹¹

Ryan's chapter on empire begins with the startling observation that the full flowering of European imperialism came and went in less than half a century. His account begins, properly, with the ideas (descending from the Melian dialogue) deployed to justify European conquest of the western hemisphere in the sixteenth century. The rationale mutated over the next few centuries, inflected by ideas about Christianity, "civilization," economic imperatives, and racial hierarchy. Ryan focuses attention on the debates between pro- and anti-imperialists from the 1890s through the post-World War II triumph of anticolonial movements. His account also includes informative brief treatments of Fanon and Qutb. The latter's

¹¹ Max Weber, "Zur Lage der bürgerlichen Demokratie in Russland" (1906), in Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 2nd edn (Tübingen, 1958), 30–65. One section of the essay has been translated and excerpted in *Weber: Selections*, ed. W. G. Runciman, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 1978); the quoted passage appears on page 282 of this edition. For the evidence sustaining my argument on Weber and the similarities—as well as the significant differences—between his ideas and those of other "new liberals" such as L. T. Hobhouse, Léon Bourgeois, and John Dewey, see James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (Oxford, 1986), esp. 298–415; the passage from Weber is quoted at 388.

books *Social Justice in Islam* (1949) and *Milestones* (1964)—sometimes translated as *Signposts*—laid out the case for a very traditional but newly aggressive Islam as a response to the degrading forms of life in the West. Only by adopting sharia law and returning to the Koran, Qutb counseled, could Muslims avoid the decadence infecting the rest of the modern world. Uncongenial as Ryan knows his readers are likely to find Fanon's celebrations of violence as cathartic and Qutb's call for a return to an earlier understanding of Islam, he concludes by observing both that such ideas are the fruit of imperialism and that they resemble those of some early Protestant sects in their zeal and their intolerance of difference. Ryan concludes the book with the bold and at least somewhat reassuring prediction that few forces in our day, even such religious fundamentalism, appear to lead toward global warfare. Although peace, whether under the fantasy reign of free markets or under the equally fantastic dream of world government, seems to Ryan as impossibly utopian now as it has ever been, the very real threats of continuing violence should not be confused with the danger of world war.

Ryan separates his account of the varieties of twentieth-century socialism, which includes the rise of parliamentary socialist parties throughout Europe, from his discussion of Russian communism, which he examines alongside the forms of fascism and dictatorship that emerged in the wake of World War I. The concept of totalitarianism, Ryan makes clear in the chapter on fascism and the Soviet Union, blurred important distinctions; his account of its genesis and its shortcomings is excellent. So too is his brief discussion of Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trostky, and Joseph Stalin, which makes clear that the demands of the Russian Revolution, not the logic of Marxism, turned the proletarian revolution into a police state. Ryan concludes by exploring George Orwell's and Aldous Huxley's fears that the West would follow suit and Herbert Marcuse's nightmare of "one-dimensional man" drugged into torpor by hyper-consumption.

Given the decisive impact of those on the left who rejected both utopian socialism and revolutionary Marxism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I consider it unfortunate that Ryan devotes so little attention to their work. Thinkers such as the British Fabians, who helped inspire the British Labour Party, and their sometime allies the guild socialists receive only brief discussion. French theorists such as Jean Jaurès, the founder of the modern French socialist party, and his successors Léon Blum and Jean Monnet receive none at all. The northern European thinkers who laid the groundwork for the post-World War II welfare states that now dominate the industrialized world, thinkers who envisioned and then hammered out the institutional arrangements under which most people in the developed world now live, likewise do not come into view. Ryan seems to assume that the logic of the welfare state is so transparent that it requires little analysis. If only that were true. Sandwiched between brief

descriptions of the ideas of Richard Titmuss and T. H. Marshall is this wistful sentence:

If we are self-centered and self-interested, and look only at our own pay-off, the welfare state will lose its legitimacy. We must be moved by at least a certain amount of altruism and be happy to make contributions that have a low chance of doing us, individually, very much good. (903)

Indeed.

For decades social democrats and “new liberals” on both sides of the Atlantic advanced arguments against such blinkered conceptions of self-interest, but their ideas are absent from *On Politics*. For several decades such ideas have been under sustained attack by conservative champions of the *old* liberalism, and Ryan could have done a service to his fellow “new liberals” by presenting a more robust account of the rise and rationale of the liberal democratic welfare state. The one exception is John Dewey, about whom Ryan has written a fine book. Dewey’s conception of an invigorated nation as a “great community” depended on his conception of individuals growing, through shared educational and social experiences, toward fulfillment as full participants in shaping the ethical ideal that he called democracy. Although democracy as Dewey understood it requires the full range of local and national institutions characteristic of representative democracies, it also involves the full engagement of individuals, self-conscious participants in a common project, in making decisions concerning their lives in their families, in their workplaces, and in their leisure activities. The integration of all dimensions of experience in the lifelong pursuit of social, economic, political, and aesthetic fulfillment was an ideal with its origins in Aristotle and Hegel. Dewey sketched the political dimensions of that ideal in a variety of lectures, essays, and books, but as Ryan points out, he never presented it systematically in a comprehensive blueprint. Those of us inclined to give Dewey the benefit of the doubt trace the incompleteness or open-endedness of his political ideas to his pragmatism, the American philosophy that distrusts all foreordained solutions in favor of cooperative experimentation in every domain.

