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Tolerance and the Autonomous Individual in Modern Democratic Liberalism

By William A. Frank

Against the backdrop of observations on the theory of the modern liberal democratic nation which draw on the work of Pierre Manent and John Rawls. I wish to discuss the nature and role of tolerance. The careers of democratic liberalism and the civic value of tolerance are closely intertwined. In the end, I shall expose an ambivalent characteristic that inheres in tolerance insofar as it is a social practice or civic disposition. This ambivalence, in turn, yields a perspective on some of the liabilities of political liberalism and modern democracies. Uniting the notions of tolerance and modern democratic liberalism is the concept of the human person as an autonomous individual.

I. Political Liberalism, Social Pluralism, and Tolerance

Many consider tolerance the premier virtue of the modern citizen. David Heyd, editor of a 1996 collection of essays entitled Toleration: An Elusive Virtue, says that “in the ethos of the last three centuries, [tolerance] has been hailed as one of the fundamental ethical and political values, and it still occu-

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pies a powerful position in contemporary legal and political rhetoric.”  

3 Alan Levine, professor of Government at American University, in his introduction to a collection of studies aimed at providing a secure philosophical foundation for the role of toleration in the contemporary project of modern liberalism, writes: “Toleration is one of the most attractive and widespread ideals of our day. It is the cornerstone of liberalism, a key protection for both individual citizens and minority groups, and in general is the predominant ethos of all moral civilizations in the modern world.”  

4 Such contemporary estimations find confirmation in the fact that John Locke (1632–1704), author of Two Treatises of Government, one of the founding inspirations of modern liberal democracy, also authored An Essay Concerning Toleration.  

5 The themes of these two works are not accidentally connected. What is it, then, that connects the liberal nation-state and the tolerant disposition?

In an interesting speculation on the origins of political liberalism, John Rawls, one of the more influential defenders of political liberalism among Anglo-American philosophers in the twentieth century, puts the matter thus:

... the historical origin of political liberalism (and of liberalism more generally) is the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ... [P]olitical liberalism assumes the fact of reasonable pluralism as a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, including both religious and nonreligious doctrines ... [T]he success of liberal constitutionalism came as a discovery of a new social possibility: the possibility of a reasonably harmonious and stable pluralistic society.

He thinks that the political problem of pluralism, brought to a crisis in the Reformation, was new to history. The bloody political instability of the six-


5 “John Locke’s Letter Concerning Toleration [published 1689] is, together with Milton’s Areopagitica and J. S. Mill’s On Liberty, one of the three canonical English-language texts in the history of the idea of toleration, and one of the most important texts on the subject in any language.” Richard Vernon, The Career of Toleration: John Locke, Jonas Proast, and After (Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), p. 3.

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teenth and seventeenth century European religious wars caused one to question the belief,

as the centuries-long practice of intolerance appeared to confirm, that social unity and concord requires agreement on a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine. Intolerance was accepted as a condition of social order and stability. The weakening of that belief helps clear the way for liberal institutions.⁷

The historically novel clashes between “salvationist, creedal, and expansionist religions,” that wracked European communities were motivated by

people’s conceptions of their good [in terms of] a transcendent element not admitting of compromise. This element forces either mortal conflict moderated only by circumstance and exhaustion, or equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought ... Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict.⁸

As Rawls understands it, then, modern European political thought emerges from the attempt to construct a political theory of justice that for the first time in history accepts within the confines of the body politic plural and competing comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral accounts of the ultimate meaning of life. In other words, what comes to be known as “political liberalism” aims for a politics that does not have a public orthodoxy. It does not espouse or favor any common beliefs or practices that would inform or dispose the members of its body politic to moral perfection or religious salvation. Indeed, it permits within its body politic competing institutions with uncompromising comprehensive interpretations of the meaning of life. Its “orthodoxy,” in an ironic twist to the word, is “liberty of conscience and freedom of thought.” Liberalism forges political bonds of justice within a constitution that leave unregulated the people’s commitments to spiritual and moral authorities. By virtue of the constitutional limitation on the power of civil government, allowance is made for the unhindered pursuit of transcendent concerns in the private sphere.

