

The Politics of Freedom

A Study of the Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, and of the Challenge of Neoliberalism

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Preface and acknowledgements

Isaiah Berlin once remarked, in a conversation with the Polish philosopher Beata Polanowska-Sygulska about the prospects for democracy in Eastern Europe, that “[t]here’s no need to read either Popper or me. One must simply follow the normal moral instincts” (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska 2006:110). There are several aspects of that short quote which in my view need to be elaborated.

The idea that ‘normal moral instincts’ may serve as a guide for those who want to build a better democracy is however at best only part of the story. We may also learn key lessons from practical experience and from what others have written before. This is especially the case if we take some of our cues from thinkers like Berlin and Popper, who informed their theories of how society ought to be organised with a keen interest for history, and especially the origins of popular ideas and misconceptions. We do not have to make the mistakes of the past all over again, if we know how they came about in the first place.

Another possible objection to Berlin’s reckless attitude towards his own and Popper’s work is that his alternative – to follow one’s normal moral instincts – is to put a lot of trust in a very fragile human faculty. In fact, the human ability to separate right from wrong is an unreliable guide to what we should do next, as we quite often come across situations in which there is no solution which is clearly and obviously better than all the alternatives. That is why we need careful reflection and serious debate, as well as a systematic collection of practical experiences, which may give us additional clues about what we should do in a particular situation. In this, perhaps quite surprisingly, even political theorists may be of assistance.

I have called this thesis *The Politics of Freedom*, because freedom is one of the basic ideas which unite the political theories of Berlin and Popper. Freedom is also a central concept in neoliberal thought, which is the third basic theme in the thesis. My discussion in

the third part of the thesis is focused around the differences between Berlin's and Popper's liberal political theories on one hand, and neoliberal political thought on the other.

* * *

As C. Northcote Parkinson once said, “[t]he thing to be done swells in importance and complexity in a direct ratio with the time to be spent” (Parkinson 1958:4). It is therefore no wonder that most doctoral theses, including this one, become rather unwieldy after a few years of procrastination. I therefore thank everyone I have met over these last few years for their tolerance towards me. If anyone should have the bravery to read the following thesis in full, I also thank them in advance for their truly superhuman patience with me.

I especially wish to give many heartfelt thanks my supervisors, Bernt Hagtvet and Raino Malnes, who have both gone well and far beyond the call of duty, in order to contribute to my *Bildung* and to help me give shape to this study. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to my supervisor for my master's degree, Robert Huseby, who in addition to everything he was supposed to do, also helped to shape my own views on many issues, from political theory to single malts. I also thank the Department of Political Science and the Ethics Programme at the University of Oslo for use of their facilities and money over many years. I thank them for giving me the opportunity to get to know many interesting colleagues, and for giving me excellent and interesting surroundings in which to work.

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Finally, I should like to point out that this thesis would never have been completed or even begun without the invaluable support of my uncle Bjørnar Thorsen and my parents Tove Thorsen and Dieter Stuwe. In their wisdom, they also know that I will never be able to repay them in full for their love and kindness, and for our numerous conversations which have given me so much knowledge – and occasionally put me straight.

Oslo, October 2011.

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of purpose

The central objective of this thesis is to explore some of the tensions in twentieth century and contemporary liberal theory, between the political theories of Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper on one hand, and the so-called neoliberal theories – the political theories of among others Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick – on the other.

The thesis is divided into three parts, consisting of two chapters each. In the first part, I describe and discuss the political and ethical thought of Isaiah Berlin, as well as a selection of the most central academic criticisms and interpretations of his thought. In the second part, I present and debate the philosophical and political theories of Karl Popper, and the most important evaluations and analyses of his political thought submitted by other philosophers and political scientists.

These discussions of two of the most important liberal political theorists from the middle of the twentieth century, serve as a background for the third part of the thesis. In this final part of the thesis, I first present and discuss the concept of neoliberalism – basically the belief that government ought to be ‘minimal and dispersed’ – and some of the most prominent political theorists associated with it, before I try to make sense of the pronounced differences between neoliberalism and the liberal political theories of Berlin and Popper. The next section below contains a more detailed outline, as well as a more formal presentation of research questions.

Both Berlin and Popper are, quite naturally, for the most part identified as liberals. This is also the ideological epithet they themselves most often use to describe their own political theories. There is however some controversy over the relationship between their political theories and the various theories they propound in other areas of philosophical enquiry (cf. section 1.3.1 below). Specifically, we see that Berlin’s ethical theory (called

value pluralism) is not universally thought of as being compatible with liberalism. We also see that there are disagreements in the philosophical and theoretical literature about which way influences run between Popper's political thought and his epistemological theories commonly called critical rationalism, as well as disagreements over which political ideology the proponent of critical rationalism in the end should endorse.

Is Berlin's value pluralism or Popper's critical rationalism capable of providing a basis for liberal conclusions in political theory? This question is a point of departure for the next four chapters of this thesis. Of these, I will devote the first two chapters to discussing the relationship between Berlin's political and ethical thought, before I in the fourth and fifth chapter examine Popper's political theories, as well as their relationship with his theories of human knowledge – his epistemology and his philosophy of science. The central conclusion in these chapters is that their political theories are largely compatible with their theories in other fields of philosophical enquiry. I also conclude that the kinds of liberal political theories recommended by Berlin and Popper are not that different from each other.

Ultimately, I conclude that they both end up with a moderate and gradualist type of 'organised liberalism' which demands that a strong and active government should guarantee the basic rights and liberties of everyone (cf. sections 3.6., 4.4.3., and 5.6. below). That way, I conclude that their political theories belong in the centre ground of the political spectrum, and that they both may be described as left-leaning liberals. This interpretation of mine goes right to the core of the academic debates over how one should understand the political thought of both Berlin and Popper (cf. especially chapters 3 and 5 below), and an important goal of this interpretation is to evaluate and synthesise other interpretations of their political thoughts and theories. Because of this, I end up with interpretations of Berlin's and Popper's political theories which are only partly consensual, in the sense that I develop some fairly

mainstream interpretations given by other students of their thought further, while I reject other, more inventive interpretations of their thought.

The liberal political theories of Berlin and Popper are, according to my interpretation, representatives of a sort of liberalism which is very much unlike the kind of liberalism presented by proponents of what is sometimes called ‘neoliberalism’. In contrast to Berlin and Popper, neoliberals centrally recommend less government intervention in the economy and a ‘rolling-back of the frontiers of the state’, often in order to secure an increase in individual liberty or economic efficiency (cf. chapter 6 below). What are the central features of the body of thought commonly called neoliberalism, and how does Berlin’s and Popper’s type of liberalism compare to these theories called ‘neoliberalism’? Is it possible to see in Berlin’s and Popper’s political theories the beginnings of what one may call a liberal alternative to neoliberalism, or a political theory which takes neoliberalism seriously as a genuine expression of liberalism and liberal concerns, but which nevertheless emphasise other and perhaps greater parts of the liberal tradition than the neoliberals do? These questions provide us with a point of departure for the last two chapters of this thesis.

1.2 Questions and outline

There are three basic questions, and three follow-up questions to each of these, which inform the discussions in this study:

- Is Berlin’s ethical theory of value pluralism capable of providing us with a basis for a recognisably liberal political theory? What are the most central characteristics of the political theory Berlin ultimately recommends?
- Is Popper’s epistemological theory of critical rationalism capable of providing us with a basis for a recognisably liberal political theory? What are the most central characteristics of the political theory Popper ultimately recommends?

- What are the central features of the body of political and economic thought commonly called neoliberalism? How does it compare to the kinds of liberalism recommended by Berlin and Popper?

The study of these questions is in this thesis divided into three parts. In the first two parts, I will answer the first two groups of questions, in the form of a presentation and discussion of the political thought of both Berlin and Popper. These two parts consist of two chapters each, and are structured in a similar way. Two themes will be emphasised throughout the first four chapters, namely Berlin's defence of gradualism and 'realism' in political thought and action, and Popper's defence of what I call 'organised liberalism' – as well as the connections between ethics or epistemology and political thought in their works.

In the second chapter, I first will first describe and explain Berlin's ethical theories, commonly called value pluralism, and the relationship between them and related theories with similar names. I also discuss Berlin's conceptual divide between positive and negative liberty, as well as his idea that successful political action is dependent on sound political judgment and 'a sense of reality'. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of his idea that we – in politics as well as other areas of human existence – need to maintain an uneasy equilibrium between different values and goals.

In the third chapter, I emphasise that there are few strong arguments in favour of the view, put forward by John Gray and others, that value pluralism cannot provide a basis for a liberal political theory in any straightforward way. Instead, Berlin's own view, that value pluralism entails a measure of negative liberty for everyone, is largely vindicated. I have therefore indicated that value pluralism may indeed provide a basis for liberalism, at least if liberalism is understood very broadly as a strong preference for liberal democracy.

Value pluralism does not, however, lead its proponents directly to liberalism in any more restricted sense, and certainly not directly to conventionally liberal economic policies, which Berlin occasionally warned against. It is clear, moreover, that the type of liberalism advocated by Berlin is more moderate and egalitarian in outlook compared to a more traditional brand of economic liberalism, and that he was more like a political eclectic who combined liberalism with political ideas more easily associated other traditions of political thought. Unlike Gray, I find Berlin's combination of value pluralism with a moderate and egalitarian sort of liberalism to be not obviously illogical. One might therefore say that value pluralism and liberalism are indeed compatible doctrines, and one might perhaps even say that value pluralism may provide a basis for the kind of liberalism recommended by Berlin, even if there is no strict, logical link between liberalism and value pluralism.

The fourth chapter contains a description and my interpretations of Popper's political thought, as well the epistemological theories he and others have given the name critical rationalism. I find that there are several links between his epistemology and his political theories, often originating in and running through a rather sketchily developed set of moral considerations. It is especially his view that one should minimise avoidable human suffering, an idea Popper calls 'negative utilitarianism', which links his various theories together so that they become parts of a philosophical system. Because ignorance, unfreedom, and economic exploitation in Popper's mind lead to much avoidable suffering, it is his view that the state should actively protect the freedom and integrity of all. I therefore describe Popper's political thought, using a concept originally developed by the German political theorist and politician Eduard Bernstein to describe his own version of democratic socialism, as a form of 'organised liberalism'.

In the fifth chapter, I present and discuss some of the remarkably different interpretations of Popper's political thought. In the ensuing discussion, I side with those

commentators who above all describe Popper as a political moderate who wants human reason and knowledge to guide political action. There is however also a lively dispute between those who emphasise his war-time books and who tend to think of Popper as a social democrat, and those who call attention to his later works, and who believes that Popper ought to have come out more clearly in favour of ‘classical liberalism’. In this dispute, I side with the former group. To the latter group I concede, however, that it is ultimately an empirical question whether or not Popper’s ‘protectionist view of the state’, or the view that political institutions should protect everyone from exploitation and minimise avoidable suffering, is compatible with traditional economic liberalism.

The third part of the study, called ‘the neoliberal challenge’, is a discussion of the third group of questions mentioned above. The first chapter of this part, chapter six, presents a set ideas of ideas commonly called neoliberalism, which despite the nominal similarity on closer inspection turns out to be very different from the kinds of liberalism proposed by Berlin and Popper. In fact, the differences between the two theorists and the neoliberals, discussed in chapter seven, illustrate the many disagreements between different groups of people who have found it useful to describe themselves as liberals.

In my exposition in the sixth chapter, I try to highlight the differences between modern liberalism and liberal egalitarianism on one hand, and classical liberalism and libertarianism on the other. I find that political ideologies such as classical liberalism and libertarianism are not far removed from the political theories commonly called neoliberalism. This is the case at least if one primarily looks at the basic economic policies recommended by thinkers who have been described using one or more of these epithets, even if they to varying degrees differ from each other on other scores. There is nevertheless so much agreement between proponents of neoliberal policies that it is clearly quite useful to describe neoliberalism as a loosely demarcated set of political and economic ideas which –

in spite of certain theoretical differences between the various political theorists most commonly described as neoliberals – in practical terms amounts to a demand for a thoroughgoing ‘rolling back of the frontiers of the state’.

In the seventh and final chapter, I bring the political thought of both Berlin and Popper back into the discussion. In it, I describe the relationship between key theories proposed by the two philosophers, most prominently value pluralism and political protectionism, as well as the moderate and above all democratic and egalitarian liberalism which they in the end recommend. I also ask whether or not it is possible to see in Berlin’s and Popper’s political theories the beginnings of what one may call a liberal alternative to neoliberalism, or a political theory which takes neoliberalism seriously as a genuine expression of liberalism, but which nevertheless emphasise other parts of the liberal tradition than the so-called neoliberals tend to do.

1.3 Berlin, Popper, and liberal democracy

1.3.1 From ethics and epistemology to political theory

Among academic philosophers, political theorists, and historians of ideas who were active during the twentieth century, Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper stand out, not only because they are important liberal theorists, but also because they were notable members of all three categories. Apart from a certain unwillingness to specialise in a particular scholarly field, there are several other similarities between them as well. One common feature of their thought, which especially has caught my attention, is that their shared efforts to construct a normative, political theory based around a strong preference for liberal democracy could be viewed as upshots of their work on other philosophical problems.

In his most famous essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin suggests that ‘a measure’ of *negative liberty* is entailed by the ethical outlook he called *pluralism*, and which

commentators have called ‘value pluralism’ in order to separate it more clearly from other theories and perspectives called pluralism (Berlin 1958; 2002:166-217, cf. chapter 2 below for a further explanation of these concepts). Berlin claims that there are many different goals or values competing for our attention. This, according to Berlin, calls in its turn for a degree of respect and generosity towards others, especially those who choose to live by other values or with other ends in mind than the state or the majority. One ought therefore to leave others alone to pursue their own ends, unless the demands of competing values such as equality, social justice, or common decency cancel out our demands for even more negative liberty.

Because of the rivalry between different values or ends it purports, Berlin’s pluralism implores us to dispense with efforts to create a perfect society, what Berlin calls Utopianism, and instead direct our best efforts at establishing and maintaining an ‘uneasy equilibrium’ between conflicting values and goals (Berlin 1990:1-19). Pluralism is, therefore, an ethical outlook of consequence to politics and political theory, because it suggests that we ought not to expect to be able to find an ultimate solution to all our social and political problems. We should therefore, within reason, respect each other’s privacy and negative liberty:

Pluralism, with the measure of ‘negative’ liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least, recognise the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle, perform. To say that in some ultimate, all-reconciling yet realisable synthesis duty is interest, or individual freedom is pure democracy or an authoritarian State, is to throw a metaphysical blanket over self-deceit or deliberate hypocrisy. (Berlin 2002:216)

Popper, on the other hand, puts forward the view that a commitment to protect the ‘the open society’ and the ‘freedom of men’ proceeds from a set of basic epistemological assumptions

which he calls *critical rationalism* (cf. Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a, especially pp. 224-258, cf. also chapter 4 below). As the name implies, critical rationalism is a form of rationalism, but one which in addition to believing in the usefulness of the human capability to reason and find out new things about the world we live in, also aims to adopt a critical attitude towards established theories and beliefs, including itself and its own presuppositions (Popper [1963] 2002a:3-86; cf. also Albert 1991). It is, basically, a way of looking at things which claims that human knowledge will develop and grow whenever and wherever it is possible to submit any theory or set of beliefs to a process of open-ended criticism, in the form of severe tests which may prove such theories wrong (cf. Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a; 1979a; [1963] 2002a).

It is his firm belief that the practice of critical thinking is best preserved in a liberal and democratic polity, and it is this belief which forms a bridge from his theories of knowledge to his theories of politics. Another point of departure for his political thought is his idea that many of the existing alternatives to liberalism are based on what he considers to be poorly conceived or fraudulent theories (Popper [1957] 2002c). Only liberal democracy is, according to Popper, well suited to facilitate critical thinking, and thereby the continued growth of human knowledge and the overall freedom of humankind:

[R]ationalism is linked up with the recognition of the necessity of social institutions to protect freedom of criticism, freedom of thought, and thus the freedom of men. And it establishes something like a moral obligation towards the support of these institutions. This is why rationalism is closely linked up with the political demand for practical social engineering – piecemeal engineering, of course – in the humanitarian sense, with the demand for the rationalization of society, for planning for freedom, and for its control by reason; not by ‘science’, not by a Platonic, a pseudo-rational authority, but by that Socratic reason which is aware of its limitations, and which therefore respects the other man and does not aspire to coerce him – not even into happiness. (Popper [1945] 1966a:239-40)

The links between political theories and ideas in other fields of philosophical enquiry are often very hard to pin down exactly, and it is not entirely clear what it means for a philosophical theory to ‘entail’ or ‘link up with’ a political point of view distinct from others. Nevertheless, this is what both Berlin and Popper come close to asserting, when they in their most seminal works claim that their preference for liberal democracy has been deduced from their perspectives in ethics or epistemology. In addition, terms such as ‘liberalism’ or ‘liberal democracy’ are, to say the very least, ambiguous and nebulous concepts. For Berlin, becoming a liberal was a matter of rejecting the “brutal and fraudulent simplifications” which inspires the “actual enemies” of liberal democracy (Berlin and Williams 1994:309). Equally, Popper understood liberal and democratic political arrangements partly as a way of making sure that erroneous theories of government did the least possible damage if their proponents gained access to political authority (cf. e.g. Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a; 1994a:151-160).

