

# **Civilization Renewed: A Pluralistic Approach to a Free Society**

## I. Introduction

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Why do we really favor a free society? Why should we favor a free society? What kind of free society should we want?

I ask these questions to consider a practical and moral case for a free society with a minimum of hard-to-defend metaphysical baggage. I do not start by assuming that individuals possess some sacrosanct "protected sphere" of individual interests or rights, however appealing such a concept may be. The notion of good consequences will play an all-important role in the argument. Nonetheless I try to make the case without being trapped by the standard difficulties of utilitarianism, including its collectivistic slant, its extreme demands on individual lives and talents, and its frequently counterintuitive moral implications.

My first loyalty is to the concept of Western civilization, the primary form that free societies take in the modern world. By Western civilization I mean North America, Western Europe, parts of Australasia, and stretching the literal meaning of the term, post-war Japan, which is built on Western-style institutions. The designation covers the time period from about 1950 to the current day, although for some nations (e.g., England, America) liberal history has a longer run. I characterize Western civilization as the set of complex effects that have arisen from private property, private ownership of (most) capital goods, the Industrial Revolution, rule of law, and representative government, usually embodied in a formal constitution.

Looking at the notion of civilization more generally, Samuel Huntington (1996, chapter two) cites a variety of definitions, including the concepts of "settled, urban, and literate" (p.40), and "the broadest cultural entity" (p.43). Fernández-Armesto (2001), referring to the work of Kenneth Clark, designates a civilization as a society with the confidence to build for the future. Clark (1969, p.1) himself noted that while he did not know exactly what civilization was, he could recognize it when he saw it. Matthew Melko (1969, p.113) remarks that "when a civilization is operating effectively, it is likely to grow." Western civilization encompasses all of these ideas but can be defined more specifically simply by pointing to where we find it.

The word "civilization" is of relatively recent origin. Apparently it was used first by the Marquis de Mirabeau, the French Physiocrat and economist, in the middle of the eighteenth century. The word became a staple of French Enlightenment writings over the next several decades. As late as 1772 Dr. Johnson would not include the word in his Dictionary, but the word was picked up by the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, including John Millar, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith. From its beginnings, the notion of civilization has been tied to the defense of a free society.<sup>1</sup>

Western civilization shows us that societies, at least under the right circumstances, can provide happy, meaningful, and relatively free lives for a significant cross-section of their citizens. John Stuart Mill (1963 [1867]), in his essay "Civilization", admitted that while civilizations have numerous vices and drawbacks: "Assuredly, we entertain no doubt on this point; we hold that civilization is a good, that it is the cause of much good, and not incompatible with any [good]..."

Along the lines of Mill, the French liberal Guizot wrote: "[Civilization] subsists on two conditions and is revealed by two symptoms: the development of social activity and of individual activity, the progress of society and the progress of humanity. Wherever man's external condition is gaining, thriving, improving; wherever man's inner nature is revealing itself more splendidly and imposingly - by those two signs, and often despite the profound imperfection of the social state, the human race applauds and proclaims civilization."<sup>2</sup>

Most of us take the benefits of civilization for granted but by historical standards the quality of our lives is a shocking fact. I start with that understanding as prior to any explicit theoretical argument. The account of this book is therefore anthropological and historical before it is economic or philosophical. Western civilization is wonderful and

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<sup>1</sup> On the origins of the word, see Febvre (1973), Benveniste (1971), and Starobinski (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Starobinski (1993, p.4), drawn from Guizot's History of Civilization in Europe.

rich in plural values. I seek to celebrate that fact and also to elevate its theoretical importance. I will use the concept of Western civilization to improve upon both standard utilitarianism and more metaphysical defenses of freedom, while borrowing from the appealing parts of these approaches.

Almost all contemporary political philosophies, whether they admit it or not, start with a phenomenology or commonly shared experience of what it is like to live under Western civilization. None of the major liberal theories escape such an understanding. For instance, Rawls's veil of ignorance, while it pretends to postulate relatively "thin" information for those behind the veil, cannot help but draw on common notions of what the West has achieved. The Principle of Liberty and the doctrine of Maximin have plausibility in reflective equilibrium because we have seen that societies such as Sweden are relatively successful. Libertarianism, however much it pretends to deviate from the status quo, is trying to elevate and perfect one aspect of the Western tradition, namely reliance on the market to allocate resources. Without a prior knowledge of what the West has achieved through markets, libertarianism, and the libertarian theory of rights, would offer little meaning. Similarly, the more liberal versions of communitarianism are informed by our experience with healthy neighborhood communities, and so on.

