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Review

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# Book Reviews

Edward B. Portis, Editor

## FEATURE REVIEW

### *Review Essay*

This review originated from the author's participation in a symposium on *Liberal Purposes* sponsored by the Virginia Chapter of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, held at the University of Virginia on November 16, 1991. Other panelists were Jeremy Shearmur, Steven Teles, Peter Vallentyne, and William Galston. E.B.P.

*Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtue, and Diversity in the Liberal State.* By William Galston. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. 343. \$49.50 hardcover, \$16.95 paper.)

Do liberals need a theory of the good? In *Liberal Purposes*, William Galston responds to this question with an emphatic "yes." *Liberal Purposes* contains a richness of insight and argument to which we cannot do justice in this brief space. What is perhaps most striking is Galston's ordered vision, proceeding from a substructural view of the good, on which rest in turn his views of liberal virtues, public policies designed to foster them, and the prospect of political revival for liberal political parties. One cannot doubt that Galston asks important questions, draws interesting connections between them, or that his account will influence future debate. These are significant accomplishments, and Galston has produced an impressive, provocative book. Nevertheless, in the remainder of this review, we will briefly criticize two of the book's distinctive features. We begin with the political consequences of liberal theory, and then turn to Galston's account of the liberal good.

### *Theory and Practice*

"It is . . . not accidental," Galston writes, "that Rawls's thought came to fruition and burst into prominence at the very moment when 'advanced' liberal politics, preoccupied with the plight of the worst-off groups in our society, severed its bonds with the moral convictions of the working class" (161).

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To Galston, in deserting traditional American values in favor of exaggerated emphasis on tolerance and neutrality, liberal political theory abandoned social forces that had long supported it. In its most prominent version, as presented by Rawls, the need for neutrality stems from the inescapable diversity of liberal society. Because consensus on broad values could be secured only by state coercion, peaceful coexistence between groups requires that the state accommodate a wide range of values and beliefs. However, though contemporary liberalism claims not to favor specific values—or perhaps to favor only minimal indispensable ones—in practice the values of toleration and political stability take precedence over others (144–45, 274–75). The results are especially clear in regard to questions of religion. Galston notes the “characteristic liberal incapacity to understand religion.” “Policies that liberals typically defend as neutral are experienced by many religious communities as hostile,” (13) and the inadequacies of Rawls’s skewed view of the liberal tradition “are mirrored in the national electoral disasters of contemporary liberalism” (162).

Galston believes that on both theoretical and substantive grounds Rawlsian theory is out of touch with liberal culture’s actual self-understanding (esp. 154–62). His alternative view is intended to help recapture the allegiance of important social forces: “Absent a renewed partnership between liberal elites and the American public, the prospects for the resumption of progressive politics can only be regarded as bleak” (18). One can ask, however, about the actual strength of the connections here. To what extent have increasingly unpopular redistributive policies resulted from the distinctive views of Rawls and similar liberal theorists, as opposed to other factors? Certain liberal principles have undoubtedly had unpopular consequences, manifested, for example, in the abolition of school prayer and permitting modes of expression offensive to many Americans. But Galston’s causal claims are not specified, and so the stakes for liberal theory remain unclear. He uses language such as that quoted above: starting with X, “it is not accidental that” Y; Y is “mirrored in” X. Thus we must ask to what extent liberal politicians’ “zeal to right the wrongs inflicted on the least advantaged” (161–62) can be traced to Rawlsian neutrality rather than to a deep commitment to the rights and autonomy of all Americans. Similarly, to what extent can the national Democratic party’s decline be traced to liberal neutrality, rather than (for example) to passage of Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s, which alienated southern whites, especially white men? It is accident that Richard Nixon pursued a “southern strategy” in 1968, or that the South has become a bastion for Republican presidential candidates. At a time when David Duke was recently supported by a majority of white voters in his home state, we wonder about the extent to which progressive public policies could be brought back to life by a clearly articulated vision of the liberal good, as opposed to the steady economic growth needed to make righting past

wrongs relatively painless. The connections Galston draws between liberal theory and political disaster are doubtless suggestive. But fundamental questions go unanswered.