I do not disagree with Berlin’s and Popper’s view that they are indeed liberals, but with the idea that a very detailed sort of political theory is directly entailed by their theories in ethics or epistemology. Instead, I give support to a weaker proposition, namely that while value pluralism and critical rationalism may lead their proponents towards a strong preference for liberal democracy, it is not the case that such theories lead their proponents directly to a very detailed political programme called liberalism. Nevertheless, they both come out quite strongly as proponents of a left-leaning type of liberalism I have called ‘organised liberalism’, whenever they combine their theoretical outlook with their own view of what lessons we might learn from our recent history.

To put it more directly, the liberalism which Berlin and Popper claim to deduce, respectively, from value pluralism or critical rationalism is the liberalism which is shared by most people, at least in the western world. One does not have to subscribe to particular

economic policies in order to become a liberal in this broader sense. One only needs to reject political ideologies which actively seek to replace liberal democracy with other forms of government. The political theories of Berlin and Popper do not, therefore, lead to an endorsement of liberal economic policies – let alone so-called neoliberal economic policies. Instead their political theories come across as an egalitarian and interventionist form of social liberalism akin to the ‘new liberalism’ of for instance L. T. Hobhouse ([1911] 1994) and William Beveridge (1942; 1944; 1945). In our day and age, however, this is a political outlook which in Western Europe has been put forward more frequently by social democrats – and not quite as often by members of Liberal political parties.

1.3.2 Liberalism

Berlin and Popper are nevertheless part of a liberal tradition in political theory. By the middle of the twentieth century, when Berlin and Popper were at their most active as political philosophers, the general perception in Western Europe was that liberal parties were a centrist force in politics, situated between the often larger conservative and social democratic parties. This was also the case in Britain, their adopted country, where the once dominant Liberal Party had been surpassed by the Conservative Party and Labour. Increasingly, however, liberal ideas and principles of government were at the same time fast becoming a shared inheritance among most major political parties.

This meant that while liberal parties grew smaller in size, their most central ideas and principles became ever more influential, and uncontroversial, in the democracies of Western Europe. During World War II and the early stages of the Cold War, when Berlin and Popper were at their most active as political theorists, words such as ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ also became terms used to describe all proponents of liberal democracy, and not merely members and supporters of Liberal political parties. For these reasons, Berlin, Popper and many others

could claim to be liberals, without at the same time making their purely partisan allegiances clear to their immediate audiences.

Berlin claimed to be a liberal quite simply because he rejected the alternatives to liberal democracy. In an article co-authored with Bernard Williams, he argues against the view, presented by George Crowder, that his value pluralism leads away from liberalism (Berlin and Williams 1994; Crowder 1994). Contrary to this, Berlin and Williams suggest that liberalism is a political option open to everyone, including adherents of value pluralism: “[I]t is from social and historical reality that we are likely to be instructed in liberalism’s strengths, and to be reminded of the brutal and fraudulent simplifications which, as a matter of fact, are the usual offerings of its actual enemies” (Berlin and Williams 1994:309).

The crucial claim Berlin makes is that typically liberal values do not form a consistent whole or resolve themselves into an all-encompassing synthesis. Berlin suggests instead that liberal values, perhaps most strikingly epitomised by the French revolutionary slogan “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”, must be moderated against each other. It is especially the relationship between liberty and equality that receives his critical scrutiny. He rejects, for instance, the view that equality is the paramount liberal value, as is the view expressed in Richard Wollheim’s companion essay to one of Berlin’s articles, both entitled “Equality”:

My own opinion is that the principle of Equality can be regarded as the fundamental principle of Liberalism. We have seen already how the principle of Democracy can be interpreted as a special instance of it. And the principle of Liberty is made superfluous by it. For the substance of every claim that men should be free in a certain matter could be rendered by claiming that in this matter they have equal rights. (Wollheim 1956:300; for a more recent rendition of this view, and one which is critical of Berlin’s political and moral theories, cf. Dworkin 2000; 2001; 2001a)

It follows that when the pursuit of equality comes into conflict with other human aims, be they what they may – such as the desire for happiness or pleasure, or for justice or virtue, or colour and variety in a society for their own sake or for liberty of choice as an end in itself, or for the fuller development of all human faculties, it is only the most fanatical egalitarian that will demand that such conflicts invariably be

decided in favour of equality alone, with relative disregard of the other ‘values’ concerned. (Berlin 1956:319)

Even if we were to grant that value pluralism does not necessarily lead directly to liberalism, one would certainly have to grant that this type of ethical theory would add a quite distinctive ‘flavour’ to one’s political theorising (cf. e.g. Berlin 1990:1-19; 2000:1-23; 2002:3-54; 166-217; cf. also Lamprecht 1921). This is perhaps most evident in Berlin’s lecture *On the Pursuit of the Ideal*, which he gave in Italy in 1988:

Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries; but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted. (...) Equality may demand the restraint of the liberty of those who wish to dominate; liberty – without some modicum of which there is no choice and therefore no possibility of remaining human as we understand the word – may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to leave room for the liberty of others, to allow justice or fairness to be exercised. (Berlin 1990:12)

Of course social and political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimised by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair – that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to lose our way. (Berlin 1990:19)

Popper claims, in his 1954 lecture “Public opinion and liberal principles” (1984:169-172; 1994a:155-157), that liberalism could be defined as a ‘group of theses’. These positions are also found in several of Popper’s other works, for instance in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a). The lecture itself was originally presented before a meeting of the self-avowedly liberal Mont Pèlerin Society, which later has become known, in some academic circles at least, as the global hothouse of neoliberal ideology (Plickert 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Mont Pèlerin Society, no date).

Initially, Popper gives us the liberal perspective on the state: “The state is a necessary evil: its powers are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary. One might call this

principle the *'Liberal razor'*" (Popper 1994a:155). The liberal will not claim, like the anarchist presumably does, that the state is an *unnecessary* evil which we might just as well remove entirely. Rather, the liberal claims that the state is an indispensable guardian of human liberty and welfare. At the same time, liberals will also view the state as a latent danger to individual freedom and happiness. The upshot of this ambivalence is that liberals will tend to view any infringements on individual liberty with scepticism, and yet at the same time view many such infringements as a necessary feature of human societies.

The second component of liberalism is its commitment to democracy. In Popper's vocabulary, democracy is simply a mechanism under which "the government can be got rid of without bloodshed" (Popper 1994a:156). Presumably, this amounts to a defence of a quite limited democracy, where the minimal requirement is that the citizens of a state can peacefully dismiss their political leaders in free and fair elections. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of more comprehensive or inclusive forms of democratic governance under particularly favourable conditions.

The third factor in Popper's liberalism is gradualism and traditionalism, which makes him reject revolutionary creeds and ideologies:

Institutions alone are never sufficient if not tempered by traditions. (...) Should we prevent a pianist from practising, or prevent his neighbour from enjoying a quiet afternoon? All such problems can be solved in practice only by an appeal to existing traditions and customs and a traditional sense of justice; to common law, as it is called in Britain, and to an impartial judge's appreciation of equity. All laws, being universal principles, have to be interpreted in order to be applied; and an interpretation needs some principles of concrete practice, which can be supplied only by a living tradition. And this holds more especially for the highly abstract and universal principles of Liberalism. (Popper 1994a:156-157)

In other words, the establishment and preservation of a set of traditions – a political culture and a 'moral framework' – is indispensable in order to make liberal democracy work:

Among the traditions we must count as most important is what we may call the 'moral framework' (corresponding to the institutional 'legal framework') of a

society. (...) This moral framework serves as the basis which makes it possible to reach a fair or equitable compromise between conflicting interests where this is necessary. (...) Nothing is more dangerous than the destruction of this traditional framework, as it was consciously aimed at by Nazism. In the end its destruction will lead to cynicism and nihilism, i.e. to the disregard and the dissolution of all human values. (Popper 1994a:157)

Popper then goes on to say that liberals would be, at least when they reside in liberal societies, a gradualist force:

Principles of Liberalism may be described (at least today) as principles of assessing, and if necessary of modifying or changing, existing institutions, rather than of replacing existing institutions. One can express this by saying that Liberalism is an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary creed (unless it is confronted by a tyrannical regime). (ibid.)

1.3.3 Utopianism

It is a rather striking parallel that both Berlin and Popper attempt to justify their own respective commitments to liberal values and principles by referring to theories they put forward in other areas of philosophical investigation. Another parallel is the *type* of liberal political theory they put forward. They are what one might call cautious liberals, whose liberal commitments to a significant degree are diluted with pragmatic and gradualist attitudes. Nowhere is this gradualism more apparent than in their shared rejection of Utopianism (cf. especially Berlin 1990; Popper [1945] 1966:157-168).

Utopianism is, according to both, the belief in the ‘perfectibility of human society’, or what one might call the “evanescence of imperfection” (Oakeshott 1962:5) in human affairs. They both lump together a substantial portion of Western political thought in this category – from Plato’s minutely regulated Republic of philosopher-kings, to more modern ideologies, especially the more doctrinaire variants of Marxism and Fascism.

Berlin rejects Utopianism because it is directly opposed to his pluralism (cf. Berlin 1990:1-19; 20-48; Davis 2001). Utopianism is, according to Berlin, the belief that human society might be made perfect, which presumably must include the end of conflict and

discord. Value pluralism, on the other hand, is the belief that the goals which human beings ought to pursue are many and in a state of “perpetual rivalry” (Berlin 2002:216), making the idea that human societies might be made perfect a ‘metaphysical chimera’. To Berlin, Utopian political theories, and their corresponding ethical theory of value monism, are moreover the most dangerous ideas mankind has ever thought up:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another. ‘Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together by an indissoluble chain,’ said one of the best men who ever lived [i.e. the Marquis de Condorcet], and spoke in similar terms of liberty, equality and justice. (Berlin 2002:212; cf. also Berlin 1990; Condorcet [1793] 1971)

Utopian political ideas receive, also, a thorough denunciation from Popper in connection with his attempt to discuss and criticise the faults he claims to have discovered in the philosophical systems of Plato, Hegel, and Marx in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Running through this entire edifice is the attempt to defend political incrementalism, or ‘piecemeal social engineering’, against Utopianism and historicism, or the belief that history follows specific patterns over which humanity has little or no influence:

Inherent in Plato’s programme there is a certain approach towards politics which, I believe, is most dangerous. Its analysis is of great practical importance from the view of rational social engineering. The Platonic approach I have in mind can be described as that of *Utopian engineering*, as opposed to another kind of social engineering which I consider as the only rational one, and which may be described by the name of *piecemeal engineering*. The Utopian approach is the more dangerous as it may seem to be the obvious alternative to an out-and-out historicism – to a radically historicist approach which implies that we cannot alter the course of history; at the same time, it appears to be a necessary complement to a less radical historicism, like that of Plato, which permits human interference. (Popper [1945] 1966:157)

The fact that Berlin and Popper make a common enemy out of Utopian ideas and theories is indicative of their shared gradualist attitudes. They both entertain a presumption in favour of liberty and gradual change, meaning that reforms ought to be incremental and designed with a view of preserving human liberty rather than stamping it out. This twofold – and perhaps somewhat ambivalent – attitude is perhaps best captured in Berlin’s expression of an ‘uneasy equilibrium’ between competing goals, and Popper’s concept of ‘piecemeal social engineering’: Designing and reforming social institutions is an intricate undertaking, highly complex because of the wide variety of unintended consequences and competing objectives it must take into consideration. It is therefore, for both of them, of first importance to undertake such activities only in small and well thought through steps.

Individual liberty is an important ambition for both of them, but neither of them is willing to make it into a paramount or all-overriding consideration. John Gray famously described Berlin’s liberalism as ‘agonistic’, meaning that it was characterised by internal tensions and inconsistencies, making it a “stoical and tragic liberalism of unavoidable conflict and irreparable loss among inherently rivalrous values” (Gray 1995:1). Popper is, one might say, also espousing an ‘agonistic liberalism’, in that he also sees liberalism not as a complete blueprint for how all aspects of society ought to be organised. Like Berlin, he sees his version of liberalism as a set of principles that ought to guide an open-ended political process, in which individual interests are weighed against each other.

Berlin and Popper are, to sum up, dedicated supporters of liberal goals and values. Their shared rejections of Utopianism, and their defences of individual liberty in the face of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies, define their idiosyncratically cautious versions of liberalism. In addition, they view gradualism, prudence and moderation as political virtues, especially when it comes to designing and reforming social institutions. One can also in their works find a strong preference for egalitarianism, and a willingness to use the state to build a

more egalitarian society in which freedom and material resources are distributed more evenly and equitably than would otherwise be the case. In that way, they are both centrist or even left-leaning liberals, more closely related to social democrats than neoliberals, who demand a roll-back of the frontiers of the state, and the institution of an almost entirely unregulated market economy. All in all, they both promote a watchful, and above all a pragmatic, liberal political theory – and this makes them surprisingly similar in the concrete political attitudes they adhere to, in spite of the differences in both emphasis and substance one can find elsewhere in their respective theories.

1.4 A note on method in political theory

1.4.1 A discipline divided

The present thesis could on the whole be seen as a piece of normative political analysis – or quite simply ‘political theory’. A central aim of the thesis is to present and compare some perspectives on how human societies ought to be organised. An aim such as this is of course closely related to the most central aim of political theory in general, namely to answer the basic question of how or along which lines human societies ought to be organised (cf. Thorsen 2008; 2011; 2011a).

When trying to answer this basic question, it would of course be preferable to have a set of more or less clear-cut and widely agreed upon methods, parallel to the ones found in the more empirically oriented social sciences. Such methods could potentially guide us through the process from the formulation of normative research questions at a greater level of detail, through to the development of a definite answer to such questions, making the whole undertaking more structured than it would otherwise be.

Political theory is, however, a field of research in which the ‘methods’ employed are rarely made explicit. Many political theorists – if not most – do not discuss research methods

at all. They simply start their discussions of how society ought to be organised, in the form of philosophical essays, most of the time without any overt discussion of or reference to a particular method or set of methods at all. Because of this, one widely used textbook dealing with *Theory and Methods in Political Science* acknowledges normative political theory as a central part of political science, itself divided into different traditions and approaches, but does not reveal to its undergraduate audience any methods for how to do normative political theory in practical terms (Marsh and Stoker 2010; Buckler 2010). Other textbooks concerned with political theory also remain largely silent on matters of research methods (cf. e.g. Beckman and Mörkenstam 2009; Malnes and Midgaard 2009).

This widespread quietism is also indicated at the beginning of one of the very few books which tries to describe the various methods and approaches in political theory:

Political theorists are often silent on questions of methods and approach. While scholars in other branches of political and social sciences expend great energy debating the right way to conduct research – arguing about the appropriate place of quantification, the nature of survey design, the ethical acceptability of particular investigative approaches, and the like – political theorists generally spend little time addressing questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ in their work. Instead, they dive straight into their analysis, turning immediately to the task at hand; arguing, for instance, about the meaning and value of key concepts such as liberty, justice, and rights. The books that political theorists write thus rarely include much explicit reflection on method, even though such reflection is a standard expectation in other areas; even less frequently do they produce works explicitly concerned with research methods, although the shelves of libraries are crowded with such texts from related disciplines. (Leopold and Stears 2008:1)

But political theory is not only a research discipline in which questions of method are rarely discussed or answered, but also a discipline divided between different traditions and approaches, as well as different views about what the most important questions of political theory actually are. This situation is richly illustrated in the same book:

[E]ven within a single department such as ours [i.e. the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford] there was little agreement about

what methods and approaches are best suited to the tasks of political theory today. Some colleagues conducted historical work, often using primary sources hidden away in archives, others analysed questions formally, employing methods borrowed from economics and game theory; still others combined techniques from analytical philosophy with those from empirical social science. Moreover, there was significant disagreement as to the proper object of study in political theory. Some felt that it lay in scrutinizing the meaning and value of key terms in our contemporary political vocabulary; others argued for the need to make concrete recommendations for public policy; others emphasized the importance of recovering lost traditions of thought and comparing them with the established norms of today. (Leopold and Stears 2008:2)

These divisions do not, however, mean that this field of research is entirely without standards or criteria for distinguishing a successful argument from an unsuccessful one, even if political theorists tend to write their works in the form of philosophical or polemical essays without a clear-cut methodology. The result of these divisions within the discipline is, rather, that such standards or criteria are rarely discussed or made explicit, and that they are certainly not universally accepted by all academics working in the field of political theory. Instead, it is more fruitful to talk – in the plural – of different methods and different approaches which define which tradition or school of thought to which a particular political theorist belongs (cf. Almond 1990). What unites political theory is therefore not a particular method or approach to answering the research questions in the field, but rather the research questions themselves. Political theory is quite simply the sustained effort to answer questions relating to how society in general or particular political institutions ought to be organised.

One way of making the divisions in political theory explicit is to consider the different ways in which political theorists view the relationship between their own research discipline and other areas of enquiry. Is political theory an extension of moral philosophy, is it a part of social or political science, is it most fruitfully viewed – in part at least – as an historical discipline, or is it perhaps a broadly humanistic discipline related to literary studies or social philosophy?