In each case our historical experiences with Western civilization, whether properly interpreted or not, underlie the major liberal political doctrines. So I will start my approach explicitly with the concept of civilization.

### History

An emphasis on Western civilization leads us to history. Works of political philosophy commonly start with real world events. Rawls and Nozick responded to the 1960s, and to the construction of welfare states around the Western world. Hayek started with the failures of communism and central planning, evident to him before many others saw the same. Hobbes and Locke took the wars of religion, and the English succession controversies, to pose many of their central problems. Machiavelli was confronted with

the wars between various Italian city-states. Burke cannot be understood apart from the French Revolution, nor can Marx be pulled from the context of the Industrial Revolution.

The central historical event behind this book is the fall of the Roman Empire. It is one of the two historical events that have made the strongest impression on me, the other being the rise of the West. Those two events, taken together, show that civilizations may undergo great rises and falls.

The fall of the Roman Empire was a terrible tragedy at the time. Despite the revisionist work done on the medieval period and the so-called "Dark Ages," there is no gainsaying the loss that the Western world experienced. Standards of living plummeted and then stagnated for centuries. Most parts of Western Europe ended up cut off from each other. Cities disappeared or shrank across Western Europe, as commerce retreated to relatively isolated estates. Roman trade and road networks fell into disrepair. Travel became much more dangerous. The production of art and literature plunged; it became common practice to melt down Roman statues for their bronze content. These changes lasted for hundreds of years. It is estimated that the median European did not reattain Roman standards of living until the eighteenth century.

I take the fall of the Roman Empire to be a proxy -- the proxy most central to Western consciousness -- for the broader possibility of civilizational decline. We cannot take the continued existence of public order for granted. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1988 [1762], p.89) put the problem in clear albeit pessimistic form: "...what State can hope to endure forever...The body politic, as well as the human body, begins to die as soon as it is born, and carries in itself the causes of its destruction."

Rome is but an example of a more general phenomenon. Michael Shermer (2002) has compiled an informal database on civilizational survival. He catalogued sixty civilizations, including Sumeria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, the eight dynasties of Egypt, six civilizations of Greece, the Roman Republic and Empire, nine dynasties and two republics of China, four periods in Africa, three in India, two in Japan, six in Central and

South America, and six in modern Europe and America. He finds that the average civilization endured 402.6 years. He also finds that decline comes more rapidly over time. Since the fall of Rome average duration of a civilization has been only 304.5 years.

S.E. Finer (1997, pp.30-34) provides an alternative look at civilizational survival, under the heading "Total Life-Spans." He defines a civilization in grosser terms than does Shermer, so for him ancient Egypt is one civilization, not eight. Civilizations therefore last longer for him on average. He finds a range of civilizational lifespans, but some of the longer-lived examples are 2,820 years (Egypt), 2,133 years (China), and 1,962 (the Byzantine empire). The Venetian Republic lasted 1,112 years. The shorter examples include the Achaemenian Persian Empire (220 years) and the Sassanian Persian Empire (427 years).

Finer also develops the more finely grained category of civilizational breakdowns, which occur more frequently. A breakdown is the "disintegration of a previously united state" (p.32), in contrast to the more severe examples of total civilizational collapse. Egyptian breakdowns come after varying periods of 675, 184, 206, 215, and 1,238 years. For Chinese breakdowns they come after periods of 400, 500, 442, 360, 326, 69, and 936 years. Assyrian breakdowns come after periods of 157, 82, 38, 143, and 312 years. Arnold Toynbee, in his classic A Study of History, classifies world history into twenty-six civilizations. By his count, sixteen of these civilizations no longer exist. Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations (1996, pp.44-45), citing Matthew Melko (1969), refers to twelve major civilizations, seven of which have perished.

For our purposes, we need not worry about the details and accuracies of these calculations. Obviously any exact numbers will have arbitrary or disputable elements. The main point is that, no matter how we define our terms, a militarily and culturally dominant civilization can in fact fall for an extended period of time.