The fact that a civil government remains politically indifferent to plural commitments of religions, philosophies, moralities, or “life-styles” among different citizen groups is no guarantee of social harmony in the interactions among individuals and groups within the sphere of society. The state may well enact an edit of toleration, promising equal protection of the law to different religious sects. However, in the purer forms of political liberalism, equality before the law need not translate into equality of social conditions for individuals or groups that make up the variegated quilt-work of a modern society. Because liberalism insures the pluralism of comprehensive views through a system of fundamental political rights, as for instance, the rights to speech, assembly, pri-

⁷ John Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. xxvii.
⁸ John Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. xxviii.
vate property, and religion, citizens are at liberty to discriminate among themselves in the social realm. Moreover, especially to the degree that the liberal state releases individuals to the liberty of their own consciences and to the freedom of their own thought, it abdicates authority to teach truth and form consciences with regard to those matters that most matter in human life.

The abdication of authority with regard to the truth of ultimate religious, ethical, or metaphysical concerns places a strict requirement on permissible categories in properly political rhetoric. One might say that in the political sphere an embargo is put on any public speech that would appeal to the particulars of any religious comprehensive system of belief. What I have referred to as an embargo on appeals to the citizens' ultimate convictions—concerns that in perennial political forms provided the substance of national or civic belonging—is developed into a moral precept of political liberalism. The precept is developed by John Rawls as the idea of public reason. The basic idea is that the “po-

9 Manent (Democracy without Nations?, p. 58) quotes Leo Strauss’s stark statement of the predicament: “Liberalism stands or falls by the distinction between state and society, or by the recognition of a private sphere, protected by law but impervious to the law, with the understanding that, above all, religion as particular religion belongs to the private sphere. Just as certainly as the liberal state will not ‘discriminate’ against its Jewish citizens, so it is constitutionally unable and even unwilling to prevent ‘discrimination’ against Jews by individuals or groups. To recognize a private sphere in the sense indicated means to permit private ‘discrimination,’ to protect it and thus in fact to foster it. The liberal state cannot provide a solution to the Jewish problem, for such a solution would require a legal prohibition against every kind of ‘discrimination,’ i.e., the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between state and society, the destruction of the liberal state.” Leo Strauss, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, preface to the English translation (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 4.

10 John Locke: “I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bound that lie between the one and the other ... The Commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests. Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like ... Now the whole jurisdiction of the magistrate reaches only to these civil concerns, and that all civil power, right, and dominion, is bounded and confined to the only care of promoting these things; and that it neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls ...” (pp. 128–129) “... the business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth, and of every particular man’s goods and person. And so it ought to be. For the truth certainly would do well enough if she were once left to shift for herself ... She is not taught by laws.” (p. 153) “For the political society is instituted for no other end, but only to secure every man’s possessions of things of this life. The care of each man’s soul, and of the things of heaven, which neither does belong to the commonwealth nor can be subjected to it, is left entirely to every man’s self.” (p. 155) A Letter Concerning Toleration in The Second Treatise of Government (An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government) and A Letter Concerning Toleration, edited and with an introduction by J. W. Gough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), pp. 123–167.
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politically liberal account of democratic legitimacy and citizenship”

rests on a moral duty to restrain public discourse and persuasion regarding basic political, constitutional questions to principles broadly acceptable or accessible to all constituents in a civic community which, it can be assumed, is religiously, philosophically, and culturally pluralistic. In effect, this commitment to what is called “public reason” entails the duty of citizens and public officials to restrain themselves in matters of political advocacy, choice, or justification: they ought not appeal to religious or other comprehensive doctrines in resolving political questions.