Some political theorists view political theory as an extension of moral philosophy, or as moral philosophy applied to questions of how society ought to be organised. Consequently, they view it not as a part of political or social science, but as a ‘complement’ to the social sciences (McDermott 2008). Even if political theorists are quite often members of political science departments in universities, they are according to this perspective more properly thought of as moral philosophers working with problems of a political nature. Quite regardless of more or less accidental administrative divisions in universities, it is nevertheless thought that political theory is an integral part of moral philosophy and thereby of academic philosophy in general.

An upshot of this perspective is that it is plainly difficult to describe a particular method for political theory. Like in other areas of philosophy, the main task of political theory is, according to this perspective, to explore concepts and ideas in a general way, and to evaluate the arguments of other philosophers in order to make them better and more lucid. Political theory is thus understood as a philosophical discipline, and the standard scientific approaches to problem-solving known from empirical social science are therefore not always thought of as appropriate or relevant. One must simply try to answer the questions posed in political theory as carefully and as systematically as possible, and one must try to root out possible objections to the answers given (Thorsen 2011a). One must also remain open to possible counter-arguments from other theorists, and write explicitly about the way one moved from the initial question to a final answer. That way, an honest conversation between theorists could take place over the research question one set out to answer in the first place, with little or no explicit reference to questions of method. This is at least an argument one could make following the methodological discussions of the well-known political theorist Brian Barry:

Both common experience of actual moral arguments and the record of Anglo-American moral philosophy in the past couple of decades strongly suggest that it is neither necessary nor even desirable to precede the doing of something (...) by trying to establish how to do it. (...) We all know how to engage in moral arguments, even if we would be flummoxed by being asked whether or not we subscribe to moral realism, objectivism, subjectivism, prescriptivism, or what have you. It is, moreover, noticeable how little difference is made by people's commitments to such general positions about the nature of morality when it comes down to arguing about some concrete moral question. (...) Thus, everyone proposes general principles, derives more specific principles from them, tests them by examples, argues from case to case by analogy, and so on. (Barry 1989:257-8; cf. also Malnes 1995:35-39)

Others turn this vision of a relationship between philosophy, political theory, and political science on its head, and claim instead that political theory is an integral part of political science – albeit a part of political science quite distinct from other parts of that discipline. The distinction between political theory on one hand, and political or social science on the other, is primarily defined by the questions asked – whether one asks empirical questions of how society *is* structured, or if one instead asks normative questions of how society *ought to* be organised (Thorsen 2011; 2011a).

The primary goal for political theory is not, according to this perspective, to become a philosophically rigorous investigation of what ought to take place under ideal circumstances. The ultimate goal of political theory is instead to understand the world we live in better, so that one in due course may find out how the world could be made a better place (Thorsen 2011; 2011a). Therefore, political theory must aim at political relevance, in the sense that one would like political theory to use the findings of social and political science to formulate proposals for reforming the society in which the political theorist lives (Miller 2008; Swift and White 2008).

Even if one understands political theory to be a normative branch of social or political science dealing with questions of how society ought to be organised, the standard scientific approaches to problem-solving are still, however, not always all that appropriate.

As a political theorist one needs to understand both rather nonconcrete philosophical discussions of political issues, as well as the types of tremendously concrete research going on in the empirical social sciences. The ultimate goal is not, however, to contribute to either undertaking. Instead, the goal is to use both as sources of insight which might contribute to the formation of ideas about how human societies and political processes ought to be organised better in the future, and to act as a mediator between the world of philosophical principles and social science on one hand, and the world of 'real politics' on the other.

In this, it seems that explicit methods are hard to come by. One simply has to do whatever it takes to arrive at morally and scientifically informed answers to political questions of the day, and then try influence the general public, politicians, and political processes. That way, public policies may become informed by the findings of both social science and moral philosophy to a greater extent than they were at the outset (cf. e.g. Swift and White 2008).

A third perspective views political theory, in part at least, as an historical discipline, where the main goal is to root out the origins of different ideas about how society ought to be organised. The basic goal is to see things the way they were, or to see things the way past generations saw them, in the hope of finding out why people thought the way they did in earlier times, and to what degree and in which way they thought differently than most people or most political theorists do today (cf. especially Skinner 1989; 2002a).

That way, one might come to see how (and to what degree) the basic concepts and modes of political thought we take for granted today are really the products of gradual and – to some degree at least – accidental historical and conceptual developments (cf. Farr 1989; Freedman 1996). We might also come to see that the way we think about politics today might have been different, and that there are fewer political ideas that are self-evidently true, than we may have thought at the outset. With a careful, historical study of political ideas and their

development through time, we may arrive at a more context-sensitive perspective on our own ideas about how political processes and society in general ought to be organised. Ultimately, we may end up with a more open-minded political debate in which we understand better the sources of political disagreements.

This is arguably the approach to the basic problems of political theory in which it is most appropriate to describe a research method resembling anything found in other areas of academic research. It is a way of doing political theory which is closely allied to the history of ideas and historical research in general. In order to find out what kinds of political ideas people entertained in the past, one must be able to make sense of historical sources and be able to construct a narrative about the development of political ideas and the changing use of political words or concepts. Political theorists of this kind are therefore historians as much as they are philosophers or social scientists, and they employ standard historical methods in at least parts of their research.

Traditionally, historians have not been particularly preoccupied with questions of method, but a renewed interest in research methods in other areas of historical research have also influenced the study of political ideas and their development through time (cf. e.g. Kjeldstadli 1999; Burke 2005). Now, we can see both a traditional and a more novel approach to the historical study of political ideas. While many historically oriented political theorists still tend to remain silent on the matter of method in their research reports, we can also see that some historians of political ideas now put a greater emphasis on questions of methodology (cf. e.g. Freedman 1996). It remains, however, that these methods largely correspond to the traditional methods used in the history of ideas, as well as general historical research (Skinner 2002a).

Political theory could moreover be viewed in a fourth and final way as a broadly humanistic discipline closely related to literary theory and social philosophy, or the study of

literature and the fundamental preconditions for human interaction. This is an approach to the basic questions of political theory found most of all in so-called ‘continental philosophy’ (cf. e.g. Pettit 1993; West 1993; Leiter 2004; 2009). If discussions of research methods are hard to come by in other approaches to political theory, one must look even further afield in the literature of the continental tradition, at least if one wants to find a simple recipe for doing ‘continental’ or ‘critical’ political theory similar to accounts found in books about the research methods of social and natural science.

At most, one may find introductions to various schools of thought such as for instance the ‘critical theory’ of Jürgen Habermas or various ‘dialectical approaches’ to political theory inspired by Hegel and Marx (cf. e.g. McNay 2008; Leopold 2008). It seems therefore to be a general norm that researchers writing within these traditions of political theory rarely build on any overt methodology, giving their works a distinctly literary feel to them (cf. e.g. Pedersen 2010a; Thorsen 2011b). The goal in these traditions seems to be to develop grand narratives of cultural change and diagnoses of our time, and the downplaying of methodological discussions seems to follow from the general nature of the questions asked – not entirely unlike what we found in the other approaches to political theory.

1.4.2 Towards a method for political theory?

We may, potentially at least, see the beginnings of a methodology for political theory if we look more closely at the questions posed, for instance the basic question of how society ought to be organised. Clearly, such normative questions – questions which ask about what ought to be rather than what actually is – set political theory apart from mainstream social or political science:

A distinction can be made between positive and normative political analysis. The difference between them is mainly one of different purpose. Whereas positive analysis has a descriptive and explanatory purpose, normative analysis has an evaluative purpose. To be sure, normative analysis often relies on empirical

knowledge, such as knowledge of how existing institutions distribute benefits and burdens. And perceptions of what is right and what is wrong also sometimes affect political decision-making. Normative analysis thus often relies on empirical premises, and perceptions of right and wrong can have profound effects on institutional design or political decision-making. But whereas the purpose of an empirical analysis is description and explanation, the purpose of a normative analysis is to assess the degree to which particular institutions, practices or decisions can be defended, from a moral point of view. (Semb 2000:11-12)

There are two basic ways to begin the normative enterprise, one corresponding to the first approach discussed above in section 1.4.1, and the other corresponding, roughly, to the other three. The first way to begin a normative analysis of politics sees political theory as a philosophical discipline, and the other views political theory as an undertaking whose ultimate goal it is to describe how the way we structure our affairs today might be improved. In his book *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer makes this division the starting-point of his own philosophical analyses of basic political concepts such as justice and equality:

One way to begin the philosophical enterprise – perhaps the original way – is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for oneself (what can never be fashioned for ordinary men and women) an objective and universal standpoint. Then one describes the terrain of everyday life from far away, so that it loses its particular contours and takes on a general shape. But I mean to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground. Another way of doing philosophy is to interpret to one's fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share. Justice and equality can conceivably be worked out as philosophical artifacts, but a just or an egalitarian society cannot be. If such a society isn't already here – hidden, as it were, in our concepts and categories – we will never know it concretely or realize it in fact. (Walzer 1983:xiv)

Walzer's second approach to begin the philosophical or normative enterprise is, basically, an attempt to get away from potentially intractable philosophical debates, and instead focus on how to make the world we live in more characterised by justice and equality. In light of this, one commentator has suggested that a "successful normative analysis is one that provides us with the most accurate interpretation of a set of shared meanings of the phenomenon to be studied", and that it is an important task for the political theorist to "describe the practices

and institutions that relates to the subject matter, and, more importantly, to discern people's beliefs about those practices and institutions" (Semb 2000:13).

This points in the direction of a close alliance between political theory and social or political science. In order to improve the political arrangements by which we are surrounded, one must first know how these arrangements came about in the first place, how they are justified or grounded in various views about how our political affairs ought to be structured, and how and why our surroundings may come to approve or disapprove of suggestions for how to improve them. Only then could one begin to make normative arguments with a reasonable chance of success. Ultimately, one may be able to present a normative argument which goes all the way from a description of a political problem, via the formulation of how things ought to be and how things might be improved, to a successful implementation of a reform proposal which aims to repair the identified problems, and thereby actually improve the political system under which we live.

A particularly embarrassing problem in normative political theory is, however, the lack of any widely recognised standards of success for a given normative argument. It is therefore not much one can say, at least at a general level, about the 'methods' employed in political theory or philosophy (Kymlicka 2002:5-7). There is simply not at present a general agreement as to when a reasonable or rational person should be convinced by any one normative argument about how our political and social affairs ought to be structured (cf. Thorsen 2011a). Most of the efforts in political theory have consequently sought refuge within a larger political ideology or a tradition for normative political thought. Such traditions are in turn wrought with tacit assumptions often only discernible with great difficulty to the outsider, and often supplied with their own – often largely implicit – standards of argumentative excellence.

This state of the discipline could probably be traced back to the obstinately intractable problem of what truth-functional properties a normative sentence might take on. As for descriptive propositions, it seems implausible to claim that these could be completely indeterminate – they are, at least for all practical purposes, either true or false (cf. e.g. Taylor 1998). But in what sense could normative propositions be either true or false? In this question controversy has seeped in, making it an additional challenge to devise future methodological standards for political theory, or indeed for any type of normative enquiry, which would have a potential for becoming widely recognised (cf. Beauchamp 2001:57-98; Malnes 2001; Thorsen 2011a).

It could of course be claimed that normative, political analysis is a hollow practice, and that one instead could and should participate in more fulfilling or productive tasks. It is however likely that only few people would condone such a position, at least if they are genuinely interested in improving the political arrangements under which we live. Instead, normative enquiry and evaluation of political affairs is a common phenomenon, both in academic debates and outside them. I will therefore in this study not attempt to justify the whole enterprise that is political theory, which is a task that might easily reach quite deterring proportions (cf. though Vincent 2004; Smits 2009:1-17).

The most basic aim of normative political analysis is quite simply to modify and improve our preceding beliefs and intentions, by developing some of them further and discarding others. That way, one might be able to identify, establish, and defend values and principles which ought to guide our answers to questions relating to how society ought to be organised (Smits 2009:3-4). A primary assumption is that it is possible to resolve if not all, then at least some of the difficult problems and conflicts we tend to think of as moral or political, by way of calm and rational enquiry and deliberation (Thorsen 2011). The question as to when enough has been said in order to justify any given political institution or

arrangement remains, however, effectively in dispute. Instead, we must be contented with merely tentative methods and norms of argumentative success.

One such norm is of a formal nature and concerns itself with the mode of presentation of the normative theory we wish to describe and perhaps defend. A theory should be as complete as possible, in the sense that it does not leave vital parts of itself in the dark. Raino Malnes (2001) has suggested comprehensiveness and acuteness as virtues when it comes to presenting and systematising normative theories. This means, respectively, that as many ideas and arguments as possible which are relevant to the problem at hand are given due consideration, and that such relevant ideas and arguments are discussed in light of each other and according to their relative importance. In the study presented below, I will try to live up to these virtues because they are preconditions for clarity in any systematic enquiry, normative or otherwise, and that the flouting of these virtues seems necessarily to hurt all arguments by leaving natural questions unanswered. In this, they constitute a rudimentary methodology – a methodology that is unfinished, but inevitable if one is to make sense of normative political theory.

Another guiding norm which has gained some prominence in our day and age is constituted by the idea that an acceptable normative argument or theory should be in tune with our considered convictions or judgements about related matters. John Rawls, the modern instigator of this idea, has given this ideal the name “reflective equilibrium” (cf. Rawls 1971:46-53). The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines reflective equilibrium as a “state in which all one’s thoughts about a topic fit together; in which there are no loose ends or recalcitrant elements that do not cohere with an overall position” (Blackburn 2008). We naturally aim at greater levels of coherence in our beliefs, since holding contradictory or mutually exclusive beliefs would be intolerable for any person claiming to be rational. That any given normative theory coheres with our prior convictions and beliefs must, at least

tentatively, be considered as an argument in favour of that theory. Conversely, if a normative theory, ethical or political, conflicts with our preceding sense of right and wrong or our ‘moral intuitions’, that in itself is an indication that the theory ought to be revised or perhaps abandoned altogether (Audi 1997).

But moral and political theory should not, either, be in the business of judging theories solely on the degree to which they lend support to our considered convictions about what ought to take place, or how society ought to be organised. Instead, moral and political theory might be considered to be what Rawls (1971:49) calls a ‘Socratic’ mode of enquiry, in which influence between general theories and considered convictions, or tentative answers to isolated questions of a normative nature, runs both ways. We may therefore, on closer inspection, want to discard some of our considered convictions if they turn out to be inconsistent with a normative argument or theory we find particularly attractive. A state of reflective equilibrium is thus achieved whenever our normative theories and considered convictions have been modified in light of each other, so that the theory is now in tune with the considered convictions we have not yet discarded, and vice versa.

A central goal of moral and political theory may thus be described as the search for inconsistencies between the normative theories we (or perhaps someone else) adhere to, and our considered convictions about what ought to take place, or how society ought to be organised. If we find such inconsistencies, we may proceed to the next stage, in which we try to decide which beliefs we ought to modify in order to achieve a state of reflective equilibrium. We may start our discussion of an inconsistency with a ‘narrow reflective equilibrium’ as our goal, and discuss whether we should revise or reject the normative theory in question, or if we instead should revise or reject the preceding considered convictions of ours, which we find to be in conflict with that theory (cf. e.g. Kymlicka 2002:6).

We might however also aim at a state of affairs which is sometimes called ‘wide reflective equilibrium’, in which we also take into consideration various ‘background theories’ which may act as a standard to judge whether or not the normative theory in question is the best available theory (cf. Rawls 1974; Daniels 1979; 1996; 2011). Background theories form what one perhaps may describe as an elusive category, but they may for instance include basic theories which we take more or less for granted, such as theories of human nature or general theories about how human societies work. Such theories may be hard to make explicit, but if we rely on them, as we normally do, we have at least the outline of a procedure for deciding whether we should abandon or revise a normative theory in light of considered convictions which come into conflict with it, or whether we instead should revise those convictions in light of the theory we have formulated.

The answer is simply that we should prefer those normative theories and those isolated ideas of ours about what ought to take place which form a more or less harmonious body of thought together, and which at the same time fit together with our background theories about how human beings and human societies work. A state of ‘wide reflective equilibrium’ is thus achieved whenever we have rooted out the inconsistencies which may arise between normative theories and isolated convictions about what ought to take place on one hand, and between normative theories and various ‘background theories’ on the other. This is at least the beginning of a practical theory about which normative theories and convictions we should build our future policies on, and which of them we instead should abandon or revise (cf. especially Daniels 1996:333-352). But even if it is the beginning of a method for political theory, we are nevertheless some distance away from a method which gives us a straightforward procedure for how to do political theory in practical terms.

We may, however, delve even deeper into the matter if we consider what use we may have for a normative mode of enquiry such as political theory. Clearly, some of the problems

that are usually dealt with under the heading of normative political theory are more susceptible to the development of practical research methods than others. We may as political theorists for instance want to assess a given political arrangement in light of some – more or less settled – normative theory or conviction. If we then, for the time being at least, move past discussions of a more foundational or philosophical nature, we may move closer to a kind of political theory with a more limited and practical purpose. We may for instance put aside philosophical discussions of what democracy actually is or whether or not democratic decision procedures are better than its alternatives, and instead move on to more practical discussions, for instance of how some specific institution or practice might be made more democratic, in accordance with a settled or traditional conception of democracy.