The contemporary world, at least until recent terrorist attacks, has tended to be complacent about civilizational security. Western polities have been on an upswing since

the turning points of the Second World War. First came the defeat of the Nazis (though by the Russians rather than by the freer nations) and then the fall of communism. Many underdeveloped nations, one way or another, try to mimic the prosperity and democracy of the West. Today the United States is a military, economic, and cultural power without rival in the history of the world. Yet world history shows that such stability cannot be taken for granted.

Today we face a potential future of biological and chemical warfare, and cheap nuclear weapons for sale on black markets. Future (current?) enemies of Western civilization may not only be undeterrable, they may have the ability to bring nuclear suitcases into major cities, or release terrible diseases, without ever being identified. Within the near future, it may be possible to kill millions people, and wreak havoc, with only a few dozen conspirators and a few million dollars.

Whether or not we fear terrorism, we are entering a period of rapid technological change, which promises to upset previous political equilibria and the international balance of power. The last fifty years have been remarkable precisely for how little life-altering technological change they brought. In contrast, technological innovations totally transformed peoples' lives from 1880 to 1930. The long list of new inventions includes electricity, automobiles, airplanes, household appliances, the telephone, vastly cheaper power, industrialism, mass production, and radio, to name just a few examples of many. The railway was not new but it expanded greatly in this period. The last fifty years have brought nothing comparable, except perhaps for television, and the formative years of the Internet, a new technology just starting to change our lives. For the most part the last fifty years brought more refrigerators and better refrigerators, thus lulling us into a false sense of stasis. The daily world of 2000 resembles the daily world of 1950 to a startling degree, except for the fact that it is faster, more fun, extends benefits to more people, and offers more choice. It is therefore no wonder that the last two generations have developed an unjustified implicit belief that the world will continue along its current track. But the next fifty years, in addition to the risks of terrorism, may bring artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, quantum computing, unprecedented

environmental changes, and many changes that we cannot yet forecast. Even Francis Fukuyama, when referring to advanced biotechnologies, has repudiated his earlier claim that we have seen the "End of History."<sup>3</sup>

The point is not to argue for pessimism, but rather to note that civilizations always face new horizons and significant challenges. Most civilizations decline for economic, political, social, and environmental reasons. This may sound like a truism, but the point is that the reasons for decline, while complex, are largely the result of human influence. Had various individuals made different decisions, their civilizations could have lasted longer (or shorter). Better political and institutional regimes lead to superior outcomes, at least in expected value terms. For that reason, warding off decline should be a central goal, if not the central goal, of political philosophy. The true and permanent decline of civilization, whenever it comes, will be an enormous tragedy, but we can work in the meantime to postpone it.

Civilizational decline nonetheless has attracted little attention from most of the leading lights in contemporary political philosophy. It does not receive discussion in Rawls, Nozick, Sen, Dworkin, or in many other notable and excellent books. Derek Parfit (1987) gives the notion a brief mention at the end of his Reasons and Persons. Contemporary political philosophers typically ask how a given society or civilization should be structured, taking the continuing existence of that civilization for granted. Whatever the intellectual virtues of these works, they do not address the ongoing challenges to the survival of civilization. Similarly, cultural critics see aesthetic corruption, but most of these visions assume that the West will continue as we know it, more or less, albeit in a morally degraded state. The postwar decline of mainstream interest in Toynbee and Spengler – two historians preoccupied with civilizational decline -- is indicative of the general shift of opinion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Futurists in the late nineteenth century systematically underestimated the changes to come. Futurists after the Second World War systematically overestimated the changes to come.

<sup>4</sup> Buchanan (1984) and Levy (2002) discuss "worst case thinking" in economics. Herman (1997), Brander (1998), Cowen (1998), and Bennett (2001) survey Western thinking on decline more broadly. Environmentalism has provided its own set of hypotheses about civilizational decline. These claims have

The ancients, of course, paid greater attention to civilizational decline than do most of the moderns. Ensuring the continued existence of the city-state, in light of hostile military enemies, is a central theme in Plato's dialogue The Republic. Homer's Odyssey portrays the change and decay of numerous political regimes. Herodotus told how the Athenians preserved their civilization against the Persians, while Thucydides narrated the defeat of the Athenians at the hands of the Spartans. John Stuart Mill (p.22), in his work on representative government, noted that: "Politics, as conceived by the ancients, consisted wholly in [an unceasing struggle against causes of deterioration]."