There is a strong sense that a citizen ceases to be “reasonable” when his public pursuit of the common good or when his public advocacy or defense of rights or opportunities is inextricably embedded in and conditioned by the unique or partial interests of a comprehensive view of personal and civic well-being promoted by his local, “sub-political” group. Because adherence to the “restraint” criterion of public reason is a moral obligation that comes with citizenship, a person who violates this duty does something reprehensible. In old fashioned terms he has been impious; he has struck at the foundations of political liberalism’s constitutional legitimacy. Again, in more classical liberal terms, we might say that he has reneged on his commitment to the social contract. In some relevant sense, it would seem that in his care for the political whole he has put the interests of some part – himself or his group – above the interests of the civic whole. There is an important qualification, however, for the citizen who violates public reason has done nothing illegal: the duty to honor the ideal of public reason is moral, not legal; “it is part of a liberal-democratic ethics of citizenship.”

Although the citizen’s violation is not a prosecutable offence, it does open him up to moral criticism.

Our excursus into Rawls’ idea of public reason illustrates an important practical implication of the separation of society and state, which is a key property of political liberalism. In public deliberations about “what the political conception of justice requires of society’s basic structure of institutions, and of the purposes and ends they serve,” citizens and public officials are obliged to appeal only to what is held or can be put in common. The question of what is put in common is the most political of questions. Before continuing with this ques-

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11 In this paragraph and the next I have used helpful formulations of James Boettcher, “Toleration and Public Reason,” a paper delivered at North Texas University, Denton, Texas, 9 April 2010. The primary source on the idea of public reason is “The Idea of Public Reason,” chapter 6 (pp. 212–254) in John Rawls’ Political Liberalism.


13 John Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 213.
tion of politics,\textsuperscript{14} we shall first examine the nature of tolerance and its connection to political liberalism.

\section*{II. The Problem with Tolerance}

Tolerance is a genuinely perplexing quality and I am not at all sure it is a moral or civic virtue. In the exercise of tolerance, one person, a citizen of good standing, for instance, puts up with the belief, opinion, or action of a fellow citizen. If we have in mind an authentic case of tolerance, then the offending belief or action must be judged rightly to be wrong, harmful, repugnant, not worthy of approval or acceptance. Not only must the good citizen, in a first moment, rightly judge the speech or action reprehensible, but in a second moment, he will find himself repelled or threatened by the belief or action, and in the final, third moment, he will restrain the impulse to interfere or prohibit the offending speech or action. As a mean, tolerance lies between an excessive disposition to wholeheartedly accept offensive beliefs or conduct and the extreme deficiency manifest in an unrestrained opposition to reprehensible behavior.\textsuperscript{15}

Discussions of "tolerance" or "toleration" are rife with equivocation, and I wish to exclude certain common misunderstandings. Tolerance is not an expression of skepticism or indifferentism or non-judgmentalism with regard to the repugnance of the offending action. If our good citizen is not sure about the truth or moral value of an offensive belief or action, then he ought to withhold judgment. Failure to do so, precipitance in judgment, would be a failure in prudence, not a failure in tolerance. Tolerance is the restraint of personal action against conduct consciously and rightly believed to be wrong. Tolerance is also not a matter of weariness or finding the offense not worth fighting over. Such giving in to what one knows to be wrong would be a case of indolence or timidity in moral matters. Nor is tolerance the acquiescence to a state of Hobbesian equilibrium\textsuperscript{16} recognizing that a balance of power is the best that either competing power can practically expect. In such a stand-off, one is dealing with a calculated biding of one's time, awaiting a favorable tip of the balance of power which would permit the successful interference with the reprehensible conduct or belief. Until that tipping point is reached our good citizen is not tolerant but insufficiently powerful. Finally, tolerance is not a matter of overcoming one's personal prejudice or envy as the basis of one's objection to another's belief or

\textsuperscript{14}Pierre Manent, \textit{Democracy without Nations?}, pp. 78–79.
\textsuperscript{16}The term is used by Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?", in: \textit{Tolerance: An Elusive Virtue}, p. 21.
action. The notion, for instance, of “racial tolerance” is an immoral posture – one should not tolerate racial differences; one should correct one’s mistaken judgment that other races are repugnant. All of these “false faces” or “cousin look-a-likes” are distinctly different attitudes or actions with which tolerance in the strict sense is often confused.