In order for political theory to become more practical in this way, political theorists may need the assistance of the social sciences in the form of various types of empirical research, or they may want to use concepts and categories developed by empirically oriented social scientists. Political theory itself will, however, at the same time become a more applied research discipline aimed at the assessment of existing political institutions or policy arrangements. Political theory *of this kind* will still be a characteristically normative discipline within social science, but it will also form a joint venture with empirical social research (cf. Thorsen 2008; 2011).

Political theorists might even use normative questions at a greater level of detail as points of departure for empirical research of their own, in order to address and clarify the normative problem at hand. That way, they may move from normative discussions to empirical research, and back again, until they have reached a set of conclusions which are both of a normative and an empirical nature about the problems with which they are concerned. For instance, they may want to know how one can make society more democratic, or how one can develop better strategies for a sustainable development of human

societies. Potentially, this *kind* of more practical political theory may be guided by methodological standards – or at least ‘rules of thumb’ – to a greater degree, especially its more empirical components (cf. especially Lafferty 2002; cf. also Lafferty 1981; 2002a). At least, it would if we compared it with the kinds of political theory which are more preoccupied with the philosophical exploration and discussion of rather abstract political ideas and concepts.

1.4.3 The methods employed in this thesis

Alongside my work with this thesis, I have found it useful to reflect on who and what normative political theory is for, and what basic questions this field of enquiry is supposed to answer (cf. Thorsen 2008; 2011; 2011a; 2011b). Any type of normative political analysis undoubtedly rests on the assumption that critical evaluations of whole polities or individual policies make sense. It is therefore difficult to sustain the view that political theory is a field of research entirely divorced from practical politics, and from discussions of concrete proposals for political reform in the society in which the theorist lives.

The political theorist may ultimately serve as a mediator between social scientists who try to describe how society actually works on one hand, and moral philosophers who develop ideas about which principles ought to guide human actions on the other. The political theorist may also, however, serve as a mediator between academic debates in general, and politicians and the general public who decides which way society as a whole ought to structure itself, or how humanity ought to move forward into the future.

The present thesis does not start from scratch. Instead, it will focus its discussions around of the thoughts and theories of Berlin and Popper, whose theories I use as a point of departure, in order to make these theories more lucid and better suited to give answers to political problems of the twenty-first century. Hopefully, the thesis will become a politically relevant contribution to political theory which will give sound answers to its basic questions

(cf. section 1.2 above). It will hopefully not merely become a free-floating philosophical investigation of abstract theories and concepts, but rather a piece of normative political analysis which will successfully assess some more concrete views of how human societies ought to be organised, and develop some of these views further.

In my ambition to be politically relevant, and not lose myself in historical details and unwarranted abstractions, I have found it useful to reflect on Bernard Williams' distinction between the 'history of ideas' (akin to the kind of historically oriented political theory described above in section 1.4.1) and the 'history of philosophy', first outlined in his study of Descartes (Williams 1978; cf. also Williams 2006). The present study, especially the first four chapters, could favourably be perceived of as a contribution to what Williams there refers to as the 'history of philosophy'. It is, basically, an attempt to interpret and develop further the thoughts of other philosophers, rather than a purely historical and descriptive investigation. The study could therefore, on the whole, be thought of as an independent contribution to political theory. I am for this reason happy to employ Williams' words as a description of my own study of Berlin and Popper:

This is a study in the history of philosophy rather than in the history of ideas. I use those labels to mark the distinction that the history of ideas is history before it is philosophy, while with the history of philosophy it is the other way round. In any worthwhile work of either sort, both concerns are likely to be represented, but there is a genuine distinction. For the history of ideas, the question about a work what does it mean? is centrally the question what did it mean?, and the pursuit of that question moves horizontally in time from the work, as well as backwards, to establish the expectations, conventions, familiarities, in terms of which the author could have succeeded in conveying a meaning. (...) [W]hat we are moved to, as historians of ideas, is an historical enquiry, and the genre of the resulting work is unequivocally history. (...) The history of philosophy of course has to constitute its object, the work, in genuinely historical terms, yet there is a cut-off point, where authenticity is replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas. (...) [T]he new work is broadly of the same genre as the original. (Williams 1978:9-10)

The final part of this thesis will follow in the footsteps of the historical-cum-philosophical discussions displayed in the next four chapters. I will here present and assess a body of political ideas that are usually – but not always accurately – described as neoliberalism, which includes among other things the political and economic thoughts and theories of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick. In this, I will make use of my own interpretations of Berlin’s and Popper’s political theories in order to discuss critically some of the basic ideas of the group of theorists that are often gathered together under the heading of neoliberalism.

I will also, unfortunately merely in outline, employ Williams’ ‘history of philosophy’-approach combined with a version of Rawls’ and Daniels’ ‘wide reflective equilibrium’, when I in this part of the thesis try to compare neoliberal political theories with the liberal theories presented by Berlin and Popper, in order to see whether neoliberal policy recommendations will hold up to scrutiny, when viewed from the perspective of the kinds of liberal theories developed by Berlin and Popper. The ultimate aim of the thesis will therefore become, as mentioned above in section 1.2, to use Berlin’s and Popper’s political theories as a point of departure in order to construct the beginnings of what one may call a liberal alternative to neoliberalism, or a political theory which takes neoliberalism seriously as a genuine expression of liberalism, but which nevertheless emphasise other parts of the liberal tradition than the so-called neoliberals tend to do.

This approach clearly has both its strengths and its weaknesses. One of its strengths lies in the way in which its normative reflections are presented as an extension of interpretive debates about the political thought of Berlin and Popper, as well as existing and on-going debates in political theory about how one should view neoliberalism in light of other liberal theories. Another of its strengths lies in its ambition to formulate politically relevant answers to how, and in light of which principles and political ideas, one ought to go

about creating a better society in the future. Its weaknesses follows largely from the fact that it is a theoretical work about politics, and from the fact that political theory as a research discipline has very few and only – at best – sketchily developed methodological standards, which are readily available for consultation to researchers working within the discipline. Like the vast majority of other works in political theory, the present thesis therefore remains largely quiet about the methods employed, and tries instead to contribute more or less directly to on-going debates within political theory about how human societies and political systems ought to be organised, and how the political theories of individual thinkers ought to be interpreted.

From the viewpoint of traditional and empirical social science, which is used to viewing research methods as practical recipes or guidelines for how to do a specific type of empirical research, this may be viewed as a very serious weakness. It is, however, a weakness this thesis shares with the vast majority of research efforts in political theory. There are of course reasons why political theorists for the most part tend to remain quiet on the question of which methods they employ. It is, to employ John Rawls' term, a Socratic research discipline without settled methods, concerned mainly with a collaborative effort to answer quite general normative questions, and with critical discussions of possible answers to these questions.

Seen as a whole, the study has quite formidable exemplars in the works of Berlin and Popper themselves – in spite of the fact that neither of them ever wrote explicitly and systematically about the research methods they employed whenever they wrote essays and books about the political thought of others. They also tried to build on the thoughts of other philosophers, even if they were for the most part preoccupied with pointing out that these 'great men' often made 'great mistakes' (cf. Popper [1945] 1966:vii). In fact, almost all of their most important works in normative political theory consist mainly of philosophical and

polemical essays which tend to be built around historical analyses of other, older thinkers – as well as their often critical evaluation of well-established political theories.

Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a) consists for instance of a comprehensive critique of the political thought of Plato, Hegel, and Marx. They are considered by Popper to be among the greatest philosophers and theoretical sociologists to have ever lived, but also the perpetrators of momentous intellectual mistakes, and the instigators of surprisingly widespread misapprehensions. But even if his scathing indictments of the three thinkers have an immediate utility as a warning to future generations about what Popper perceives of as past errors, I consider his attempts to forge a broadly liberal and above all a democratic alternative to their theories – scattered throughout his books, essays, and lectures – as his most important contribution to political theory. The same approach, in which the author's own liberal theory is presented next to an extended critique of its alternatives, is also found in Berlin's many essays (cf. e.g. Berlin 1990; 2002). In them, an impressive inventory of theorists and philosophers are presented, often with the aim of contrasting them to Berlin's own perspectives in epistemology, ethics, and political theory.

For this reason, my line of attack is – in part at least – somewhat different compared to Berlin's and Popper's style of writing, in that I take as my point of departure arguments from philosophers whose overall theories are ones towards which I find myself mainly sympathetic. This is not to say, however, that I will remain uncritical of their political theories. It is, rather, my position that they have many significant things to say, but also that their arguments need elaboration and clarification if they are to hold up to closer scrutiny, and at the same time remain relevant in today's world and our close future.

PART I: ISAIAH BERLIN

2. Isaiah Berlin – pluralism, liberty, and realism

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will give an overview of Isaiah Berlin's philosophical and political ideas. I will start with pluralism, as it is the most fundamental of the ideas commonly associated with him. I will then move on to describe his ideas about positive and negative liberty, political realism, and practical problem-solving in politics. Finally, I will present some preliminary conclusions about the connection between pluralism and Berlin's political theories. The discussion leads up to a question: What, if any, political conclusions can be drawn from Berlin's pluralism?

The next chapter will deal more thoroughly with criticisms of Berlin's moral and political theories, as well as the broader implications of his political thought. The general idea behind this chapter and the next is that Berlin's pluralism provides us with premises for a moderate and liberal point of view, broadly construed as a political creed that permits several different specifications of itself. This creed is above all marked by a belief in liberal democracy, combined with a 'conservative' taste for incremental reform and a 'social-democratic' notion that individual liberty, power, and the resources needed to meet one's potential should be distributed evenly.

Berlin was most definitely a "fundamentally unsystematic" political philosopher (cf. Cherniss 2006:xxi). In part, this is due to his wide interests as well as his style of writing. More than occasionally, he sacrificed theoretical stringency for the sake of literary elegance and an appreciation of the complexities of human affairs. His essays are therefore often both lively and enlightening, but frequently also in need of elaboration and interpretation, especially on more technical and philosophical problems, which Berlin tended to address only fleetingly. It is also quite often necessary to read his essays closely if one is to discover Berlin's political recommendations, which are often given as brief asides in the text.

Berlin was not the kind of political theorist who tried to construct and defend a wide-ranging philosophical system. There is instead an inborn empiricism – described by Berlin as ‘deeply and uniquely English’ – ingrained in his somewhat scattered thoughts about politics and ethics. His empirical attitude was furthermore mixed with a sceptical ‘Russian’ fascination for radical political ideas, which led him to become a thoughtfully moderate voice in political theory. He was a philosopher who tried very hard to understand political thinkers with whom he disagreed, and to explain the specific nature of these disagreements. His defence of incrementalism and personal freedom was for this reason always combined with a strong word of warning against the authoritarian temptations which often lie at the end of abstract and far-reaching modes of political thought (Berlin 1998:255-9).

But even if he was not a very theoretical philosopher, his influence and presence is felt in many contemporary debates in ethical and political theory. At the same time, *just because* he was not as theoretically rigorous as many political philosophers are today, his works display a greater appreciation of the complexities of human life. For this reason, his works were often more directly relevant for politics when they first came out, at least compared with today’s academic political theory, and many of his essays remain so long after they were originally written.

There are two fundamental ideas which lie at the heart of Berlin’s thought, namely liberty and pluralism (Crowder 2004). Berlin started a debate about what ought to be meant by words such as liberty or freedom, which continues to this day (Miller 2006). His most famous essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, and its division between negative and positive liberty, is still the natural starting-point for this debate. Berlin did not, however, discuss his division between positive and negative liberty further, except only in passing. With his defence of what he called pluralism, he also made a lasting impact on debates in ethical

theory, and the political consequences of this way of thinking about morality is a recurring theme in many of his later essays.

In addition, Berlin's way of doing normative, political analysis is centred around a conception of *realism*; one simply cannot expect to be able to construct a politically relevant normative analysis of politics from theoretical premises alone, without the aid of concrete and locally embedded historical and sociological knowledge. At the same time, people who want to change the world for the better need to possess a quality he called political judgment, an elusive character trait without which any sustained political effort is almost certainly doomed to failure or to lose its way (Berlin 1996; Hanley 2004).

Berlin also advises against the view that political theory should conclude in any sort of detailed guideline for how to organise every aspect of society, or how to make society perfect. But all-out relativism will not do, either. Instead, political theory should help to establish and maintain an 'uneasy equilibrium' between competing ends and considerations which we ought to uphold. Viewed in this way, morally sound political thought and relevant political action are activities which ought to inform one another. These activities should not be thought of as entirely separate from each other; political action is not entirely exempted from moral scrutiny, and political theory should not take up residence in cloud-cuckoo-land.

2.2 Pluralism

The idea perhaps most commonly associated with Berlin is *pluralism*. For Berlin, pluralism was primarily a name for his own perspective in ethics, which from the viewpoint of more traditional ethical theory must come across as a relatively eclectic position. In philosophy today, however, pluralism is mostly used as a common name for "any doctrine which maintains that there are ultimately many things, or many kinds of thing" (Craig 1998:463, cf. also Hall 1968; Rorty 1990; Rescher 1993; McLennan 1995). The word 'pluralism' is

therefore a term with a rather nebulous denotation, and one is consequently often in need of a more specific name for Berlin's ethical theory than the one he used himself.

It has therefore become more widespread to add a qualifying word, as in terms such as 'ethical pluralism' or 'value pluralism', in order to distinguish Berlin's theory from other and often quite different theories which are also commonly called pluralism (cf. Gray 1995; Crowder 2002; Galston 2002). The tendency to separate clearly between Berlin's pluralism and other theories called pluralism might however put up an artificial boundary between closely related systems of thought. Instead, I suggest here that other 'pluralisms' might in some instances serve as a background for a deeper understanding of Berlin's ethical pluralism, as well as its political implications.

It is more than likely that Berlin deliberately employed a known term when he described his take on ethics quite simply as pluralism. When *Two Concepts of Liberty* appeared in 1958, in which Berlin for the first time outlined his ethical theory at any greater level of detail, 'pluralism' was already a familiar concept in philosophy and political theory. It was usually employed to describe at least two rather prominent currents of thought, namely metaphysical and political pluralism. Perhaps Berlin even wanted his ethical ideas to be associated with these other theories? There is certainly common ground between Berlin's pluralism and these other types of theories called pluralism, in that they all claim that the world is more complicated than some people think.

Berlin's pluralism basically claims that all the ideals and values we ought to maintain does not fit together quite as easily as one could want them to. Instead, Berlin claims that moral conflict is an ineradicable part of any human existence. In fact, Berlin states that the awareness of conflicts between values or goals competing for our attention is the starting-point of political and moral philosophy. If not ends collided, there would surely be little need for political and moral theory – the questions usually asked in these fields of enquiry would

be either completely unintelligible or quickly reduced to problems of a ‘technical’ nature, which experts or computers could resolve for us (Berlin 1961; 2002:166-217).

But perceived conflicts between ends is one thing, and ineradicable disagreement quite another. Might it not be the case that the apparent pluralism of ends is a temporary predicament which will wither away soon enough? Might not all our political and moral problems in the end dissolve as our understanding of the world and our place within it increases? Might not ever more careful analysis in the end transform moral and political philosophy into a ‘scientific’ discussion of means, as opposed to a ‘philosophical’ or ‘political’ debate about different ends?

The crucial turning point in Berlin’s analysis is that he develops value pluralism into a perspective on the nature of morality. Berlin believes that there will always be several different considerations pulling us in different directions. While this is a very strong proposition which has been controversial among moral philosophers, Berlin does not try to defend it. Instead, he treats it merely as a piece of common sense he does not care to examine critically, and which he uses as a point of departure for discussions about what we ought to do. Berlin’s value pluralism thus becomes an alternative to those theories which assume that all our problems and questions might in the end be supplied with one – and only one – correct answer, other answers being necessarily false (Berlin 1990:1-19). It is also, moreover, an alternative to theories such as moral relativism and scepticism, which claim that it does not really matter all that much which answers we give to pressing normative questions, and which answers we reject out of hand (cf. Berlin 2000:1-23).

2.2.1 What is value pluralism?

But what exactly is value pluralism? George Crowder (2002:2) defines it as a theory of philosophical ethics which states “*that fundamental human values are irreducibly plural and ‘incommensurable’, and that they may, and often do, come into conflict with one another,*

leaving us with hard choices.” Compact as this sentence may be, it declares that value pluralism makes four distinct claims about morality and the nature of normative reasoning.

First, and perhaps most importantly, value pluralism acknowledges that there are certain values whose pursuit is part of what Berlin identifies as the ‘essence of humanity’ or ‘the human horizon’. That is, the pursuit of these values is an integral part of what it means to be human. If a human being shows no interest whatsoever in for instance liberty, equality, friendship, or justice, would she strike us as being just as much a real person as the rest of us? Would not such a person rather come across as a sleep-walker resembling a human being on the surface, but at the same time wanting a certain inner humanity?