Livy and Tacitus, among the Romans, saw the continued maintenance of Roman civilization as the fundamental issue of their time. While they are commonly considered historians, they also belie the common belief that Rome had no first-rate political theorists. For them history was central to political philosophy. Augustine (1984, p.599) wrote that: "The earthly city will not be everlasting." The Muslim Ibn Khaldûn, writing in the fourteenth century, was one of the last representatives of the tradition of antiquity. His treatise The Muqaddimah started with the concept of civilization and focused on fragility and tendency for cyclical decline.

Montesquieu, although usually considered an Enlightenment thinker, hearkened back to this earlier tradition. His central works (Persian Letters, Spirit of the Laws, The Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline) were rife with pessimism and obsessed with the theme of civilizational decline, perhaps because the world was just emerging from a very bloody seventeenth century. In essence, I am seeking to combine the broad historical perspective of Montesquieu with the analytical tools of Rawls, Nozick, Parfit, and the modern theory of rational choice.

A multiculturalist may query what this book could possibly offer to individuals who have grown up outside the Western tradition. In response, I do not argue that all non-Western

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had enormous influence over policy, and over the thinking of the common man. But they have had only a marginal impact on mainstream political philosophy

individuals should necessarily try to fit into the Western tradition (see my earlier book Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures on this question). But people who stand outside the West still should care deeply about what happens to Western civilization, for both benevolent and economic reasons. Their interests and their concerns still leave us with the question of what to do with Western polities.

Similarly, I do not defend every aspect of Western civilization. I do not seek to apologize for slavery, the Holocaust, or colonial oppression, all of which are products of Western civilization. I do later consider whether these crimes are somehow part and parcel of the positive side of Western civilization, a necessary side of a larger bundle, so to speak. I will argue that we can separate different facets of Western civilization meaningfully. For the time being, I proceed to speak of Western civilization in terms of its positive qualities as described above, and not in terms of its darker side throughout history.

### Pluralism and a free society

Starting with civilization leads naturally to a pluralistic approach to value. Civilizations embody a plurality of important values, including individual autonomy, prosperity, creativity, justice, equality, merit, fairness, friendship, truth, and beauty. No one of these values, however, serves as a trump card, as does utility for the utilitarians. In lieu of a single trump value we have a cluster of arguments, and a cluster of factors, which may or may not point together towards the same kind of society. Resolving such value clashes is a central problem of this book.

A successful pluralist argument points to something special and multi-faceted about Western civilization and free societies. It tells us we have many reasons for favoring our polities, and supports those polities without relying too much on a single set of philosophic intuitions. We could realize we have been making philosophic mistakes, and revise our views, yet at the end still favor some form of a free society. This case for a free society thus has empirical roots and cannot easily be held hostage to purely abstract

philosophic arguments. Most importantly, pluralism can help us answer some specific questions about the particular form a free society should take and how we should confront concrete policy decisions.

Pluralist doctrine has a long and honorable history in philosophy, starting with Aristotle and continuing through Plutarch, Montaigne, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, William James, and Max Weber. In more recent times, Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, John Rawls, Kenneth Arrow, John Kekes, John Gray, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, William Galston, Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, and Gilles DeLeuze, among others, have defended various forms of pluralistic doctrines.<sup>5</sup>

We should not, however, focus on philosophical thinkers alone. Our personal observations of diverse human purposes and natures provide the strongest arguments for pluralism. The West's sum total of histories, biographies, novels, and artworks reflect a multiplicity of important and plural values. For instance, reading the Great Books ought to convince us that no single value, and no single way of looking at values, can reign supreme above all others, in all circumstances. Histories and biographies tell us about the diversity of human motivation and human projects. Art shows us how many important feelings, ideas, and conceptions -- multiple and plural in their nature -- resist articulation but nonetheless contribute to the value of a life. This book therefore serves as a philosophic apology for doctrines that find their best advocates in other genres and other modes of thought.

Generic uncertainty about ethical reasoning provides another argument for pluralism. A variety of honest and intelligent thinkers push upon us the importance of rights, or utility, or justice, or beauty, or some other standard. Perhaps we are not sure who is right and who is wrong. Perhaps all these doctrines make some valid points. Perhaps there are many contenders for the Best Moral Theory. In that case, sitting in a state of partial

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<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of Aristotle, and Hume, is controversial in the literature. See, for instance, Crowder (2002, p.17).

ignorance, all the cited values stand some chance of mattering, which again brings us back to pluralism.