### *Liberal Good*

It may be true that much of what Galston says is more consistent with liberal public culture than the neutral view he opposes. But can his view bear philosophical scrutiny? Even if contemporary liberals do not embrace moral skepticism, the diversity of their values and beliefs makes it difficult for them to agree on a substantive conception of the good. On the one hand, a particular liberal good must be flexible enough to be accepted by a range of different groups. But it must also be sufficiently determinate actually to guide public policy. Does Galston, then, find an acceptable middle course between these poles?

It is notable that Galston does not attempt to justify his moral view on the basis of a “nonliberal” or “preliberal” inquiry into the nature of the human good. Rather than raising the preliminary question, “Why be liberal?,” he accepts liberalism as a going enterprise and attempts to extract the account of the good implicit in it. Galston proceeds in two stages, first presenting a series of background conditions an acceptable view must meet (166–73) and then a list of “key dimensions of . . . a liberal conception of the good” (173–77). This list is not claimed as definitive, but Galston holds that it is both intuitively acceptable and constitutes a view with teeth, able to rule out unacceptable alternative conceptions (e.g., nihilism, moral monism, irrationalism [177]). The seven constituents of his list are: life, normal development of basic capacities, fulfillment of interests and purposes, freedom, rationality, society, and subjective satisfaction.

The background conditions are these. First, individual well-being is not the only morally basic consideration for liberal social policy. Desert, equality, and individual agency are plausible candidates for analytically distinct and equally basic considerations. Second, and again for the purposes of liberal public policy, the account of human good must be deeply secular and this-worldly. Third, the account must be both general (e.g., based upon generalizations about common human experience) and sensitive to the diversity among particular human lives. Fourth, it must be an account of ends, not means. Fifth, it must be more than a theory of “internal states of feeling.” It must also include “conditions, capacities, or functionings.” (We take this to mean that it must be Aristotelian as well as Epicurean.) Sixth, the account of the good must be an account of ultimate or final goods. Finally, it must acknowledge that the elements of well-being are irreducibly plural, and cannot be reduced to a single common measure, a unique hierarchy, or a lexical ordering. To this list we should probably add two points Galston mentions.

some pages later: namely that “[t]he liberal theory of the human good is intended to provide a shared basis for public policy” (178), and that “[t]he liberal account of the human good [mediated by a principle of liberal equality] provides the basis for . . . a theory of public purposes and a theory of public claims” (183).

Galston’s list of goods raises questions. We have no quarrel with the items labelled fulfillment, rationality, and subjective satisfaction. Analytically these are clearly ends characteristic of liberal practice, all of which meet the background conditions. Society (i.e., meaningful social relationships) is also an obvious choice—even though it may be questioned by people who prefer to analyze love in terms of interdependent utilities. But the other items on Galston’s list are unsettling. They are life itself, development of basic capacities, and freedom. We can only indicate briefly the problems in each case.

(1) *Life*. Galston says, “[w]e believe that life itself is good and that the taking or premature cessation of life is bad.” This does not seem to fit with the background conditions, since life itself is surely not an end or even a means, but rather a ground or necessary condition for value. Mere life, after all, may not be worth living; mere life is merely the *being* part in well-being. So in theory it does not seem a good candidate for inclusion on the list of intrinsic or ultimate goods. In practice, of course, it is true that some liberals talk as though life itself were of intrinsic value. But we suspect this kind of talk does not reflect genuine consensus. The history of war, violence, carelessness, heroism, stubbornness, rebellion, and self-destructive behavior (as well as their opposites) gives a better picture of the situation. And the debates about euthanasia suggest that the real consensus in practice (if there is one) is probably closer to the theoretically more defensible view that life is the ground of all value, rather than an intrinsic one.

(2) *Normal development of basic capacities*. Galston says “[we] regard it as good to be born with normal basic capacities . . . [and bad to be unable to develop or maintain those capacities].” We do not doubt that there is a practical consensus on this point, as long as we do not confine ourselves to making a list of intrinsic goods. But Galston insists that he is confining himself to intrinsic goods. To get on his list, a good must be an ultimate end rather than merely a means. But we do not see how normal development can meet that test. Perhaps if liberals were, in practice, Aristotelians of a sort who value everything that is good-of-its-kind for its own sake, the point would stick. But that seems too strong a claim to make about practice, and (theoretically) might be quite illiberal in its policy implications. Certainly, it does not suggest egalitarian policies so much as perfectionist ones.