These ‘fundamental human values’ are furthermore considered *objective* in the sense that they represent something of value regardless of what status they are accorded by individuals or particular cultures and societies. Value pluralism is, for this reason, opposed to moral relativism and scepticism, which in one way or another deny the existence of such objective values (Mackie 1977; Harman 1996). In Berlin’s short intellectual autobiography, *My Intellectual Path* (Berlin 2000:1-23), he states that value pluralism does not entail relativism, as some critics would have it (e.g. Podhoretz 1999), but rather that it is directly opposed to it. Human values are under Berlin’s understanding of them delimited by what he elsewhere calls ‘the human horizon’ (cf. especially Crowder and Hardy 2007:293-297). He emphatically claims that there is a limit to which ends humans may pursue and remain human, and therefore also a limit to which values may be deemed objective:

I think these values are objective – that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given. The fact that men are men and women are women and not dogs or cats or tables or chairs is an objective fact, and part of this objective fact is that there are certain values, and only those values, which men, while remaining men, can pursue. If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value-system which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common values – for all human beings must

have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do. *That is why pluralism is not relativism – the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity, rather than arbitrary creations of men’s subjective fancies.* Nevertheless, of course, if I pursue one set of values I may detest another, and may think it is damaging to the only form of life that I am able to live or tolerate, for myself and others; in which case I may attack it, I may even – in extreme cases – have to go to war against it. But I still recognise it as a human pursuit. (Berlin 2000:12, emphasis added)

The second claim value pluralism makes is that these objective values are irreducibly plural, in the sense that they cannot be collapsed into one another until one is left with only one ultimate or paramount end, such as happiness or welfare, as Aristotle and Bentham claimed. This is a rejection of the assertion, found both in ancient Greek and mediaeval Western philosophy that ‘The Good’ is a single, unified phenomenon, and that there in fact exists a *summum bonum*, or ‘the highest good’, to which all other ‘goods’ are subordinate (cf. Lamprecht 1920a:562). The claim that there is only one most ultimate end, which overrides all others, is by Berlin described as ‘monism’. Monism and relativism are the opposite numbers of pluralism, in that they both deny one of the most central claims of value pluralism. But while Berlin does not take relativism at all seriously, and considers it to be a position with almost no plausibility whatsoever, he is all the more serious when it comes to arguing against value monism in ethics:

The enemy of pluralism is monism – the ancient belief that there is a single harmony of truths into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit. The consequence of this belief (which is something different from, but akin to, what Karl Popper called essentialism – to him the root of all evil) is that those who know should command those who do not. Those who know the answers to some of the great problems of mankind must be obeyed, for they alone know how society should be organised, how individual lives should be lived, how culture should be developed. This is the old Platonic belief in the philosopher-kings, who were entitled to give orders to others. There have always been thinkers who hold that if only scientists, or scientifically trained persons, could be put in charge of things, the world would be vastly improved. To this I have to say that no better excuse, or even reason, has ever been propounded for unlimited despotism on the part of an élite which robs the majority of its essential liberties. (Berlin 2000:14)

The third claim value pluralism makes, still according to Crowder, is that these plural and objective values are in some instances incommensurable with each other, as they cannot be ranked, *in the abstract*, according to one common measure or principle. The exact nature of this incommensurability is, however, a dividing issue among theorists concerned with value pluralism. Berlin himself employs this concept, originally taken from mathematics, only fleetingly and not without a certain degree of recklessness. In so doing, he leaves much room for diverging interpretations of value pluralism and its consequences (Seung and Bonevac 1992; Crowder 2002:49-54; cf. also Levi 1986; Stocker 1990; Richardson 1994).

John Gray (1995) and John Kekes (1993) suggests, for instance, that incommensurability ought to be understood as a strict form of *incomparability* between values, and consequently that we rarely have any good reasons for choosing one value over another, when and if they come into conflict with each other:

The basic idea of incommensurability is that there are some things so unlike as to exclude any reasonable comparison among them. Square roots and insults, smells and canasta, migrating birds and X-ray seem to exclude any common yardstick by which we could evaluate their respective merits and demerits. That this is so is not usually troublesome because the need to compare them rarely arises. But it is otherwise with values. It often happens that we want to enjoy incompatible values, and so it becomes important to compare them in order to be able to choose among them in a reasonable manner. If, however, incompatible values are also incommensurable, then reasonable comparisons between them become problematic. (Kekes 1993:21)

What Kekes is effectively saying, is that whenever conflicts between two ends or values arise, values which have been declared equally objective and fundamental, there is no way of resolving the conflict: One is forced to ‘plump’ for one or the other solution, without any good reasons to support the decision made. It is interesting, however, to observe that this kind of ‘plumping’ is actually criticised by Berlin, as an illustration of the abdication of reason, and of reasoned choice between competing ends. It may be that some choices between values are troublesome and ‘tragic’, and that they make this kind of ‘plumping’ occasionally unavoidable, but it seems exaggerated, to me at least, to suggest that all choices

between ultimate values are so intractable that they warrant the kind of blind *Dezisionismus* which Gray and Kekes seem to indicate (cf. Lukes and Berlin 1992; Hardy 2004).

Crowder (2002:49-54), on the other hand, suggests instead that incommensurability between values ought not always to be viewed in this manner. Instead, he argues in favour of a more relaxed understanding, under which it is merely thought that some values are ‘unrankable in the abstract’, but not necessarily so in every particular instance of a choice between values. This is, as it turns out, a perspective which Crowder develops after having been reproached by Berlin and Bernard Williams for having articulated attitudes similar to those of Gray and Kekes. The critique levelled by Berlin and Williams against Crowder’s initial argument is therefore applicable to Gray and Kekes as well:

In his talk of ‘underdetermination by reason’, Crowder seems unsure which of two quite different views about potentially conflicting values he is ascribing to the pluralist: that it is not a requirement of reason that there should be one value which in all cases prevails over the other; or that in each particular case, reason has nothing to say (i.e. there is nothing reasonable to be said) about which should prevail over the other. Pluralists – we pluralists, at any rate – see the first of these views as obviously true, and the second as obviously false. (Berlin and Williams 1994:307)

Berlin and Williams are in effect saying that a pluralist must admit a certain amount of case-by-case reasoning into his way of thinking about morality (cf. especially James 1891:341-354). Values cannot be ranked ‘lexically’ or in the abstract, at least not without a sense of genuine loss (cf. Rawls 1971:42-44; 1993:197-199), but there may be considerations arising from the particular situation in question, which warrant the reasoned choice of one value over its possible alternatives:

The kind of ranking that becomes a problem because of incommensurability is *abstract* ranking, or ranking irrespective of context. (...) Impartial justice may be an overriding principle for a trial judge but not for someone with a friend in trouble. (...) Value incommensurability seems to imply a particularist approach to ethics, one that requires us to decide value-related questions by attending to the particular circumstances of the case rather than to the guidance of abstract rules. (Crowder 2002:53; cf. also Williams 1978a; 1979; 1985)

Fourth, it is said that values are sometimes incompatible with each other. By this it is meant that the values which have already been deemed as objective, irreducibly many, and sometimes ‘incommensurable’, are also in some cases in a state of “perpetual rivalry with one another” (Berlin 2002:216). This feature of value pluralism issues in a particular way of doing political and moral philosophy, in which perfect or ideal solutions are thought of as ‘conceptually incoherent’, and that the solutions we do come up with are, at their very best, temporary and provisional:

Liberty and equality, spontaneity and security, happiness and knowledge, mercy and justice – all these are ultimate human values, sought for themselves alone; yet when they are incompatible, they cannot all be attained, choices must be made, sometimes tragic losses accepted in the pursuit of some preferred ultimate end. But if, as I believe, this is not merely empirically but conceptually true – that is, derived from the very conception of these values – then the very idea of a perfect world in which all good things are realised is incomprehensible, is in fact conceptually incoherent. And if this is so, and I cannot see how it could be otherwise, then the very notion of the ideal world, for which no sacrifice can be too great, vanishes from view (Berlin 2000:23)

2.2.2 Value pluralism before Berlin

After his initial formulation of ethical pluralism in published form, in his two articles *Equality* and *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Berlin 1956; 1958), Berlin put down a significant portion of his research efforts in the history of ideas into tracing the origins of his perspectives on morality. What he found was an astonishing collection of notables from the history of political and ethical thought, including Machiavelli, Montesquieu and John Stuart Mill, whom under Berlin’s reading become value pluralists *in spe*, or theorists moving towards, but not completely reaching, an outright value pluralist conclusion (Berlin 1979:25-79, 130-161; 2002:218-251). He also finds ancestry to his own theory in the thinkers he collectively denotes as the ‘Counter-Enlightenment’, the critics of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment, among which Vico, Hamann, and Herder are counted among the most important contributors (Berlin 1979:1-24; 2000).

There is however also a third group of precursors to Berlin's pluralism, and one that Berlin does not acknowledge in his works, which constitute the most accurate anticipation of his theory. Most notable among these are Sterling Lamprecht (1920; 1920a; 1921) and A. P. Brogan (1931), who anticipate Berlin's theory and vocabulary to an astonishing degree. Other, less precise, but perhaps better known forerunners include William James (1891; 1897), John Dewey (cf. especially 1908; 1921; 1927) and Max Weber ([1917] 1982, [1919] 1992; [1919] 1992a). It is of course possible, and even likely, that all three developed their theories independently of each other, as neither Brogan nor Berlin acknowledge Lamprecht's earlier articles, but it remains that the three authors share extraordinary similarities in vocabulary and substance.

Berlin supports the claim that he was unaware of Lamprecht and Brogan's work when he in a letter to his friend Jean Floud stated that pluralism was "[t]he only truth which I have ever found out for myself"¹. But of course one cannot preclude in a definite way the possibility that Berlin read either Brogan or Lamprecht at an early stage and then later forgot about them:

Berlin provided his own (somewhat peculiar) genealogy of pluralism. He traced the rebellion against monism first to Machiavelli, and depicted Vico and Herder as decisive figures. Yet he acknowledged that Machiavelli wasn't really a pluralist, but a dualist; and other scholars have questioned his identification of Vico and Herder as pluralists, when both avowed belief in a higher, divine or mystical, unity behind variety. (...) Ethical pluralism first emerged under that name, however, in America, inspired by William James's pluralistic view of the universe. John Dewey and Hastings Rashdall both approximated pluralism in certain writings (Dewey 1908, Rashdall 1907); but pluralism was apparently first proposed, under that name, and as a specifically ethical doctrine, in language strikingly similar to Berlin's, by Sterling Lamprecht, a naturalist philosopher and scholar of Hobbes and Locke in several articles (e.g., 1920, 1921), as well as, somewhat later, by A. P. Brogan (1931). The dramatic similarities between not only Berlin and Lamprecht's ideas, but also their language, makes it difficult to believe that Lamprecht was not an influence on Berlin.

¹ Letter from Isaiah Berlin to Jean Floud dated 5.7.68, quoted in Ignatieff (1998:246).

However, there is no evidence that Berlin knew Lamprecht's work; and Berlin's tendency was more often to credit his own ideas to others than to claim the work of others as his own. (Cherniss and Hardy 2006)

Regardless of whether he ever read Lamprecht's three essays or Brogan's single article and later forgot it or not, there is more than considerable overlap between the ethical theories of the three authors. Due to this fact, I find it fruitful to view them as complementary theorists of value pluralism, in which Berlin's broader historical and conceptual analyses adds texture to the sketchier, but perhaps at places more systematic theory of value pluralism supplied by Lamprecht and Brogan.

Lamprecht, the earliest of these three authors, develops his 'ethical pluralism' primarily on the foundations laid out by William James' 'epistemic pluralism', combined with a growing disenchantment with various attempts to reduce all human morality into one and only one supreme maxim or value. What he rebels against is not "pragmatism in any of its positive doctrines", but rather what he describes as "an unfortunate one-sidedness" in its tendency to value 'control' or 'intelligent action' above everything else (Lamprecht 1920:513; cf. also Dewey 1918; Ryan 1995). Instead, he concludes, "[l]ife gains its meaning and its value only because through its course men can achieve a multitude of goods which not only lead on to further consequences, but are in themselves a joy and a delight" (ibid.).

This emerging uneasiness with value monism, and in particular its tendency to push the complexities of human existence into a rigid, theoretical scheme, is developed by Lamprecht into an alternative theory of morality in two subsequent articles (Lamprecht 1920a; 1921). Lamprecht's pluralism has thus two distinctive origins. One is the pragmatic view of 'the pluralistic universe' in which "the impossibility of finding any one metaphysical formula which will fit all reality" is acknowledged (Lamprecht 1920a:561; cf. James 1909). The other is what he thinks of as a pre-theoretical and 'common-sense' view of morality:

To the naïve mind, not yet befuddled by the intricacies of academic controversies over ethical theory, the moral life would surely not seem one simple path outside of which all else was bad, nor would the distinction between good and bad, or between right and wrong, seem sharp and exact. The moral life seems to be confronted with alternative possibilities of development towards different and sometimes inconsistent goods; it is full of dilemmas, ambiguities, loose ends, irresolvable choices. (Lamprecht 1920a:562)

To Lamprecht, pluralism leads directly to an endorsement of personal freedom for everyone: “When we make our supreme choice [between conflicting values], we must, in so far as possible, without endangering all such choices, be willing to let others make theirs” (Lamprecht 1920a:566). In other words, he shares Berlin’s view that ethical pluralism entails a measure of negative liberty for all. His second article culminates on a note characterised by a cautious optimism, if we replace the ‘absolutism’ of unexamined traditions and conventional moral theorising with a more ‘scientific approach’ which “would enable us to retain our standards without becoming bigoted, to learn to compromise when compromise alone is the highest morality” (Lamprecht 1920a:572; cf. Berlin 2002:212-217).

Lamprecht (1921) does not, however, explicitly align his pluralism with any detailed set of political beliefs, even if he lets his very favourable attitudes towards the then newly formed League of Nations shine through in his article. The ‘political implications’ he sees coming from his pluralism are not implications on the level of individual problems in practical policy-making, but rather a vague preference for provisional, broad compromises over struggle and discord. For Lamprecht, moderation and prudence are among the most important guiding lights in politics and political theory. The first principle for sound political thought and action is that one should not insist on the unshakable truth of one’s own prejudices. Instead, Lamprecht begs us to adopt a more cautious and compromise-friendly attitude in political deliberations.

There is, in addition, another precise anticipation of value pluralism in a single article by A. P. Brogan (1931), which captures some of the most central features of the pluralistic

disillusionment with ethical theory. Brogan's contribution to the overall theory of value pluralism is that he is the first to clearly distinguish pluralism from its alternatives, which he calls 'objective monism' and 'subjective pluralism', and which could be identified as value monism and ethical relativism:

[B]oth the objective monist and the subjective pluralist offer you suspiciously easy and dogmatic doctrines. What you are asked to believe is just one sentence, though to be sure it is usually a different sentence for each philosopher. They say that the highest good is so and so, that goodness is pleasure or what not, that value is whatever you think or feel it is. As soon as this one sentence has been settled, all fundamental problems about value are supposed to be solved. Even if there were no fallacies back of the proofs for all of this, would it not seem too easy to be a plausible account of our complex world? At any rate it is to be confessed that an objective pluralism will be more difficult. It will call in all of the possible methods of analysis, including psychology and the modern logic of relations. It will study human valuations patiently and empirically, using not only the traditional statistical methods but also newer and more fruitful methods. It will perhaps seem more slow, but it will ultimately seem more sure, than the traditional methods. (Brogan 1931:295)

It seems, therefore, that Berlin was not the first to work out a pluralistic theory about morality and fundamental human values. He does, however, supply this theory with some further reflections, and a richer historical narrative, describing its antecedents in early modern thought. Together with Lamprecht and Brogan, Berlin forms an 'inner core' of theorists advocating value pluralism.

Today, value pluralism is perhaps not quite as unusual or novel as it was in the days of Lamprecht and Brogan. One might even claim that pluralism is a natural part of what one might designate as a sort of fuzzy, eclectic centre of ethical theory, together with for instance other moderating tendencies within more traditional perspectives, such as 'broad consequentialism' and 'broad deontology' (cf. Sen 2000). What pluralism shares with these other perspectives is, most prominently, the belief that no single consideration or simple algorithm might solve any conceivable moral problem or dilemma. These eclectic and intermediary positions all share a common ground which is not shared by what Sen not

entirely without bias calls ‘narrower’ conceptions of morality. In essence, the growth of pluralism and related perspectives in ethics contribute to increased realism and therefore also to the increased impact of philosophical ethics on everyday moral and political debates.

2.2.3 Philosophical pluralism

Does Berlin’s pluralism stop at value pluralism, as that theory has been described above, or could his perspectives on ethics be viewed more fruitfully as part of a broader and more general pluralistic outlook? Berlin was, naturally, aware of other uses of the term ‘pluralism’, for instance in the quite general and ‘metaphysical’ sense, in which ‘pluralism’ describes the belief that there exists a plurality of different ‘things’ or ‘substances’, as opposed to monism, defined as the belief that only one substance, or kind of substance, exists (Hall 1968; Hamlyn 1984:109-112). This metaphysical pluralism is perhaps most memorably expressed by William James in his Hibbert Lectures, held at the University of Oxford in 1908 and 1909, and later published in his book *A Pluralistic Universe*:

Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely ‘external’ environment of some sort or amount. Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. ‘Ever not quite’ has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.