Note that pluralism is not relativism. Pluralism does not say "the right answer depends on your point of view," but instead allows for Truth with a capital T, while admitting uncertainty about the content of that T. We also must recognize that sometimes values conflict, and the True answer (note the capital T) does not always assign an unambiguous right or wrong to either side of the debate. Not all value conflicts can be resolved rationally.

It is not my intention to elaborate pluralism in all its details. Instead I wish to confront the common view that pluralism fails as an account of a free society. I wish to ask "Given a commitment to civilization, and pluralism, then what?" My admittedly ambitious motive in writing this book has been to focus on the hard questions. I have imagined writing the first few drafts of the book, presenting a draft to readers for criticism, throwing away the earlier draft I had had, and rewriting the material to focus only on reader criticisms. That is how I have tried to structure this book.

This focus on clashing arguments makes much of the book read like a form of intellectual violence, noting that the violence is often directed against my own views. I do not focus on exposition, building consensus on familiar material, literature survey, or other niceties. I do not retread familiar ground, offering some "suggestive remarks" on the tough problems at the very end. I do not "argue by elimination" by focusing on the weaknesses in other views and downplaying the weaknesses of my own. Instead I seek to zap my own beliefs – advocacy of a free society -- with the strongest attacks possible and spend the rest of the book trying to pick up the pieces. That is the kind of philosophic book I like to read and thus that is the sort of book I am trying to write.

For this reason, I spend little time on many of the specifics behind the case for a free society. I do not spend any time arguing the empirics of whether a free society is more prosperous than the alternatives. Nor do I devote attention to detailing and condemning

the human rights abuses of less free alternatives. Nor do I provide any wise or seasoned account of which pluralistic values should matter, or why a particular value might be important. No doubt these issues are critical, but many writers have already handled them. As stated above, I wish to focus on the weak points in the case for a free society, which are significant, and see how far we can get.

The idea of absolute individual rights, as found in Robert Nozick, has won few adherents, in part because it seems theological. Nozick simply assumed that such rights exist, and no one has succeeded in deriving them. Well-known "lifeboat" scenarios (would you steal a dime from Rockefeller to save millions of starving babies?) suggest that at heart most libertarian rights theorists are consequentialists of some kind or another. Even Nozick invoked a Lockean proviso, intended to insure that the creation of a property right could not greatly damage the interests of others.

Nor do contractarian approaches settle the question of justification. We do not know what people "behind a veil of ignorance" would choose, without having some prior theory of what is right, or some prior theory of what kind of life a self-interested person would pursue. But if we had such a prior theory, why not start with that theory of the good directly? When it comes to contractarianism, many critics have the sneaking suspicion of "philosophy in, philosophy out." The contractarian framework generates no more philosophic wisdom than is put into it in the first place. Even if we accept contractarianism as our best available starting point, the substantive work of filling in the boxes remains to be done, and the contractarian can read this book as a move in that direction.

The "epistemic argument" of Friedrich A. Hayek may refute central planning, but it does not settle more complex issues about what form a free society should take. Hayek points out the limitations of the individual mind and our inability to redesign societal institutions from scratch, using a "blueprint of reason." Reform proposals must confront our respect for institutions that have survived, and that have delivered a positive rate of economic growth for many years. I take the Hayekian critique of "rationalist constructivism"

seriously, but presumably it should apply at the macro level as well. If we have something "that works," whatever that means, we should be wary of abandoning it for rationalist promises of a better tomorrow. But this argument cuts against all or most attempts to reform the status quo, including Hayek's own ideas.

Hayek's approach was attractive on an aesthetic level. In his vision the market is a "cosmos," a splendidly diverse and complex "spontaneous order" that defeats most attempts at central direction. The problems with government intervention thus stem from the very nature of human knowledge. The disastrous history of central planning shows that Hayek had a good point. But Hayek never decisively elevated classical over modern liberalism, or provided a more general explanation of how to evaluate one alternative as superior to another. Although the critique of central planning was devastating, one looks in vain in Hayek for answers to the hard questions about a mixed economy. How exactly did Hayek justify his calls for a smaller government? Do not many government interventions increase decentralization and dispersed knowledge, rather than stifling those properties? Does Hayek's critique apply to modern forms of the welfare state? Is not government a spontaneous order just as the market is? Perhaps most importantly, what is Hayek's ultimate normative standard? Does not his argument collapse into either utilitarianism or historicism, two views whose implications he is not ready to accept?