That the exercise of tolerance can at times be a socially useful and a prudent response to offensive conduct seems evident. One might uncontroversially, I hope, agree that in Ciceronian terms, tolerance is a *bonum utile*, a disposition that in some circumstances of life will prove beneficial and expedient. But is it a value of a higher quality? Is tolerance a moral or civic virtue? Is it a species of the *bonum honestum*? To answer in the affirmative one would have to see that human dignity is without exception manifested in the *exercise* of tolerance. Failure to be tolerant, verging from its mean either toward a steady inclination to whole-heartedly accept offensive beliefs or conduct, or to the opposite of a ready disposition to oppose reprehensible behavior, would have to signify some diminishment or violation of what is most perfective of human life.

*If* the narrative of a human life is conditioned by the axiological terms of political liberalism, then it seems a good case can be made that tolerance is an essential moral or civic virtue. In this case, tolerance would be essentially tied to a fundamental commitment to values of pluralism and multiculturalism. Tolerance need not require the endorsement of the content of the plural values, but it would hold in high esteem the deeper value of personal autonomy and freedom of conscience in matters of self-determination regarding life-style and communal practices. As Bernard Williams put it, people can coherently think that a certain outlook or attitude, belief or practice is deeply wrong and that the flourishing of such an attitude or practice should be tolerated, if they also substantively value in a preferential way the autonomy or independence of members of a community.\(^17\)

A second, more sociological case can be made for the intrinsic value of tolerance. Again, the argument supposes the political liberalism’s framework of a relatively unfettered social pluralism. “[T]he case for tolerance lies in the fact that rejecting it involves a form of alienation from one’s fellow citizens.”\(^18\) In other words, tolerance fosters social solidarity. It enacts and protects a broad fellowship of citizens equally possessed of the right to define and shape society. In a society whose members hold so little in common with respect to substantive values or comprehensive religious or philosophical beliefs, the universal estimation of the high value of toleration might well hold the best or even the last promise of social cohesion in a thoroughly liberal polity.


Thirdly, like all authentic virtues, toleration makes a very difficult personal demand: it requires that one rise above one’s own desires in order to do the right thing. In this case, however, the demand is especially difficult, for it requires that one transcend one’s own desire to secure the fullest expression of one’s own values.\textsuperscript{19} The extreme character of the self-denial inherent in toleration is not often observed. The impulse to seek communion in the transmission and celebration of that which one holds most dear seems a deep and natural inclination of human nature. It is the self that seeks fulfillment in communion that is sacrificed in the practice of toleration. Where individual autonomy is the preeminent value, then the curbing of this natural inclination would be a mark of nobility.

Finally, one might argue that tolerance is noble precisely because in the social sphere it allows for a wide latitude for error in the pursuit of good and truth. The point is not so much to affirm that error has its rights, but to express a confident trust in the ultimate integrity of a free conscience. At the very least, these four arguments make evident the support that tolerance renders to political liberalism in its fashioning of a comprehensive modern view of man and society.

I pose two arguments against the case of tolerance as a universal moral or civic virtue. The first argument draws upon the principle that one understands the cause through its effects. In the case of tolerance, its effect on society is an increase in relativism and indifferentism in moral values and religious commitment. The tolerant attitude proves to be an unstable disposition. In actual practice it tends to function as a kind of contingent “stop-gap” measure. It falls into a pattern of personal and social development that moves from an initial tendency to repel repugnant behavior (persecute it) to the acquired disposition to tolerate it (put up with it) but eventually to the acceptance of it as “just different” (annul its reprehensibility). Toleration seems too often an expedient to the day when either (a) there are shared comprehensive values (social, moral, spiritual solidarity), or (b) relativism governs (indifferentism’s refusal to judge behavior as objectionable). It is not clear that there is stable ground intermediate to these two extremes. Moreover, by and large, individuals and groups in pluralistic societies do not want to be tolerated; they want to be accepted. People seek equality. What stands in their way is the judgment that their belief or conduct is judged reprehensible. Tolerant people maintain those judgments, and in so doing exercise power or moral superiority over those who are tolerated.