(James 1909:321-322)

There is, according to metaphysical pluralists like James a misplaced desire for unity and order in much of the ideas and theories produced by mankind. Especially philosophers and scientists who hunger for an orderly and uncomplicated world in which everything makes perfect sense, and in which everything is somehow connected with everything else, have a tendency to oversimplify matters. It is perhaps a natural desire to want to view the world as an orderly place, but this inclination might lead us to accept unwarranted abstractions and

generalisations, as well as duplicitous ‘grand theories’ or ‘ultimate solutions’ to the problems plaguing mankind.

It is indeed likely that Berlin was aware of, and perhaps even drew on parts of this tradition of philosophical or metaphysical pluralism when he gave his views in moral theory the name ‘pluralism’ rather than something entirely different. Berlin wrote only a handful of philosophical essays which were not in some way had moral or political philosophy as the main focus, and did not in any of his published texts give any sort of detailed discussions of purely metaphysical problems. He did however espouse a general “anti-reductionist, anti-simplifying attitude” whenever his discussions touched on issues from other fields of philosophy (Williams 1978:xviii), for instance in his essay *Logical Translation* (Berlin 1978:56-80), or in essays discussing topics from the philosophy of social science, such as *The Concept of Scientific History* (Berlin 1978:103-142). It might even be said that the kind of unreasonable, Utopian rationalism which Berlin criticises in several of his more famous essays is just as much a criticism of monism in metaphysics and epistemology as it is a denunciation of monism in ethics and politics (cf. e.g. Berlin 1990:20ff; 2002:166-217).

Taken together with the ‘political’ pluralism discussed in the next section below, it is likely that ‘metaphysical’ pluralism form a frame of reference which would have been readily available for Berlin, and which Berlin might have even alluded to when he discussed his perspectives on morality under the heading of pluralism. Pluralism would have been a familiar term when Berlin first developed his value pluralism, and Berlin could have easily emphasised more clearly the distinctions between his theory and other ‘pluralisms’ – if that was something he wished to do. Instead, Berlin’s version of ethical pluralism sits well within a more general pluralism, and that metaphysical and ethical pluralism is a product of a common ‘temperament’ emphasising a cautious empiricism against a more idealistic

approach to philosophy and the study of the world and mankind (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska 2006:119ff).

2.2.4 Political pluralism

Berlin must also have been aware of the fact that he was using a term which was and is relatively widely circulated in political theory, as a name for certain views advocating decentralisation and diversification of economic and political processes. In essence, the political pluralist will claim is that there ought to be several sources of political authority and economic power, and not just one. In light of that conviction, he will claim that there ought to be room for voluntary associations freely formed by individual citizens working together in order to realise a common goal, and not just one, all-powerful state, or only one way of organising the economy, for instance an all-encompassing market economy.

This type of ‘political pluralism’ was in fact a quite common perspective among several influential political philosophers during the first half of the twentieth century. In Britain we find that socialist political theorists such as Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole, who were perhaps the best known figures of British political thought in Berlin’s youth, held views which are often described as forms of political pluralism (cf. Hirst 1989; Stears 2002). It is however the American political scientist and theorist Robert A. Dahl who most clearly defines “the fundamental axiom” of political pluralism, in its most general sense:

Instead of a single center of sovereign power there must be multiple centers of power, none of which is or can be wholly sovereign. Although the only legitimate sovereign is the people, (...) even the people ought never to be an absolute sovereign; consequently no part of the people, such as a majority, ought to be absolutely sovereign. (Dahl 1967:24)

Used in this ‘political’ sense, pluralism could basically be thought of as the view that political and economic power ought to be devolved to, and divided between, several independent organisations and branches of government. As a reference book indicates,

political pluralism makes six “general propositions” which are “integral to the political theory of pluralism”:

(1) individual fulfilment is assured by small government units, for they alone are representative; (2) the unrepresentative exercise of governmental power is frustrated when public agencies are geographically dispersed; (3) society is composed of a variety independent religious, cultural, educational, professional and economic associations; (4) these private associations are voluntary insofar as no individual is ever wholly affiliated with any one of them; (5) public policy accepted as binding on all associations is the result of their own free interaction; and (6) public government is obliged to discern and act only upon the common denominator of group concurrence. (Kariel 1968:164)

Political pluralism took, at least in academic circles, roots in the United States, and was most prominently expounded by liberal theorists such as John Dewey, who imported some of their attitudes against unitary sovereignty from British political thought (cf. Dewey 1927; Nicholls 1974). Later still, pluralist ideas of decentralisation and diversification have been elaborated by Dahl in several of his books about democracy (e.g. 1956; 1971; 1985; 1986; 1989). In recent times, the interconnections between political and ethical pluralism have been emphasised by William Galston, who sees Berlin’s defence of negative liberty and value pluralism as two of the three main ‘sources of liberal pluralism’ alongside political pluralism (Galston 1999; 2002; 2005). Another proponent of political pluralism, and one who also quite closely approximate Berlin’s moral pluralism, is Michael Walzer (1983; 1990; 2005), who has continued the liberal and social-democratic tradition of political pluralism from Dewey and Dahl.

It is not entirely clear whether or not Berlin alluded to this tradition within political theory, when he in *Two Concepts of Liberty* and later works describing his own theories and perspectives on politics and ethics as a form of ‘pluralism’. It is more than likely, however, that Berlin knew very well that ‘pluralism’ was a concept which already had a fairly specific meaning in political theory. It should be noted, moreover, that Berlin operates more or less seamlessly between political and moral theory, and that one possible interpretation of *Two*

Concepts is that he alluded to political pluralism as well as value pluralism. In conclusion, one might say that his theory of value pluralism is distinct from political pluralism, but certainly not in contradiction with it. One might even make a strong case, given Berlin's outspoken anti-authoritarianism and his strong emphasis on personal freedom, for the view that value pluralism not only entails a measure of negative liberty and an opposition to authoritarianism, but that it also indirectly supports the more positive view that society ought to be organised along the lines laid out by political pluralism.

2.3 Liberty, realism and the uneasy equilibrium

2.3.1 Positive and negative liberty

In political theory, Berlin's most influential idea is his view that there are two opposing concepts of liberty at work in many political debates. In an early essay, he portrays one concept of liberty which is typically 'liberal', and another which is 'romantic' in its nature and modern origins (Berlin 2006:155-207). The liberal concept of liberty focuses on the relationship between individuals and political and economic authorities, and describes liberty as the absence of restraints on the individual. A person is free if she is not hindered by other human beings or the various institutions they have set up. The romantic concept of liberty, on the other hand, depicts liberty as the ability a person has to manage her own life, and to actually succeed in controlling her external environment, often in concert with other members of some collective entity to which she belongs. Interestingly, the collective and positive conception of freedom is also often a centrepiece of many otherwise different anti-liberal and totalitarian ideologies (cf. Holmes 1993; Sørensen 2010). In *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin sets out to distinguish more clearly between this liberal and *negative* conception of liberty and the more romantic and *positive* account (Berlin 2002:166-217):

The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may, on the face

of it, seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other – no more than negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing. Yet the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions, not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other. (Berlin 2002:178-9)

The realisation that there are several possible and potentially competing conceptions of political liberty was initially developed by liberal theorists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Most prominent among these is perhaps Benjamin Constant, who with his lecture, *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes*, differentiated an ‘ancient’ form of liberty from a ‘modern’ one, which to some extent coincides with Berlin’s account of positive and negative liberty (Constant 1819; 1988:309-328). One could, perhaps, perceive of Berlin’s arguments as a generalised, conceptual analysis building on the same basic categorisation put forward by Constant. The ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ conceptions of political and personal freedom is therefore in some ways the very basis for Berlin’s more general account of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ liberty:

In the ancient world, particularly among the Greeks, to be free was to be able to participate in the government of one’s city. The laws were valid only if one had had the right to take part in making and unmaking them. To be free was not to be forced to obey laws made by others *for* one, but not *by* one. This kind of democracy entailed that government and laws could penetrate into every province of life. (...) In the modern world (...) we proceed on the assumption that there is a frontier between public and private life; and that, however small the private sphere may be, within it I can do as I please – live as I like, believe what I want, say what I please – provided this does not interfere with the similar rights of others, or undermine the order which makes this kind of arrangement possible. This is the classical liberal view, in whole or part expressed in various declarations of the rights of man in America and France, and in the writings of men like Locke, Voltaire, Tom Paine, Constant and John Stuart Mill. (Berlin 2002:283-284)

Negative liberty is thus understood as *freedom from* coercion. It is a concept of liberty which defines it negatively as the nonattendance of man-made obstacles in the lives of individual human beings. This is at the same time what makes the notion of negative liberty a *liberal* conception of liberty, as negative liberty would demand that the state limits itself as well as

other entities from entering a more or less clearly defined ‘private’ area in the lives of its individual citizens. Positive liberty is, on the other hand, *freedom to* do or become whatever one wants to. Liberty is defined positively as the occurrence of a state of affairs in which a person is ‘his own master’. The notion of positive liberty is intimately linked to the concept of autonomy, in the sense most closely related to its Greek origins, as the ability one has to give oneself the laws which one is obliged to uphold and abide by (from *αὐτόνομος*, meaning ‘self-legislating’ or ‘independent’ (cf. Liddell and Scott 1891:117)):

The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s, acts of will. (...) I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realise that it is not. (Berlin 2002:178)

As long as this relatively benign conception of positive liberty is maintained, it is, under Berlin’s understanding of it, a reasonable conception of liberty, which is to be counted among fundamental human values right alongside its negative opposite number. The problems arise, however, when the prospect of ‘self-mastery’ is bent out of shape because it is thought that ‘real’ or ‘true’ liberty consists of a ‘higher self’ defeating the ‘empirical self’ and imposing its will on the whole organism. This positive concept of liberty is especially dangerous if society as a whole is thought of as an organism, as several prominent political thinkers have suggested it should. This notion is found prominently in Plato’s *Nόμοι* (“The Laws”), where he describes the disorderly city as being at war with itself, between its higher purpose and the multitude of interests put forward by its individual citizens. The good, well-ordered, and liberated city is therefore one which is able to procure a “victory of oneself over oneself” (cf. Plato 1980, e.g. 626e). This idea has been elaborated by Berlin in *Two Concepts*:

[T]he real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual (as the term is normally understood), as a social 'whole' of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a Church, a State, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn. This entity is then identified as being the 'true' self which, by imposing its collective, or 'organic', single will upon its recalcitrant 'members', achieves its own, and therefore their, 'higher' freedom. (Berlin 2002:178)

Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self. (Berlin 2002:180)

Positive liberty is, according to Berlin's account of it, more easily subverted into its opposite than the negative conception of freedom. It is therefore potentially authoritarian, and may be used, as it has been in the past, to legitimise massive government repression. In its stead, Berlin suggests that 'a measure of negative liberty' should lie at the heart of any conception of the relationship between man and society deserving the name of freedom. Human well-being and happiness may very well be dependent upon a sense of self-mastery, and mastery of one's external environment. Nevertheless, negative liberty ought not to be sacrificed entirely in order to achieve a further increase in positive liberty. This is especially the case if one's understanding of positive liberty rests on the view that the true recipient of liberty is a group of people, like a nation or a class, and not the individual members of such groups.

That is also why Berlin's conceptual divide casts a ray of light over modern politics: Because authoritarian movements and governments – both to the left and to the right – often build on a warped conception of positive liberty, they can claim to promote 'real' or 'material' liberty while at the same time abolishing 'licentiousness' or 'bourgeois freedoms'. It is entirely possible to erect a totalitarian state even in the name of liberty itself. This is also Berlin's most important word of warning, that we must not sacrifice too much of our liberty, negatively understood, in order to achieve a sense of self-mastery over our common destiny.

With an exclusively positive understanding of what liberty is, however, we will always stand the risk of destroying liberty for liberty's sake. This risk will only decrease if we keep in mind that liberty also has a negative and individual component, and that liberty also consists of admitting others the right to be left alone, at least to some extent.

This does not mean, however, that Berlin did not see positive liberty as a fundamental value alongside other values such as negative liberty, equality, justice, and happiness. His defence of 'a measure of negative liberty' against the potentially authoritarian interpretation of positive liberty should not be interpreted as an endorsement of *laissez-faire* economic policies. Instead, his defence of negative liberty should be read in light of his pluralism. Any conception of personal freedom which remains true to Berlin's pluralistic starting-point needs to take both positive and negative liberty into account. Berlin himself says as much in his introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, written about a decade after the original publication of *Two Concepts* (Berlin 2002:30-54). In several later essays, also, Berlin repeatedly warns against interpreting his defence of negative liberty as an endorsement of libertarianism or similar ideas. What he wants is 'equality of liberty' and 'equality in liberty', and not, to use a rather telling metaphor of his, total liberty for wolves at the expense of lambs and others who may stand in their way.

Even in *Two Concepts* itself, Berlin speaks favourably of policies which limit the negative liberty of some, in order to reduce "glaring inequality or widespread misery", as long as the policy-makers are clear on the fact that they are reducing the commercial liberty of the well-off (Berlin 2002:172). Libertarianism would be just as much an error, viewed from the standpoint of the kind of pluralism Berlin describes in *Two Concepts*, as every other doctrine which attempts to put one goal ahead of all others, even if that paramount goal is negative liberty. Instead, the view Berlin wants to convey is one in which negative liberty is indeed acknowledged as a fundamental human ideal and an indispensable feature of a

decent and democratic society, but also a goal which often come at the expense of other goods. In essence: Negative liberty for the individual is not everything that matters, but it does matter, and everyone should be accorded a measure, perhaps even an equal measure, of freedom from man-made obstacles.

2.3.2 Realism in politics and political theory

Another principal component of Berlin's political thought, apart from his analyses of the concept of political liberty and his pluralism, is his perspective on the nature of politics. To Berlin, the defining feature of successful politicians is that they possess a quality which he alternately describes as *a sense of reality, realism, or political judgment* (cf. Berlin 1996:1-53; 2000:134-142). This quality moves successful politicians to seek out practical solutions and what Berlin calls an 'uneasy equilibrium' between the many competing values they ought to promote, and not to go searching for a Utopian 'final solution' to every conceivable political problem (cf. especially Berlin 1990:1-19). One can, in light of this, see a fundamental empirical generalisation lying behind many of Berlin's writings on political matters: Politicians and political theorists inspired by Utopianism have almost invariably failed in their grand thoughts and social experiments, whereas their more 'realistic' opposite numbers have at least occasionally managed to liberate, emancipate, feed or enlighten mankind, or to realise whatever goals they had set for themselves in their political vocation:

Robespierre, Joseph II of Austria, Lenin did not on the whole succeed in translating their ideas into reality. Bismarck, Lincoln, Lloyd George, Roosevelt, on the whole, did so. Austria in 1790, France in 1794, Russia in 1920 did not correspond to the great reformers' dreams. Germany, England, America, at the relevant periods, did not fall nearly so short of what their more practical statesmen attempted. It might be said that these latter were less ambitious, that what they wanted was not so widely different from what existed; but this would not be true. The differences made by Bismarck or Roosevelt were of a vast extent, and affected the fortunes of mankind to a radical degree. (Berlin 2000:138)

Berlin's political thought is in many ways centred on his conviction that practical politics is a complicated undertaking. Politics is most adequately described as an art or a craft which lacks any clear and concise general rules, laws, or algorithms for politicians and others to follow and carry out under any eventuality. Statesmanship is perhaps in some favourable circumstances helped by the methods and findings of political science, but it is not in itself a branch of science or reducible to the application of scientific principles and methods (cf. Hanley 2004). What Robespierre, Joseph II and Lenin so characteristically lacked was not primarily access to scientifically based knowledge, even if they did show quite a considerable lack of understanding for the nature of the human material with which they dealt, but rather an elusive form of *practical wisdom*, what Aristotle at places called *φρόνησις* (*phronēsis*), and which Berlin called 'political judgment':

What is it to have good judgment in politics? What is it to be politically wise, or gifted, to be a political genius, or even to be no more than politically competent, to know how to get things done? (Berlin 1996:40)

Obviously what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness, the particular men and events and dangers, the particular hopes and fears which are actively at work in a particular place at a particular time. (...) In the realm of political action, laws are far and few indeed: skills are everything. What makes statesmen, like drivers of cars, successful is that they do not think in general terms – that is, they do not primarily ask themselves in what respect a given situation is like or unlike other situations in the long course of human history (which is what historical sociologists, or theologians in historical clothing, such as Vico and Toynbee, are fond of doing). Their merit is that they grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation – this and no other. What they are said to be able to do is to understand the character of a particular movement, of a particular individual, of a unique state of affairs, of a unique atmosphere, of some particular combination of economic, political, personal factors; and we do not suppose that this capacity can be literally taught. (Berlin 1996:45)

To a great extent, Berlin's views on the nature of politics and political action are directly derived from his pluralism, which denies that all good things entail each other. With it, he also rejects the thought that moral and political deliberation could be seen as the carrying out of a simple algorithm, which will always produce a single answer to every question of a

normative or practical nature. He also denies that politicians and political theorists ought to seek out and attempt to realise Utopian, final solutions to all problems and imperfections in human societies (cf. e.g. Berlin 1990:1-48; 2002:166-217).