The well-known doctrine of liberal neutrality also encounters serious intellectual challenges. Liberalism often postulates a government that performs some set of practical functions, such as supplying public goods and a safety net, but is otherwise neutral across competing values. Government exists to protect property rights, to make choice possible, and to provide a level playing field, in which people can choose values for themselves. . Note that this argument, if it works, allows for a relatively value-free defense of a free society. We can defend the values of autonomy, and freedom of choice, and otherwise remain neutral across competing values and lifestyles. The choice of subsequent values would be left to each individual, operating in a competitive, market-like framework. Robert Nozick, in the last part of Anarchy, State, and Utopia, described the resulting diversity as his version of "utopia."

This vision of neutrality has failed to hold up against withering criticisms from James Fitzjames Stephens, Joseph Raz, and George Sher, among others. A liberal society will favor some values, and disfavor others, whether or not we call it neutral. So we cannot cite neutrality without making a substantive commitment to some particular values over others. Fitzjames Stephens, in responding to Stuart Mill, argued that we would advocate a free society only if we believed that it would produce good values, rather than bad ones. In this regard liberalism is always value-laden. Fitzjames Stephens (1991 [1873], p.85) wrote "To me the question of whether liberty is a good or a bad thing appears as irrational as the question whether fire is a good or a bad thing? It is both good and bad according to time, place and circumstance, and a complete answer to the question, In what cases is liberty good and in what cases is it bad?"

Of course we can defend liberal society on value-laden grounds. Freedom may produce "better values" than the alternatives. But we then return to the problem of how to weigh some values against others, when values conflict, a focus of the next chapter.

Utilitarianism offers another way of defending a free society. It is widely recognized that freer societies produce happier people than do tyrannies. But utilitarianism is a collectivist doctrine in many ways, offering no protections to the individual or to the individual life plan. Rawls argued that utilitarianism does not take distinctions between individuals seriously.

Nor do utilitarian arguments necessarily support Western civilization as we know it. Wealth redistribution can improve the quality of life in poorer parts of the world. Several billion people in the world earn less than \$2 a day. I spend my marginal dollar on an ice cream cone, while per capita income in Haiti is \$250 per year. Most Haitian children grow up with diarrhea, chronic malnutrition, and malaria. They never learn how to read. A hundred dollars goes a long way in their world. Both a utilitarian point of view (Peter Singer), and a consequentialist point of view (Shelley Kagan) suggest that we should

redistribute resources to these individuals. Not just a penny, but a significant portion of our social surplus, enough until the wealthy are close to the level of the poor.

The utilitarian has a difficult time countering the radical implications of such arguments. Some critics point out that foreign aid is notoriously ineffective and often counterproductive. This appears true, but surely it would be easy for our government to just transfer wealth directly, by taxing us and dropping the dollar bills over Haiti with a helicopter, or by handing them out as lottery payments. Our domestic social security program is one example of a government policy that just transfers cash from one group to another, with a minimum of administrative costs (social security administrative costs are estimated at about one percent of the program's budget).<sup>6</sup> Many individuals would argue that capitalism and a freer market would serve Haiti very well. Again, this might be true, but in the meantime the case for significant redistribution, to the poorer countries of the world, appears compelling within a utilitarian framework.

This problem with redistribution, of course, is by no means unique to libertarianism. Defenders of the modern liberal welfare state face similar embarrassing questions. Virtually all of the American poor are rich by global standards. 92 percent of poor American households own a television and 70 percent own a car, with 27 percent owning two or more cars. 60 percent own microwaves, and 41 percent own their own homes, 70 percent of those without a mortgage. Obesity is a more serious problem than is starvation. Why do we not send welfare funds, and indeed other parts of the government budget, to the truly poor in Haiti? One does not have to be a strict utilitarian to see how much good such a transfer could do.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore many contemporary programs could be compared to sending money to the Haitians by a helicopter drop. Why do we spend \$100 million or more on the National Endowments for the Arts? Why not save lives in Haiti instead? How many current government programs could clear this hurdle? Given the disparity of values at stake --

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, [http://www.nysenior.org/Issues/Social Security/ssbasics/html](http://www.nysenior.org/Issues/Social%20Security/ssbasics/html).