Alongside his cogent and sympathetic portrait of Dewey’s democratic idealism Ryan discusses various forms of mid-century “realism.” Dewey’s sometimes-friendly critics Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr doubted the public’s capacity to rise to Dewey’s lofty expectations. According to the much harder-edged Joseph Schumpeter, whose ideas now inform much of Anglo-American social-scientific discourse, democracy is best understood simply as a competition among elites for the public’s trust. Once elected, officials should try hard to ignore the electorate’s uninformed and usually misguided impulses and get on with the business of problem-solving for which they alone are equipped. That technocratic view of politics, Ryan observes, has framed political scientists’ understanding of

democracy as a struggle between interest groups. If enough groups compete, according to the rosier view of American pluralism that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, then citizens' multiple and cross-cutting affiliations will prevent fundamental divisions of the sort that can spin out of control and into left- or right-wing extremism.¹²

The alternative reading of that condition, which emerged with the upheavals of the 1960s, contends that such stability staves off chaos at the cost of stasis. The New Left, which for a brief moment nudged American politics toward Deweyan democracy, resonated on both sides of the Atlantic because, in Ryan's words, its American and British versions resembled "the European attempt to reconcile Catholicism and Marxism." That project "depended on finding the points where Catholic pluralism" met Marxism, Ryan contends, "and workplace democracy was one" (971). Many commentators have identified the religious sources and dimensions of social democracy in post-Christian Europe, but that is another crucial dimension of contemporary welfare states left untouched by Ryan's analysis. Dewey distanced himself from his roots in his mother's fervent Congregational Christianity. Yet his commitment to democracy as an ethical ideal echoed the commitments of some Christian communities, from the earliest to today, and Dewey acknowledged the "religious" quality of many "consummatory experiences" in a way that highlighted the continuity Ryan ignores.

Recent work on the religious roots of John Rawls's philosophy has revealed that his *Theory of Justice* too stands in the long tradition of Christian political thinking. Ryan justifiably calls Rawls's work "the most philosophically impressive attempt of recent years to give an all-encompassing account of legitimate social, political, and economic arrangements in the modern world" (*PO*, 972). Like Ryan, Rawls was a liberal democrat. He stressed the priority of his first principle of justice, which insures equal liberties for every individual, to his second, the difference or "maximin" principle, which holds that all inequalities must be justified according to whether they improve the condition of the least well-off members of society. But as Ryan correctly observes, Rawls's project overall requires a commitment to justice conceived in terms other than the simple summing of individual desires. It rests on a "moral intuition" similar to those of Rousseau and Kant. Ryan contends that *A Theory of Justice* should be seen as an effort to demonstrate that socialists and conservatives are mistaken: the liberal welfare state "is not a patched-up

¹² Two recent books examine these mid-century debates. On the relation between economics and politics on both sides of the Atlantic see Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); and on the tensions between democracy and expertise in American thought see Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge, 2012).

compromise between conservatism and socialism, but a distinctive creed with solid foundations” (*MML*, 508, 511). If Ryan is right about that, then what is the source of that commitment, and of the moral intuition that undergirds it? What is the foundation of the liberal welfare state, and is that foundation sturdy enough to sustain the weight of the arrangements it purports to justify? Neither of these books addresses those crucial questions.

CONCLUSIONS

On Politics and *The Making of Modern Liberalism* are learned, engaging, and provocative books. They also reveal the tensions at the heart of Ryan’s liberal individualism. In the Introduction to his essay collection, he offers the following characterization: “I think the core of political liberalism has been defensive, and that as the term suggests, the history of liberalism is the history of a concern to protect individual liberty against a succession of threats” (*MML*, 9). Yet this “liberalism of fear” is but one side of the tradition; its verso is the “liberalism of individual autonomy.” Ryan writes that “it has seemed to me for the past thirty years that there is indeed one concept of freedom, and that it is the positive concept that Isaiah Berlin identified as equating ‘Am I free?’ with ‘Am I my own master?’” In “Liberalism” (1993), however, Ryan characterizes liberalism as an “essentially contested concept.” Even if we take the “most plausible brief definition” to be that “the freedom of the individual is the highest political value, and that institutions and practices are to be judged by their success in promoting it,” then we would still dispute the meanings of “freedom”—in Berlin’s terms, is it negative or positive?—and the nature of the “individuals” who are to enjoy that freedom (23).