Berlin's pluralism issues in the view that one has to add context to moral and political deliberation and evaluation if such activities are to be profitable, and that successful political action in turn depends on such context-sensitive considerations. To be a successful politician – or for that matter a successful human being – one would need to look at the intricacies of each particular problem at hand, in an attempt to devise practicable solutions to the problems which have forced themselves upon one's perception of the world. Politics ought to be understood as the art of practical problem-solving, and not as the more sweeping activity which consists of moulding the world anew according to one's own ideas.

But Berlin's admiration for 'practical men' – he writes in particular about Churchill, Roosevelt, and Weizmann – is also developed further into a view on how one ought to go about conducting profitable studies of human societies, and in particular political theory (Berlin 1961; 1978:103-172; 1998:1-65). For Berlin, political theory does not have to be, and indeed ought not to be, an abstruse or highly technical form of enquiry, but should instead preserve close ties to practical political problem-solving (cf. especially Berlin and Williams 1994). Construed in this way, it is Berlin's sincere hope that political theory, or more generally the study and criticism of political ideas, might become a discipline which will help us to develop better societies, and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

In Berlin's view, ideas are powerful instruments for political action, which are not to be taken lightly. It is ideas which form the points of departure for any political endeavour, those which translate themselves into catastrophe, as well as those which ultimately contribute to the progress of humanity. It is, therefore, the responsibility of those that concern themselves with the careful analysis of political concepts and ideas to remain

constructive and politically relevant by avoiding ‘the pursuit of the ideal’, by rejecting deceitful simplifications and unwarranted abstractions, and instead concentrate one’s best efforts on the immediate amelioration of real political problems. This is precisely what Berlin does, also, when he attempts to erect a left-liberal alternative to the various totalitarian ideologies of his day. The central aim is to preserve a “logically untidy, flexible and even ambiguous compromise” (Berlin 2002:92), a compromise which will provisionally guarantee, among other things, a measure of liberty, equality, and common decency.

2.3.3 The uneasy equilibrium

Like for so many of his generation, the great wars and ideological storms of the twentieth century shaped Berlin’s political and moral views in a profound way. What began as seemingly benign intentions – national solidarity, ‘true progress’, and ‘real liberty’ – ended disturbingly often in total war and genocide (cf. Berlin 1990:1-19; 2002:53-93). The cynical interpretation of our recent history, not entirely bereft of empirical support, claims therefore that we are almost always on the move from one catastrophe to the next. We have little hope of ever escaping the self-destructive pattern set out by our built-in inability to rise above self-interest or undue attachments to a particular ideology or a particular group of people. At the same time, the twentieth century was also the site of real and lasting human progress, and no time has ever seen more people being lifted out of poverty, slavery, and hopelessness.

An underlying motive behind a great deal of Berlin’s political thought is the wish to expose the faults and shortcomings of the theories and great expectations that led to catastrophe, and which continues to do so, but also at the same time to inspire politicians and others to make wise choices for the future. Instead of fashioning detailed visions of what a perfect society might look like and what we need to sacrifice in order to get there, we should instead concentrate our best efforts around making the here and now a better place, so that we can leave the world in a better state than when we became parts of it.

His scepticism of Utopianism comes from his interpretations of human history. Here, Berlin contends that once the attainment of a perfect state of affairs is made a goal for political action, one has already embarked on a psychologically ‘slippery slope’ which will very easily lead to an instrumentalisation of all other possible considerations. When the perfect society is presented as being within humanity’s reach, people will, according to Berlin, do things they otherwise would not even contemplate: *“For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that?”* (Berlin 1990:15)

A second reason behind his rejection of Utopianism is more theoretical, and originates in his pluralism. If conflicts between fundamental moral values are of a permanent nature, then perfection in human affairs becomes an incoherent notion; we might well enough choose other values than the ones we normally decide to pursue, but it is impossible to realise all values at the same time. *“We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss”* (Berlin 1990:13):

No society can include within itself all forms of life. We may indeed lament the limited space, as it were, of social worlds, and of ours in particular; and we may regret some of the inevitable effects of our culture and social structure. As Berlin has long maintained (it is one of his fundamental themes), there is no social world without loss: that is, no social world that does not exclude some ways of life that realize in special ways certain fundamental values. (Rawls 1993:197)

Berlin stood for a balanced interpretation of Enlightenment values (Jahanbegloo 1992). While he acknowledged the validity of these values, and indeed the necessity of upholding them in order to create a more decent society, he also recognised that these values have previously been distorted in such a way that the calls for them ended in totalitarianism and mass violence. Berlin was indeed committed to such values as rationality, liberty, and

equality, but he also warned against a total devotion to only one or a few of these ideals, or to base one's political actions on a fraudulent or fallacious conception of these values.

There is on this view nothing wrong with the underlying values that have inspired such atrocious regimes as those of the Jacobins or the communists. On the level of abstract values, they are both genuine heirs to the Enlightenment (cf. e.g. Brinton 1928; Berlin 2004). The problem with these regimes lies not, therefore, in the values they claim to embody, but rather in how they conceptualise these values, what they are willing to sacrifice in order to achieve their goals, and in their analyses of what it takes to realise their ultimate intentions. These distorted variants of 'the Enlightenment project' are in Berlin's works repudiated because they are willing to sacrifice too much of some of the things that one ought to value, in order to achieve bliss on other scores in some distant and vaguely specified future.

When Berlin wrote about thinkers like Marx, Helvétius or Saint-Simon, his rejection of the idea that human misery now best ought to be compensated for in a future Eden is at its most passionate (Berlin 1996; 2002a). Berlin tempers, therefore, his commitment to Enlightenment values with an admiration for the historical sensitivity and embryonic value pluralism of 'Counter-Enlightenment' thinkers such as Vico and Herder (Berlin 1979:1-25; 2000a). He does not, however, adopt their approval of unexamined traditions, and so remains committed to the diffusion of freedom, equality, and human enlightenment, no matter how uncomfortable these ideals must seem at first (Berlin 1978:1-11; 2002:36-52).

Berlin sometimes used the epithet of 'liberalism' to describe his own political views. Berlin's version of liberalism is, however, strongly characterised by his pluralism. Berlin's liberalism is an attempt to balance, always provisionally and often precariously, between competing ends (Galipeau 1994). Among these ends one finds equality, justice, generosity, and common decency – in addition to liberty, both positively and negatively understood. Such balancing acts, whose aim it is to establish and maintain what Berlin describes as an

‘uneasy equilibrium’, are always limited in scope, limited to a particular society or to a particular policy area, because the peculiarities of a given situation will always influence which decisions one ought to make. The proper aim of political theory is therefore not to provide us with a detailed plan for ideal societies, but instead to try to solve, by way of careful analysis of various ideas and concepts, some of the dilemmas which beset the political issues and problems we are faced with in a given situation.

Towards the end of his essay *Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1950, he describes one such central balancing act between ends internal to his left-leaning liberalism, namely that between securing an adequate measure of individual liberty, as well as a decent standard of living for everyone. But even if the problem is common to a lot of situations, he characteristically calls upon the contemporaneous experiences of totalitarianism and global war which characterised ‘the age’ in which he wrote:

The dilemma is logically insoluble: we cannot sacrifice either freedom or the organisation needed for its defence or a minimum standard of welfare. The way out must therefore lie in some logically untidy, flexible and even ambiguous compromise. Every situation calls for its own specific policy, since ‘out of the crooked timber of humanity’, as Kant once remarked, ‘no straight thing was ever made’. What the age calls for is not (as we are so often told) more faith, or stronger leadership, or more scientific organisation. (...) What is required is a less mechanical, less fanatical application of general principles, however rational or righteous, a more cautious and less arrogantly self-confident application of accepted, scientifically tested, general solutions to unexamined individual cases. The wicked Talleyrand’s ‘*Surtout, Messieurs, point de zèle*’ can be more humane than the demand for uniformity of the virtuous Robespierre, and a salutary brake upon too much control of men’s lives in an age of social planning and technology. We must submit to authority not because it is infallible, but only for strictly and openly utilitarian reasons, as a necessary expedient. (Berlin 2002:92)

To sum up, it might be said that Berlin speaks of a liberalism which is sensitive to the uniqueness of the various political problems it strives to supply with solutions. It is a *cautious* and *tentative*, but above all an irredeemably *moderate* form of liberalism which does not seek ultimate solutions but provisional compromises instead. This is perhaps most

directly expressed in his essay on *Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington*: “I was, and remain, an incurably sceptical liberal, a convinced gradualist” (Berlin 2004a:667).

As a political theorist, Berlin strove always to be informed by historical knowledge and practical experience, even though he left room open for more principled discussions. His liberalism was not only moderate and tempered by the belief that ultimate values conflict. It was also a work in constant progress, flexible enough to absorb the shocks of unexpected upheavals, and impressionistic enough to accommodate the various and often changing social and political circumstances which often determine whether a piece of political reform is ultimately successful or not. He was perhaps not a systematic political thinker, but that only makes his political thought more interesting and, in the end, more politically relevant.

2.4 Some preliminary conclusions

Berlin’s many essays in political theory and the history of political ideas provide us with challenging reading material. This is so, not because they are particularly abstract or difficult to understand, but rather because they in many ways invite readers to reflect one more time about influential political ideas and fundamental human values. There is almost always a ‘plea for difficulty’ behind his more political texts, which implore his readers to seek out more moderate conclusions than the ones provided by radicals of all political stripes, including neoliberals or economic liberals to which we will come back in the last part of this study. Often, his essays also require a close reading if one is to notice the many nuances of his arguments.

On a few occasions, Berlin designated himself as a liberal, and this is also how he is treated in much of the literature (Galipeau 1994; Gray 1995; Crowder 2002). Reading Berlin, however, I am struck by the way in which the sum of his political beliefs could just as easily be described as amounting to a moderate form of democratic socialism, or perhaps even an

equally moderate form of conservatism. His liberalism speaks to people who are liberal in the widest conceivable sense – people who share a fundamental preference for democracy and personal freedom, but who often end up in disagreement over how society and especially the economy should be organised in order to secure representative government and liberty.

Berlin sometimes described his political beliefs as a close approximation to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programme for economic and political reform and redistribution of wealth and property. This should give us a fairly clear indication of what kind of liberal Berlin was. He was a liberal who wanted freedom in personal matters, but who rejected *laissez-faire* economic policies because of their tendency to favour the ruthless and the socially privileged. Berlin might be described as a liberal, but it was always the moderate liberalism of contemporary or slightly older Liberals such as John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, and decidedly not the more consistent 'classical liberalism' of for instance the 'Austrian School' in economics, represented by for instance Ludwig Mises and Friedrich Hayek.

Berlin was, to a large extent because of his value pluralism, a left-leaning liberal. He believed not only in negative liberty, but in equality and social justice too. To paraphrase Berlin, a realistic political theory will not give us easy answers, but will instead supply us with a steady stream of thorny questions which will require local, temporary, and often logically untidy solutions. It is not to be expected that political theory will provide us with clean, tight, and exhaustive answers to every conceivable political question. This should however not deter us from contributing to social improvements.

His outspoken defence of gradualism, realism, and thoughtful uncertainty in political matters is in many ways the reason why it is somewhat difficult to place his thought in an established category such as 'conservatism', 'liberalism' or 'socialism'. In fact, he was in many ways all these things rolled into one. He was a passionate moderate who believed in

the corrigibility of the human condition, as socialists do. At the same time, he held the conservative view that mankind often fails in its attempts at improving its own lot, despite good intentions. On top of it all, or perhaps rather behind it all, lies his commitment to fundamental liberal ideas such as democracy, human rights, and individual liberty. And while liberty is not everything to a pluralist like Berlin, it is also the case that without liberty, everything else matters less.

3. Criticisms of Berlin's political thought

3.1 Introduction

Berlin has been an influential voice in contemporary political theory. Ronald Dworkin, one of his most persistent critics, has even claimed that Berlin's influence has been growing in recent years, and that his thought will continue to influence political theory in the future (Dworkin 2006). His influence is also felt in ethical theory, where moral pluralism is no longer the highly personal perspective it perhaps once was when Berlin touched upon that subject in *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

One of the more interesting criticisms of Berlin's political theories comes from John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that moral pluralism or 'intuitionism' does not give us answers to crucial political questions in a clear and precise enough way (Rawls 1971:34-40). Rawls' critique of intuitionism remains perhaps the most challenging critical analysis of Berlin's whole way of thinking about ethics and politics. The essence of Rawls' criticisms against Berlin has also been reiterated by Ronald Dworkin (2000; 2001; 2001a; 2006), who rejects value pluralism in a more outright way than Rawls does. As I see it, however, the critique launched by Rawls and Dworkin does not take into account that politics is a complicated and at times morally hazardous undertaking, which ought not to be thought of as an exact science. Instead, normative political analysis ought to strive to become more realistic and relevant for practical policy-making, as opposed to a primarily academic discussion of political and public affairs (cf. section 3.6 below).

Another important set of criticisms comes from among others John Gray (1991; 1993; 1995; 2000), who claims that pluralism leads away from what he calls liberalism. Gray develops this critique in his book *Isaiah Berlin* from 1995, in which he claims that Berlin's attempt to combine value pluralism with liberalism is largely unsuccessful. It is not however clear to what degree Gray's own political thought, which one must assume he believes is a

better match for pluralism, is intended as a full-blown alternative to liberalism or liberal democracy. It is in many ways difficult to categorise Gray's political thought. He is most certainly a pessimist, coming close to a position one might characterise as a radical form of cultural relativism. But it is not clear what his alternatives to liberal democracy actually are, and to what degree he really is as anti-liberal as he claims he is (cf. Newey 2007).

I will also briefly discuss Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, and its enduring influence on debates in political theory. One question which initially caught the attention of philosophers was whether the distinction between negative and positive liberty ought to be replaced by a single concept of liberty which incorporates both negative and positive dimensions within itself (MacCallum 1967; Megone 1987; Nelson 2005; Christman 2005). With only one concept of liberty, so the argument goes, one would be able to bypass some of the problems or dilemmas described by Berlin, and we would instead be able to see more clearly how the two concepts of liberty are really unavoidably intertwined.

In an opposite vein, it has been suggested that his two concepts should be supplemented with a third, 'republican' conception of liberty as 'non-domination' (Pettit 1997; Skinner 1998; 2002). This 'republicanism' is based around the idea that individual liberty and security is dependent on the existence of a political system in which individual citizens can be sure of not being dominated by external forces. Another important set of criticisms claims that Berlin exaggerated the dangers of positive liberty. It is instead said that positive liberty is a more 'material' or 'meaningful' conception of personal freedom (Crocker 1980; Ramsay 1997). Instead of focusing on all these types of criticisms to the same extent, I will focus on the last sort of criticism below in section 3.4.

I will therefore first describe and discuss the criticisms made by Rawls and Dworkin, before I move on to Gray's pluralist critique of liberalism, and the idea that positive liberty is an important ideal. I will then discuss William Galston's and George Crowder's attempts to

develop Berlin's political thought further. In the penultimate section, I will present some of my own views on his political thought, and especially his perspectives on personal and political freedom. The last section will conclude the present chapter as well as the previous.

3.2 Rawls and Dworkin

3.2.1 Rawls: Against intuitionism

The first systematic criticism levelled against Berlin's approach to normative political analysis comes from John Rawls. This assertion may be somewhat surprising, as Rawls does not to discuss Berlin's essays or theories at any greater length. In addition, the few places where Rawls does in fact mention Berlin, he does convey a generally favourable attitude towards Berlin's many aphorisms and assumptions (Rawls 1971; 1993). In later works, especially *Political Liberalism*, Rawls acknowledges 'the fact of pluralism' – the fact that people in modern societies have different ideas about what makes life worth living – and seems also to approach Berlin's value pluralism.

Nevertheless, much of the general idea behind Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is rooted in his unwillingness to accept the provisional and logically untidy solutions to 'problems of priority' which Berlin applauded on several occasions (Rawls 1971, especially part I; Berlin 2002). Rawls does not want to give up on moral and political philosophy quite as easily as Berlin is willing to do. Instead, Rawls wants to forge more logically uncluttered solutions to a wider range of problems in normative political analysis, especially problems of what is usually called distributive justice.

At the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls does not directly criticise Berlin, but he does assail pluralism or intuitionism for leaving us with too many unanswered questions. In Berlin's place, other moral pluralists such as Brian Barry (1965), G. E. Moore (1903), Nicholas Rescher (1965), and W. D. Ross (1930) are criticised for their lack of willingness

to give more definite answers to questions concerning which values or principles ought to be put ahead of others. According to Rawls, intuitionist theories have two basic features, which correspond quite closely to the core principles of the position Berlin called pluralism:

[Intuitionist theories] consist of a plurality of first principles which may conflict to give contrary directives in particular types of cases; and second, they include no explicit method, no priority rules, for weighing these principles against one another: We are simply to strike a balance by intuition, by what seems to us most nearly right. Or if there are priority rules, these are thought to be more or less trivial and of no substantial assistance in reaching a judgment. (Rawls 1971:34)

The most immediate upshot of intuitionism – or pluralism – is that there are occasionally several morally acceptable answers to general questions regarding how and according to which principles society ought to be organised. Armchair political philosophy will therefore not always give us clear and definite answers to every question, but will instead sometimes supply us with numerous acceptable answers. The pluralist will therefore claim that there is sometimes a need to choose between equally legitimate values. Should one for instance give priority to a more efficient allocation of resources, which proponents of *laissez-faire* capitalism claim will arise in an unregulated market economy? Or should one instead aim for full employment and a more equal distribution of income, which many advocates of these ideals assert will require extensive public regulation of the economy? If both efficiency and equality are legitimate ends, which they in all likelihood are, how should one go about choosing between them?