Haitian lives and suffering vs. small benefits for the relatively wealthy -- it seems that only an extreme nationalism avoids these embarrassing questions. A cosmopolitan must recognize an enormous universe of competing and urgent claims on our resources. We commonly deal with moral dilemmas of this kind by depersonalizing them, but once we disarm this defense mechanism we must admit that even a small amount of transferred wealth can make a big difference in very poor lives.

Some individuals, such as Peter Singer and Shelley Kagan, will accept these reductions. They will argue that we should redistribute wealth to elevate the general welfare of mankind. Our society would become much less free, but arguably freedom as a whole will rise around the world. So their view should, and does, remain a contender in my eyes. But the implications of their framework are difficult to accept. Must utilitarianism and consequentialism, for instance, conclude that relatively wealthy mothers should not be allowed to give special priority to the needs of their babies? Surely those resources could save even more babies around the world. Shouldn't a wealthy mother neglect her baby, perhaps even let it die, to save ten other babies in Haiti? Can anyone truly believe this? Live like this?

The general dilemma runs deeper than simply answering Singer and Kagan. Most generally, I am skeptical of relying too heavily on any single moral value. Any set of first principles seems to fail us in one set of cases or another. Whether the first principle be rights, utility, autonomy, equality, a theory of the good life, or whatever, it is typically easy to find some counterexample to that first principle, some set of implications that few people are willing to accept. Furthermore, our judgment that our first principles "fail us" indicates that those first principles are not truly first principles at all. Rather we cannot help but judge those first principles by some other set of deeper intuitions.

Perhaps we can weaken the role for unitary first principles altogether. I tend to see unitary first principles as symbolic values, although they are not usually labeled as such.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, [www.geocities.com/talkingfierce/racecad.html](http://www.geocities.com/talkingfierce/racecad.html), and [www.fair.org/extra/9901/rector.html](http://www.fair.org/extra/9901/rector.html).

Unitary first principles commonly serve as a front for some value-laden and indeed pluralist vision of what kind of society the theorist would like to see. The unitary first principle then stakes out this identification very strongly. Egalitarians, for instance, do not typically uphold the value of equality when it would involve making everyone worse off. Nor do they worry about the rather severe inequality between millionaires and billionaires. Instead many choose equality as a first principle to affiliate themselves with a particular vision of treating humans decently, and a particular vision of society, perhaps akin to Sweden or Norway. They then work backwards to a notion of “equality” as summarizing this vision. Libertarians also start with a particular vision, that of a free and wealthy meritocracy, good for both the rich and poor. It is this vision that they find attractive, and they then work backwards to an idea of individual rights. I do not know any libertarian who was convinced by an abstract argument for libertarian rights. Rather libertarians, like most others, typically start with an appealing broader vision, simultaneously figuring out what ostensible first principles it would come bundled with. Let us all admit this biographical fact, treat it as more than a mere historical accident, and see how it can be fit into political theory. Most doctrines, however much they disagree on value priorities and trade-offs, are, upon examination, strongly pluralist in their true foundations.

Consistent with this point, almost all of us judge foundationalist theories in terms of whether we like their conclusions, rather than in terms of the foundations per se. This again implies that the supposed foundations are in fact held in thrall to deeper, often unspoken intuitions. Furthermore, no foundationalist theory commands the loyalties of more than a small percentage of readers or observers. This suggests that the proffered foundations are in fact not self-evident, but rather are difficult to judge. Since we would expect greater agreement on self-evident foundations, the foundations are either arbitrary, or they are not really foundations at all, again bringing us back to pluralism.

### Civilization and Utopia

A look at history in turn brings an emphasis on political equilibrium and what is actually possible. Some normative recommendations appear to have nothing to do with the world we live in. It means little, for instance, to announce the following for a constitution: "Every politician should do the right thing, always." However appealing the rule may sound, there is no way of getting from here to there. Wishing for this outcome is like wishing that hurricanes would suddenly disappear. Similarly, the portrait of an ideal society offered in Marx's Communist Manifesto appears to be refuted by history and shown to be impossible.