(3) *Freedom*. Galston gives three reasons for valuing freedom. Two of them treat it as only an instrumental good: it is a means to realizing our interests and a necessity for integrity—defined as “the ability to act in accord with [one’s] beliefs and thus to identify with, and take responsibility for, [one’s]

deeds." The third reason is more nearly in accord with the background conditions. Galston says, "we value the general opportunity for self-assertion or self-determination." This seems a good fit with the background conditions, and also seems central to both the theory and practice of liberalism. We therefore have no problem with including it. But its inclusion raises, in a pointed way, the question of why the list has only seven items.

Our primary concern is as follows. We assume, with Galston, that the list of liberal goods is supposed to reflect accurate generalizations about human value experience generally. (Otherwise it is unlikely to contribute to the theoretical justification of liberal purposes and institutions.) Surely, as a generalization about human experience, we have to say that human beings also value the opportunity to find a vocation in which goals and projects are simply predefined. The intrinsic good at stake here may be termed "meaningful necessity," where that refers to being required for, or compellingly called to a role in, something apart from one's own life or choosing. On what ground can this be ruled out of the list of liberal goods? On the ground that liberalism, as practiced, doesn't give it a fundamental place? Perhaps. But how can the account of human goods used to justify liberalism rule it out, when it seems to capture a value every bit as fundamental in human life generally as the opportunity for self-assertion? Surely we persistently want both opportunities: assertion and absorption, freedom and meaningful necessity.

Moreover, when we try to construct generalizations about the elements of human well-being, our list of goods quickly becomes quite long. The "background conditions" for our list are simply that we want it to include everything that can plausibly be regarded as a distinct good (not reducible to others on the list), as well as regarded as intrinsic, necessary, or widely instrumental good definitive, at least in part, of a good life. Our list starts with the material conditions necessary for sustaining life and consciousness, and goes through the quality of consciousness, knowledge or understanding, self-command, the harmonization of reason, desire and will, excellence, meaningful opportunity, meaningful action, meaningful necessity, self-love, benevolence, mutual love, sexuality, achievement, rectitude, integrity, and aesthetic value (see L. Becker, "Good Lives: Prolegomena," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Summer, 1992). We are at a loss to know how, in theory, to shorten the list dramatically.

The problem, of course, is that once the list attains these dimensions, we are far from confident it could be used to argue for the sort of nonneutral liberal purposes Galston proposes. This long list of goods can be organized in multitudinous ways, to define a large range of good lives, no one of which is obviously "the" one about which liberals must be nonneutral. It seems that, for all intents and purposes, this expansive list of goods would require a new conception of neutrality: neutrality between the innumerable ways

the goods can be prioritized and ordered to dictate plans of life, rather than neutrality between the values of actual liberal citizens. In practice this new neutrality would not differ appreciably from that with which we began. And so one must question the practical significance of Galston's good-based liberalism.

In order to rescue his position, Galston would have to provide additional background conditions to shorten his list of goods, or some means of ranking the items on an expanded list. Neither of these problems promises to be easy. Neither is likely to succeed, moreover, if one chooses to work within the confines of existing liberal views, rather than attacking fundamental questions of value head-on.

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*Political Parties and the Winning of Office.* By Joseph A. Schlesinger. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991. Pp. 248. \$37.50.)

Joseph A. Schlesinger has spent his professional life making important contributions to the study of elections, political parties, and party organizations. In this book he has rewritten, distilled, and combined that body of work into a theoretically coherent whole. He addresses the paradox represented by the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and their view that the American parties are a model, and the general dissatisfaction, even disdain, of the American people for their party system. He notes that during the 1970s academics, journalists, and professional politicians joined in a chorus of concern over the weaknesses, continuing decline, and possible decomposition of the parties. But even as the "decline of parties" thesis gained momentum, based on the evidence of nonvoting, nonidentification, split-ticket voting, and the reduced role of the parties and politicians in the nominating process, there was an equally compelling argument that the parties were at least holding their own and were probably being strengthened.

The structure of the book can, in fact, be traced to a series of questions posed by Schlesinger in his introductory chapter. Starting with the question, "What then are we to make of parties in the United States?" the author posits a series of dichotomous statements that define the organization of his thesis. What are we to make of parties that no longer control their nominations, yet continue to win elections; which have suffered a substantial decline in electoral support from voters but whose electoral records have improved; that have supposedly decomposed but whose organizations have flourished; and that have no control over their members but continue to offer clear choices to the electorate? Schlesinger does not believe that the existing literature