Among the charms of Ryan’s writing is its equanimity. He rarely disrespects the thinkers he examines, he works hard to present their ideas fairly, and he is all too willing to concede that things are complicated. Again and again his chapters and essays end, or begin, with an apology for his inability to resolve the problems addressed. It is tempting to read such self-deprecating gestures as rituals, clever yet insincere denials that much significance is being claimed for the arguments on offer. I think there’s more to it than that. Like Mill and Dewey—and unlike Russell—Ryan really does doubt that most serious political questions have clear answers. That twenty-three-year-old reading his paper on freedom at Cambridge and Oxford remains visible. If that makes Ryan sometimes hard to pin down, and it does, it also makes him an excellent guide to the long tradition of Western political theory.

In the opening pages of *On Politics*, Ryan says he first read Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy* at fifteen, and he claims that the book, together with Mill’s *On Liberty*, changed his life. When he returned to Russell’s *History* years later, he

was surprised to find it “spectacularly prejudiced.” Ryan clearly wants readers of *On Politics* not to have that reaction. His own book is unfailingly polite, even-tempered, and fair-minded—all virtues, at least from my perspective. Yet there is still something missing.

I know what Ryan means about Russell. I first read Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy* when I was twenty-three and twenty-four years old. Although it did not change my life, it did make a difference. In my first two years as a student in the Graduate Program in Humanities at Stanford, I was reading or rereading many of the books discussed in Russell’s *History* and Ryan’s *On Politics*. Because I found Russell unfailingly entertaining but also often infuriating, I decided to read him alongside another book less well known today, *A History of Philosophy*, a multivolume overview by Frederick Copleston SJ. Weighing their starkly different assessments of thinkers from the Presocratics to the pragmatists helped me develop a critical sensibility of my own.

I indulge in that autobiographical tidbit because despite the many virtues of Ryan’s *On Politics*, I would recommend that readers do something similar, albeit for a somewhat different reason. Ryan’s account ably expresses the ideas of secular liberal individualism probably held by most members of the Anglo-American academic community. For that very reason, though, I think it should be supplemented by one or another book that presents an alternative perspective. Options abound. Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* (1960, 2nd edn 2004) remains bracing, as do Jürgen Habermas’s most expansive book, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1998) and Jerome Schneewind’s *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998), to cite just a couple of possibilities. But the book that I think best ventilates Ryan’s moderate liberalism is Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989). Even though I disagree with Taylor as vociferously about Locke as I do with Ryan about Madison, I think Taylor provides even better brief accounts of some thinkers (Augustine, Hegel, and Kant, for example) than Ryan does. Moreover, Taylor’s explicitly religious outlook provides a valuable counterbalance to Ryan’s tough-minded secularism—especially because, as Ryan concedes, secular thinking is making very little headway outside Western Europe and its cultural dependencies. These two books, one an appreciation of modern liberal individualism and the other a critique, would make excellent companions for readers now embarking on the long journey through Western thought.

In closing, I recommend that strategy because I think Ryan underestimates the extent to which liberal individualism remains indebted to the moral intuition he identifies in Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*. Those of us in the modern West now inhabit a world in which, as Ryan correctly observes, a concern with freedom is usually considered fundamental. Conservatives and liberals prize different liberties, but almost everyone shares a passionate commitment to inviolable individual rights.

In the context of those commitments, it sometimes seems that only rights count. That means that our obligations can fade out of focus. We can lose sight of the ethical as well as political importance of generating laws to constrain our freedom.

A phrase carved on courthouses in cities like Worcester and Springfield, Massachusetts, and plastered on government buildings and even police cars throughout the Midwestern United States, should remind Americans that our ancestors did not share our contemporary understanding of the primacy of freedom: “Obedience to law is liberty.” Usually attributed to the late Roman writer Boethius, those words concisely convey the neo-Roman ideal of autonomy in self-government that Ryan identifies with Cicero and hears reverberating in the writings of so many later thinkers. The idea of limiting liberty with law was so common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American and European cultures that it could be, and usually was, taken for granted. Now, as a glance at the Internet makes clear, these have become fightin’ words, a threat deemed incompatible with America’s oldest traditions, a challenge to everything contemporary Americans hold dear.

The once innocuous idea of autonomy has become, at least to some contemporaries, the emblem of totalitarian government. Cicero and Boethius, like Augustine and Aquinas, Rousseau and Hegel, Tocqueville and Mill, believed it essential—as do both Alan Ryan and Charles Taylor—to distinguish between genuine freedom and simple impulse, or appetite, which must be mastered by reason. The purpose of law is to channel individuals’ often wayward wills away from destructive behavior and toward constructive contributions to democratic civic life. If individualism means only the retreat from the public sphere, liberal democracy will wither, just as Tocqueville and Mill warned. Given how seductive the lure of unbounded freedom has become in the twenty-first century, any challenge to its sovereignty smacks of tyranny. In our day, therefore, it is especially welcome to have Alan Ryan’s calm but insistent reminders that in Western political thought, civic duties have circumscribed and given meaning to the exercise of freedom. It is equally important to remember where our ideas of duty came from, and why those ideas still matter.