Yet what standards do we have for judging a proposal to be "too" utopian? Any proposed change, by definition, postulates something that is not factually the case. We typically like to say that some proposals (e.g., Marx's Communist Manifesto) are "too utopian" while other proposals (e.g., a better functioning bureaucracy) are not. But where exactly do we draw the line? A less utopian proposal is not always to be advocated over a more utopian proposal, simply because the former is less utopian. If so, we would always be stuck with the status quo. So can we find some "stopping point," some correct degree of utopianism, after which we are too utopian and before which we are just sufficiently utopian? Or does the force of logic always lead us to be as utopian as possible?

Chapter five will examine the nature of our political commitments in more detail. We will discover that how we evaluate differing visions for a free society will depend on how we define the correct level of utopian commitment. For instance, the typical libertarian position can always be trumped by a sufficiently utopian version of modern liberalism ("government is smart and kindly"), provided we are willing to be so utopian. Similarly, the typical modern liberal view can always be trumped by a sufficiently utopian version of libertarianism ("transactions costs are low and markets work incredibly well"), again provided we are willing to be so utopian. We therefore cannot clear up the debate without a common understanding of when utopianism is justified, and to what extent.

The meaning of political reform proposals depends on how we interpret the complexities of modal logic. I will not try to resolve the question of what modal logic "really means,"

but I will use modal logic to deconstruct political belief. The belief that things could be "other than they are" in fact involves a utopian commitment, no matter how modest the change we have in mind. We will see that most political doctrines are in fact a complex bundle of views about what is ideal and what is feasible. These beliefs then get crammed, misleadingly, into a single political position or reform proposal. I will argue that we oversimplify when we boil down our views to a single statement of what kind of polity we favor. It will turn out that by viewing political opinion as a complex bundle of beliefs, combining the ideal and the feasible, we can diminish the differences between apparently competing visions of a free society.

This same enterprise of reconciliation will open the door for a qualified defense of utopianism, at least utopianism in defense of Western civilization. Since every plausible set of reform beliefs must have some utopian element, we should not reject utopianism out of hand. At the same time, however, we will see that this embrace of utopianism implies a partially syncretic approach to politics. That is, no utopian point of view is uniquely correct in any factual sense. Instead multiple utopian perspectives offer correct and non-competing truth claims.<sup>8</sup> This same utopian syncretism will provide a foundation for what we can all agree upon, while maintaining diverse, and rational, political stances within a framework of loyalty to Western civilization.

A closer examination of the ideal and the feasible will yield another kind of return. It will help generate a new argument for why human beings have rights, and a new understanding of how rights theories and consequentialist theories relate to each other. I will sketch a theory of rights, consistent with our loyalties to civilization, and robust to consequentialist counterexamples. I will interpret rights talk as being a meaningful part of a multi-perspectival notion of a broader utopian good.

So there I stand. I hold broadly liberal ideals and a great love for Western civilization and Western culture. But I am often torn between classical liberal, modern liberal, and

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<sup>8</sup> On syncretism, see Rescher (1993).

"cosmopolitan redistributionist" notions of how society should look and what freedom should mean.

Three particular problems, all mentioned above, have the greatest hold on my attention: how to reconcile clashing values, the issue of feasibility (what is utopian?), and the urgent demands of the very poor. No doctrine has offered good answers to these problems (though any status quo is undoubtedly feasible and thus does not face the second problem). For that reason, I find it no surprise that debates between classical and modern liberals (and other points of view) show so little progress. Each side can correctly poke holes in the arguments of the other. Neither side can build a sound case from first principles.

So which liberalism? Classical, modern, or something else altogether different? Is the distinction between classical and modern liberalism a historic relic, never to reemerge as a truly relevant debate? How should we evaluate different liberal possibilities? Why are we liberals at all? Should we be liberals? What politics should we push for?

The path will involve many twists and turns, and several chapters of densely packed arguments. By the end I will have tried to present a new vision of liberalism, a new way of thinking about what a free society should look like, and a new way of thinking about our own life commitments, especially with regard to politics. The bulk of the arguments are substantive, and geared towards philosophic and social science methods of reasoning, but the very last set of conclusions are to some extent existential. Those conclusions tell us something about us, who we are, how we live, why we choose political doctrines, and not merely about the mechanics of freedom on the macro-scale.

This book is where my internal mental debate stands. I hope you enjoy it. If you are the kind of reader I want, no matter how hard I push, you will feel I have not pushed hard enough on the tough questions.