Secondly, as Bernard Williams has observed: “[P]eople whose deepest convictions [are] not in favor of individual autonomy and related values [do not] think a state better that let[s] their values decay in preference to enforcing

The idea here is that, in the actuality of social life, ideas compete for a place in the heart, and beliefs, in turn, dispose passions and motivate actions of specific sorts. But ideas and practices that enshrine individual autonomy are corrosive of the institutions of shared beliefs that matter most to the human community. Among the associations that make life most worth living are those of friendship, marriage, family, and religion. In each of these, the unions rest not on contractual ties entered into by autonomous individuals. Rather they are perfections of relationships built into the structure of human personhood. These perfections are enjoyed in the communion of persons. The unions of friendship, marriage, family, and religion witness to the ontological insufficiency of the autonomous self. It is "only a substantive view of goods such as autonomy that could yield the value that is expressed by the practices of toleration."\(^\text{21}\) Surely, it is not \textit{prima facie} unreasonable that values such as family, marriage, or religion should trump the substantive value of personal autonomy. In as much as these arguments diminish the luster of tolerance, they cannot but help also rouse some ambivalence to the hegemonic claims for the ultimate value of political liberalism.

### III. Democracy and the Autonomous Individual

In the first two sections of this paper, we have developed the connection between political liberalism's commitment to pluralism and the social value of tolerance. The pluralisms, religious or moral, that in effect called into existence the new forms of modern politics and civic virtue were accepted as intractable realities and found to be reducible to what is most valuable about the human person, namely, man's capacity for freedom of thought and liberty of conscience. Liberty, freedom of choice, and emancipation from authority are features most congenial to the modern concept of the human person. The modern person is most himself insofar as he is self-determining. We begin to sketch here the notion of the human person as an autonomous individual. For the limited purposes of this paper, we shall understand that the "autonomy" of this individual excludes the notion that personhood is essentially relational. The ideal individual is imagined as a self-standing unit, a human isolate, who would only freely enter into relations with others motivated by some calculation of self-interested gain. "Autonomous" also means here, in an almost literal sense, self-legislating. It is interesting to see how this notion, this ideal of the human person as an autonomous individual is at work at the origins of the modern liberal nation-state.

\(^{21}\) Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue," p. 25.
But the notions of autonomy and individuality will not suffice for the founding of a political unit, not even for the modern nation-state. Politics, at its essence, is a matter of putting and holding things in common. It is the nature of politics to achieve order based in putting some things in common. And in modernity, it is the political form of the nation which is the community of belonging par excellence, the whole within which modern human life flourishes. I have just said that autonomy and individuality will not suffice — based on the assumption that these forms of human life require democratic polities in which they are lived out. So it has been in history. In the world today the predominant political form is the modern democratic nation-state. Despite the fact that these nations can be located all along a spectrum of more or less actual democratic freedom and participation, the basic form of modern democracy clearly predominates as an ideal system of government. According to one authority more than half of the more than 200 independent countries of the world are democracies to one degree or another.

In his *A World beyond Politics?* and *Democracy without Nations?* Pierre Manent examines the centrifugal forces engendered by the democratic impulses of freedom and equality. These impulses appear in our contemporary experience to be the extension of a sense of belonging or fellowship beyond the confines of national unity. In the European premodern contexts, it was in the city, the empire, or the Christian church that a person might achieve an ultimate sense of belonging that embraced and gave full play to human capacities for judgment and action. In the modern context, this belonging is largely thought to be achieved in the political form of the nation. In modernity the nation establishes a context for deliberation and action, for the making and administration of laws that permit the flourishing of democratic human life within its sphere. The national sphere, however, is a territorial framework, the result of a host of ex-

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24 On the number of democratic nations states in the world today see Laza Kekic, *The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy*, which “provides a snapshot of the current state of democracy worldwide for 165 independent states and two territories. This covers almost the entire population of the world and the vast majority of the world’s 192 independent states (27 micro-states are excluded). Several things stand out. Although almost half of the world’s countries can be considered to be democracies, the number of ‘full democracies’ is relatively low (only 28). Almost twice as many (54) are rated as ‘flawed democracies.’ Of the remaining 85 states, 55 are authoritarian and 30 are considered to be ‘hybrid regimes.’ As could be expected, the developed OECD countries (with the notable exception of Italy) dominate among full democracies, although there are two Latin American, two central European and one African country, which means that the level of development is not a binding constraint. Only one Asian country, Japan, makes the grade.” [http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/democracy_index_2007_v3.pdf](http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/democracy_index_2007_v3.pdf) (accessed 29 May 2010).
ternal, contingent, and arbitrary facts of nature and history, rivers and mountains, wars and alliances. There is much about a national identity that is not self-chosen or rational; much of it is simply given, imposed, or inherited, as are the elements of culture and language, for instance. Insofar as the nation is the political form that organizes power and deliberation in ways that permit the flourishing of democratic life, it fosters citizens whose deepest impulse ought to be toward self-determination. At this point we can anticipate the tension between the terms of national belonging and the liberty interior to personal autonomy.

In order to draw out more fully the significance of the concept of autonomous individuality it will be useful to sketch the common story of the origins of the modern state. Modern democracy typically accounts for itself by the recitation of a philosophical narrative. It is the story, variously told, of an original compact by virtue of which men and women living in the prepolitical “state of nature” freely enter into a social contract that liberates them from the liabilities of nature’s associations and establishes them in a political society. As John Locke, for instance, narrates it, liberal government comes into existence in order to secure life, liberty, and property and to permit them to flourish in secure associations and social interchanges. For our purposes it is important to note that by virtue of their original mutual consent, individuals give expression to, they actualize, power and inclinations that lie at the core of their personhood. They exercise their capacity for liberty and their desire for community. In other words, insofar as we have “a people” assembled by the sum of their equal and uncoerced acts of consent, we have enacted the “stem cell” of a modern democratic nation. Pierre Manent is particularly insightful with respect to what I would call the moral or social psychology at the foundation of modern democracy. He says that “if democracy is to fulfill its promise for humanity,” then the consent at the heart of democratic freedom must extend itself toward communication. In his introduction to Manent’s work, Paul Seaton says that Manent’s “entire oeuvre points toward ways that contemporary democratic man can and

25 In this account I grossly simplify a complicated reality. In his An Intellectual History of Liberalism, Manent succinctly unfolds the logical stages in the development of the idea of liberal democracy over four centuries, from Machiavelli to Tocqueville. In his A World beyond Politics?, he offers an insightful interpretation of the contemporary status of the modern democratic state. As he sees it, the ideal of modern democracy advances on the desire for freedom of self-expression or even self-creation and the commitment to the universal resemblance or equality of all men. Under the direction of these impulses democracy organizes the sovereign power at the source of the modern states it organizes itself into “broad categories of separations:” separations of powers, of professions (division of labor), of church and state, of civil society and state, of those represented and the representative, of facts and value or science and life. “The modern regime institutes its order of separations for the sake of liberty. Modern liberty is inseparably linked to these separations.” (p. 13).
ought to strive to achieve that humanizing conjunction of freedom and political - as well as spiritual - community."26 The communion he has in mind, however, is not that of the nation; it is rather the notion of humanity, the commonality of human persons, imagined as constituting a community of belonging.

As Manent develops the understanding of democratic community, we come to see it, not as a particular association of men and women gathered in a tribe or team or church; even the nation seems too sectarian or partial. The inner tendency of the democratic impulse is to find its home in humanity itself, the sum of human persons, stripped of their differences of language, gender, nation, or culture. The basis of democratic community derives from the sentiment of resemblance by which "we are required to see the other as the same as ourselves."27 What we share is the common dignity of being autonomous, free individuals, fit for incorporation into this or any democracy. It is axiomatic that my passion for freedom is united with your passion for freedom. Who could not want to belong to the democratic community?

The powerful attraction of the impulse toward liberty (consent) and resemblance (communion) is expressed in United States President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, 28 January 2003. He spoke about the values of "freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law" as not being specifically American or Western: "Ours are not western values, they are universal values of the human spirit. And anywhere, any time ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny, democracy, not dictatorship, rule of law, not rule of the secret police." I emphasize President Bush's identification of democracy, along with its freedom and rule of law, as "universal values of the human spirit." The truth of this position would be undeniable if it were indeed the case, as the rhetoric implies, that the only alternatives to democracy are tyranny, dictatorship, and the menace of a secret police. Despite the weakness of the argument, the central claim of the universality of democratic values is often taken to be self-evident. I cite President Bush's speech as prominent expression of a notion that deeply informs the modern liberal democratic mind. Natan Sharansky, who had served nine years in a Russian "re-education" prison camp for the crime of publicly defending human rights within the Soviet Union, published a book entitled The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror,28 which enjoyed some influence in foreign policy circles among neo-conservatives and within the Bush administration. He concludes his book calling for a "coalition of free nations" that will promote democracy and expand freedom throughout

26 Pierre Manent, Democracy without Nations?, p. xiv
the world. "In order to do so, we must believe not only that all people are created equal but also that all peoples are created equal."29 For my purposes I need neither endorse nor critique the views of Sharansky and George W. Bush. I advance them only to illustrate the currency and forcefulness of the democratic impulse to equality and liberty.

Let us return to the founding narrative of the modern democratic state. As we noted, democratic society takes its point of departure from the figure of the autonomous individual, the one who, from within the state of nature, gives his fiat to the social compact. In political society, he appears as the bearer of rights, and it becomes the responsibility of the sovereign state to protect these rights. In the original act of consent, by virtue of the enduring social contract, power that reposes in the desires and wills of many individuals existing in the "state of nature" is ceded to a sovereign, as for instance, to Hobbes's Leviathan or to Locke's Civil Government. The modern state, therefore, assumes its embryonic form in two moments: its first moment consists in the autonomous person's act of consent and solidarity with others just like himself, and, then in the second moment, the absolute power of the sovereign — itself modeled as an autonomous individual — is constituted. Both the autonomous human person in the state of nature and the sovereignty of the Leviathan are conceptual creations of modern political philosophy.

Once the sovereign power of civil government enters onto the scene and lifts mankind out of the state of nature, the decisive political problem becomes how to limit that power. For,

"sovereign" means that the state's legitimacy is qualitatively, intrinsically, unconditionally superior to all social authorities. The state is essentially superior to all social authorities, whether based on birth or wealth or on intellectual or spiritual competence. In short the sovereign state brings equality into being; it produces the plane of equality — equality of conditions, the equality implied in the human condition — without which we simply cannot conceive a decent human life, despite our many differences and differences of opinion.30

The concept of sovereignty has a supreme advantage for the early modern political theorists. It wipes away the premodern, perennial order of natural associations and inherent hierarchical authorities. A new order can be established on the equal dignity of each human person. For the modern state, all power and authority are derived from or are checked by the sovereignty of the people. What lie between the state and the individual person, those subsidiary associations that premodern political thought had always understood to be grounded in natural goods and necessities, can now be relativized. The concept of sovereignty authorizes the reconstitution of these subsidiary forms of association as

29 Natan Sharansky (with Ron Dermer), p. 279.
social artifacts, relationships creatively fashioned or freely contracted. Earlier in this paper I observed that most men and women find the greatest satisfactions in the common life shared in friendships, marriage, family and religion. Some few find this satisfaction in political deliberation and action. If this is the case, then I think it must be because participation in these communities unites the members with something not just like themselves; its lifts them into a communion, a union that is larger than the sum of themselves, more than the replication of their like. They participate in something that elevates and completes their individual personhood. But I do not think that sovereignty elevates or completes individual personhood. Sovereignty, democratically organized by Manent’s system of separations, at its best, seems to emancipate autonomous persons for forming relationships among self-defining individualities, ultimately unconstrained by anything that is not uniquely one’s own. The experience of fellowship or communion in these relationships is hard to imagine as much more than the unending multiplication of one’s own self, of the kind one experiences in the infinite reflection of oneself in opposing mirrors. It is not so much completion as replication that provides the hope or the future for flourishing individual autonomy.

IV. Conclusion

The experience of democracy within the form of the modern liberal nation especially prizes liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Citizens understand themselves as autonomous individuals. They see themselves as bearers of rights that affirm particular manifestations of that autonomy. Rights defend a person against alien claims upon what is properly one’s own. Rights signify, they demand recognition, just because they are backed by the sovereign state. But the state’s sovereign power is a product of the citizens’ own common and equal consent. Democratic citizens also recognize in other men and women, precisely because they too are autonomous individuals, the likeness of their own passion for liberty and equality. It is this sense of resemblance or communion with other selves assembled in civic projects of self-expression and self-creation that causes them to cultivate the civic disposition of tolerance as a

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32 The politics of political liberalism, which must render itself systematically tone-deaf to claims grounded in comprehensive religious, moral, or philosophical interpretations of first things, cannot invoke either God or nature as the foundation of rights.
Tolerance and the Autonomous Individual

democratic response to inevitable pluralisms with regard to things that matter most to one's self and one's associations. The measure of the modern democratic citizen's achievement in the exercise of liberty and equality is his emancipation from any authority other than that of his autonomous consent. From the perspective of premodern or perennial political-social philosophy, this emancipation means the deconstruction of the natural form and good of subsidiary communities, of those human associations intermediate to the sovereign state and the autonomous individual. In the modern liberal polity these subsidiary communities are reconstructed as social artifacts; they represent interpersonal relationships creatively fashioned and freely contracted.

In this paper I have situated my understanding of tolerance within an interpretation of modern democratic liberalism. This interpretation has tried to maintain a focus on the concept of the autonomous individual as axiomatic to the general theory of modern liberal state. I believe that the case for tolerance as a moral virtue is as strong as the case that natural human happiness is best envisioned as the fulfillment of the possibilities of autonomous individuality in modern liberal democracy.

Summary

Modern political liberalism envisions autonomous persons participating in social relationships among self-defining individualities that are not ideally constrained by anything that is not a function of personal liberty and equality among men. Political liberalism esteems tolerance as a privileged social virtue. This paper examines two criticisms of the claim that tolerance is a moral or social virtue. First, insofar as the intrinsic worth of tolerance is pegged to a commitment to the radical autonomy of the individual human person, then those who hold to a more relational concept of human persons will view tolerance in a more relativistic or utilitarian light. Secondly, insofar as liberal governance is typically situated within the political form of the modern nation-state, the practice of tolerance runs into conflict with the essential need to maintain a national identity in the fostering of shared spiritual and cultural forms of life.

Zusammenfassung

Der moderne politische Liberalismus sieht die Menschen als autonome Personen. Die Teilhabe der selbstbestimmten Individuen am sozialen Leben ist nur denkbar in Abhängigkeit von der persönlichen Freiheit und der Gleichheit der Menschen. Der politische Liberalismus schätzt die Toleranz als eine privilegierte soziale Tugend. Dieser Beitrag stellt zwei kritische Fragen an diese Auffassung, ob Toleranz eine moralische oder soziale Tugend ist. Erstens: Wenn der innere Wert der Toleranz im Zusammenhang mit der

33 Sokolowski, "Human Person and Political Life," insists that "perennial" better describes the alternative to modern political philosophy than the term "premodern."
radikalen Autonomie der individuellen menschlichen Person geschen wird, würden dann diejenigen, die den Menschen mehr als ein Beziehungswesen sehen, die Toleranz in einem stärker relativistischen oder utilitaristischen Sinn verstehen? Zweitens: Insofern eine liberale Regierung in einem Nationalstaat besteht, gerät dann die Toleranz nicht in Konflikt mit den wesentlichen Erfordernissen, die nationale Identität durch eine Stärkung der geistigen und kulturellen Lebensweisen zu wahren?
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