The pluralist or intuitionist answer to the last question, and many others like it, is not at all clear from the outset. If both are legitimate ends, opposite priorities between them are at least possible choices to make within a pluralist framework. In order to avoid having to rely on purely arbitrary priorities, the practical pluralist will therefore demand more empirical knowledge about the wider effects of different priorities, before choosing between relatively abstract goals such as economic efficiency and equality (Okun 1975). If we move

further up the ladder of abstraction to Rawls' level, where the most important choice between quite general values such as liberty and equality is situated, then the need for such empirical knowledge about the effects of different priorities in both the short and the long run will become even more apparent. This is perhaps the main reason why a practical sort of normative political analysis, in which the complexities of real-life political processes are taken into account, is so difficult to fit on the Procrustean bed of pure moral theory.

And this is where Rawls and Berlin part ways. Rawls thinks that it is a problem that pluralism and intuitionism will leave us in a state of indeterminacy when we try to discuss practical political problems. Berlin, however, is perfectly happy to leave more practical questions aside to everyday political deliberations, after having described some of the ingredients of a minimally acceptable society (Berlin 1956; 1958). While Berlin is unwilling to devise exhaustive theories about what the outcomes of political processes ought to be, Rawls wants clear-cut and philosophically elegant answers. To Rawls, it seems that 'messiness' and *ἀπορία* in ethics and politics is a problem no matter what, and that we should always try to devise 'tidier' and more definite solutions. An alternative way of dealing with indeterminacy is given by Berlin; we must rely not on our ability to construct impressing philosophical theories in which everything makes perfect sense, but instead try to be more realistic and rely on our capacity for moral and political *judgment*. That way, we may end up with solutions which may not be as uncluttered as philosophers would wish, but which at least offer practicable solutions to real problems at hand.

Rawls wants, it seems, most of all to escape the uncertainties of moral pluralism and intuitionism. The preferred method to achieve this is to try to construct 'rules of priority' between values suspected of often coming into conflict with each other. That way, he can give more systematic answers to problems which may arise on greater levels of detail. With the help of a few rules which gives us a 'lexical' ordering of various values, the problems

and dilemmas arising from value plurality and incommensurability will quite simply wither away. The solution Rawls gives us is most certainly elegant and appealing. It consists among other things of characterising justice as “the first virtue of social institutions” ahead of other possible virtues and considerations, such as the overall welfare of society as a whole (Rawls 1971:3). The term justice or fairness is then described as a finely tuned mixture of ideals more usually described by names such as liberty, equality, and equality of opportunity. This is summed up in his general conception of justice: “All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage for the least favoured” (Rawls 1971:303).

On the level of practical recommendations, Rawls’ theory of justice is probably not that different from proposals which Berlin would be willing to accept. Justice is certainly one of the most fundamental virtues a society could possess. Both also tend to view *injustice*, unwarranted repression, or glaring inequality, as the gravest shortcomings any human society might inflict upon itself. Both Rawls and Berlin want to organise society in a way which takes the demands for both liberty and equality seriously. Rawls’ rules of priority might even be considered a welcome addition to Berlin’s pluralism, at least as rules of thumb, because they reduce the clutter surrounding many debates over political values and how to make priorities between them. As an addition to Berlin’s analyses of liberty and equality, however, Rawls’ theory of justice seems not to sufficiently appreciate the complexities of practical politics – an appreciation of which made Berlin one of the more politically relevant political theorists of the twentieth century (cf. also section 3.6 below).

Finally, is justice, as that concept is understood by Rawls, really the first (or most important) virtue, value, or principle for political reform and action? Is it always more important than other values? Could we not just as easily claim that there are many virtues,

and that none are always more fundamental than others? It is nevertheless the case that Rawls does not, however, make a compelling case for the view that moral pluralism should be abandoned. He is not, basically, at his most convincing when he argues against local and temporary, and indeed ‘intuitive’, solutions to problems of priority between different general values. This is however also attempted by Ronald Dworkin, who rejects Berlin’s moral pluralism in a more direct way than Rawls, and puts equality rather than liberty or justice at the top of his proposed hierarchy of values.

3.2.2 Dworkin: Against pluralism

According to Dworkin’s book *Sovereign Virtue* it is equality – or more precisely ‘equal concern’ – which is the most important virtue in politics. While he chooses not to copy, at least not exactly, Rawls’ concept of first virtues, there is a strong parallel between the views put forward by Rawls and Dworkin. Both of them claim that there is a strong presumption in favour of a single virtue against which human societies and institutions are to be judged, and in turn reformed if they do not meet the requirements of the proposed standard:

No government is legitimate that does not show equal concern for the fate of all those citizens over whom it claims dominion and from whom it claims allegiance. Equal concern is the sovereign virtue of political community – without it government is only tyranny. (Dworkin 2000:1)

Whenever a political community fails to do whatever it can to prevent inequality from occurring, it does not do enough to live up to this standard of equal concern. The more inequality, the greater the need to change society:

For the distribution of wealth is the product of a legal order: a citizen’s wealth massively depends on which laws his community has enacted – not only its laws governing ownership, theft, contract, and tort, but its welfare law, tax law, labour law, civil rights law, environmental regulation law, and laws of practically everything else. When government enacts or sustains one set of such laws rather than another, it is not only predictable that some citizens’ lives will be worsened by its choice but also, to a considerable degree, which citizens these will be. In the prosperous democracies it is predictable, whenever government curtails welfare programmes or

declines to expand them, that its decision will keep the lives of poor people bleak. (Dworkin 2000:1-2)

There is at this still early stage in Dworkin's argument probably no open disagreement between him and Berlin. Berlin also makes, in his essay *Equality*, an argument for the view that equality is a precondition for a minimally civilised and decent society (Berlin 1956). Berlin would also agree with Dworkin that a society characterised by conspicuous inequality is in need of political and economic reforms. In a very straightforward sense, they are both egalitarians, in that they consider equality to be an important virtue of human societies.

But *Equality* is also the first published text in which Berlin considers and presents his idea that there are several equally fundamental values which might sometimes come into conflict with each other, and that we consequently need to construct some sort of compromise between them. If we take equality too far, we will end up trading off too much of other values which are equally important. One will probably also end up with a political system where exaggerated demands for uniformity will threaten personal freedom and economic efficiency. It is therefore necessary to find a workable compromise between the ends we care about and indeed ought to care about.

And it is at this point that the two egalitarians end up in direct disagreement with each other, with Dworkin becoming one of the most articulated critics of pluralism (Dworkin 2001; 2001a; 2006). Dworkin's most prominent reason for rejecting pluralism comes from his dismissal of the quite common belief that there is an almost inevitable conflict between liberty and equality. Instead, he claims that one must define both liberty and equality more 'dynamically' than Berlin and others have done in the past, and try to fit the two values together as the pieces in a jig-saw puzzle:

Of course we can define the various political virtues in such a way that conflict is indeed inevitable. Suppose we define equality in the way that certain socialists did: equality means everyone having the same wealth no matter what choices he makes about work or leisure or consumption or investment. We can define liberty in the way

that John Stuart Mill and Isaiah Berlin have: someone's liberty is his freedom to do whatever he might wish to do free from the interference of others. Then there will certainly be conflict between liberty and equality. (Dworkin 2001:253)

There is perhaps a commonsensical appeal behind these rather simple definitions of equality and liberty. And while the definitions supplied by Dworkin are hardly indicative of how most socialists describe equality, or how Mill and Berlin defined liberty, they do convey a sort of everyday non-technical usage of such terms. He goes on:

But why should we define them that way? Here are two other definitions which I want to put before you. (...) We can define equality dynamically, as I did in *Sovereign Virtue*. Equality is preserved when no one envies the package of work and reward than anyone else has achieved. (...) Your liberty is your freedom to dispose as you wish of property or resources that have been awarded to you under a reasonably fair system of property and other laws, free from interference of others, so long as you violate no one's rights. (Dworkin 2001:253-254)

With his definitions, Dworkin claims to have removed much of the conflicts between equality and liberty, which Berlin declared were evident to anyone but the intellectually immature (Berlin 1990:1-19). It is however an open question whether or not his new definitions capture how these concepts are understood in ordinary language and real-life political debates. If, however, they are too far removed from everyday usage, they become poor guides to people who see both liberty and equality as important ideals. What is clear is that it is possible to define both equality and liberty in ways which makes conflict unavoidable, just as much as it is possible to forge definitions which makes conflict between them less likely. The central question is whether we should try to construct definitions of values which minimise conflicts between them, or whether we instead should build on ordinary language, and try to think how we ought to confront situations in which different ideals will lead us in diverging directions.

The disagreement between Berlin and Dworkin is a matter of how one is to deal with value conflicts rather than a real disagreement of whether human values actually come into conflict with each other. Dworkin's solution might be characterized as holistic. He wants

human values to form a coherent totality, and is willing to supply ordinary value concepts with new definitions in order to remove conflicts between our various ideals. By contrast, Berlin's solution is one of acquiescence: Given how values are ordinarily understood, they will occasionally clash, and we will have to choose between different ideals. Instead of trying to make value conflicts disappear by changing the definitions, we should think seriously about which priorities we want to make, and choose as best we can which way to move forward. It is, however, an open question whether or not everyday usage should be accorded the kind of privileged place Berlin is willing to give it, or if we should rather try to define better concepts about what we should ultimately value.

3.3 Gray: Pluralism without liberalism

Before the 1990's there was, as far as I have been able to tell, little or no controversy over Berlin's pluralism and its ability to supply its proponents with liberal political conclusions (Shklar 1989; Galipeau 1994). John Gray's book *Isaiah Berlin* from 1995 is therefore a watershed in the literature commenting on Berlin's moral and political thought. In it, Gray claims that moral pluralism will lead its proponents away from liberalism, to a position in which liberalism is merely thought of as one possible answer to the general question of how society ought to be organised alongside – one must assume – various illiberal ideologies.

Gray shares this position with John Kekes (1993; 1997; 1998). Kekes suggests, while not commenting exclusively on Berlin's thought as Gray does in his book, that pluralism leads to conservatism. It is however an open question if Kekes' conservatism is as much 'against liberalism' as he claims it is. Perhaps there are more affinities between it and the kind of moderate liberalism advocated by Berlin, than either of them would care to admit. In order to simplify matters, I will however not discuss Kekes' thoughts about pluralism in detail, and instead focus this discussion around Gray.

As a political philosopher, John Gray comes across as an exceptionally nomadic thinker (Lukes 1995; Ryan 2001; Horton and Newey 2007). In the early 1980's he wrote two books about John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Hayek, focusing on their respective conceptions of liberty (Gray 1983; 1984). In them, he came across as mostly sympathetic to their markedly different, but still recognisably liberal political theories. Later, he gradually became ever more hostile towards liberalism in any shape or form, and set out to develop a 'post-liberal' political theory which, as the name suggests, is meant to supplant what he calls 'fundamentalist liberalism' (Gray 2000).

'Post-liberalism' is, if one takes what Gray has written about it at face value, a rather heterogeneous political theory (Horton and Newey 2007). It contains elements of communitarianism and conservatism, combined with cultural relativism and green politics, as well as a rather furious hostility towards modernity (whatever that may mean) and in particular global capitalism. In Gray's later works, the liberal tradition is, together with the rest of 'the Enlightenment project', repeatedly declared dead, all due to the alleged and sudden collapse of 'the modern era'. It seems, therefore, that Gray has moved well away from his earlier liberal positions. It is more difficult to say exactly where he has ended up.

On his own terms, despite all the blitz and clamour surrounding his recurring rejections of liberalism, Gray is however an interesting theorist of pluralism, developing what may be described as a more radical form of moral pluralism than anything Berlin ever subscribed to (Crowder 2007). Already in one of his earlier essays on the topic, this willingness to adopt a more drastic type of value pluralism has become apparent, adding a component of cultural relativism on top of Berlin's moral theory. Gray does this by inserting that it is not only human values that are incommensurable with each other, but also that comparisons between specific cultures and 'forms of life' are futile: "Objective pluralism of the sort advanced here recognizes incommensurabilities among generic human goods and

evils as well as incommensurabilities between (and within) specific cultures or forms of life” (Gray 1989:292, emphasis added). He also adds the view, already rejected by Berlin and Williams (1994), that value incommensurability entails that we cannot give good reasons for choosing one value over another when such incommensurable values clash with each other. They are simply ‘incomparable by reason’ (cf. Gray 1995:142).

The problem with Gray’s indictment of Berlin’s liberal pluralism is that the argument builds on notions of pluralism and liberalism it is doubtful anyone before him, Berlin included, have entertained. Pluralism, in the more radical form Gray espouses, does not prescribe, according to Gray himself, which values or how many of them one ought to cultivate (Gray 1995:38-75). But rather than adopting the approach formulated by Bernard Williams (1978) and probably supported by Berlin, namely that one should forge a flexible and temporary balance between as many values as possible, Gray suggests that one instead should simply adopt the values of the culture one is born into.

Instead of commenting on Berlin’s thought, Gray has an entirely different agenda, namely to abandon his former political beliefs and enlist Berlin as a fellow-traveller in his flight from anything that reminds him of liberalism or ‘the Enlightenment’, which to Gray is equally obsolete after the supposed collapse of ‘modernity’ and the dawn of the ‘post-modern’ epoch in human history. Liberalism is to Gray *the* political theory of the by now concluded modern era and, we are led to believe, thoroughly outmanoeuvred by the alleged breakdown of ‘the Enlightenment’ and its accompanying belief in the genuine possibility for progress (cf. Wheen 2004:187-190). His ambition is therefore to ‘rescue’ pluralism, which he evidently believes in (albeit a highly original rendering of it), from the dead hand of liberalism and modernism.

Gray (1995:152) asks, commenting on the last paragraphs of the *Two Concepts of Liberty*, “if diversity comes into conflict with liberty, and the diversity is that of worthwhile

forms of life expressive of genuine human needs and embodying authentic varieties of human flourishing, why should liberty always trump diversity – especially if one is a value-pluralist?” And indeed the way Gray frames this question is indicative of his less than indulgent reading of Berlin. What Berlin asserted was rather that pluralism would entail a “measure of ‘negative’ liberty” (Berlin 2002:216), and not that liberty would always be more important than other ideals.

Gray’s question might however also be turned around to his own version of value pluralism: Why should, one might ask, diversity matter so much that it trumps out our concerns over for instance truth, equality, or liberty? If all four terms describe something of value, why should we always choose diversity? If an all-out concern for diversity forces a certain proportion of humanity to live in ignorance and slavery, because it is ‘part of their culture’, why should we not choose to live by other ideals than mere variety? This highly natural question is not answered, or even raised by Gray. His alternative vision of a world in which diversity is furthered by means of establishing a *modus vivendi* of limitless tolerance is not more closely matched to pluralism any more than the moderate liberalism Berlin and many others have preferred. If one assumes moral pluralism to be true, we live in a world in which values sometimes collide. In such a situation we are forced to choose, but it remains thoroughly unclear why we should not choose freedom, and instead enter yet another age of sharp divisions between nations, classes, and creeds.

3.4 Formal and material freedom

The third and final type of criticism discussed here comes from several theorists who maintain that a purely negative conception of liberty is insufficient (Crick 1966; Macpherson 1973; Cohen 1979; Taylor 1979; Crocker 1980; Ramsay 1997; Meyer 2007). Typically, critics in this category start with the assumption that negative liberty is not enough if freedom is to be meaningful to most people. Instead, they claim that one should establish and

maintain what we might call an infrastructure of freedom, so that more people will have the opportunity to *enjoy* the freedom admitted to them. In essence, they suggest that negative liberty alone is of uncertain significance if it is not accompanied by a similar measure of real opportunities for everyone to make effective use of that freedom.

It should be noted that these criticisms are not critiques of Berlin's political thought as such. They are, rather, critiques of the view that less government intervention in the economy will always lead to more freedom for everyone. While it is simply out the question that Berlin ever held this absurd view, it is obviously the case that many other influential liberal thinkers have approached this exclusively negative perspective on personal freedom. Consequently, such liberals have suggested that the state, in the name of liberty, should not intervene in order to distribute freedom, and the opportunities to enjoy freedom, more evenly between people under its authority.

Perhaps the most thoughtful criticism of this type comes from C. B. Macpherson, in his essay on *Berlin's Division of Liberty* (Macpherson 1973:95-119). Macpherson disapproves of Berlin's analysis in *Two Concepts* because of the sharp distinction made between liberty and what he calls 'the conditions for liberty'. According to Macpherson, it is only direct coercion of one person by other human beings or the organisations they form which is counted as a denial of liberty by Berlin. Unintended coercion stemming from the way society and especially the economy has been organised is not a denial of freedom, but merely the absence of the conditions necessary to make effective use of one's freedom. The economically underprivileged are in an unregulated market economy, under Macpherson's reading of Berlin, formally speaking free to same degree as owners of substantial capital. The difference between the two groups lies elsewhere, in the differences of real opportunities they have for bettering their own lot.

According to Macpherson, there is a liberal bias in Berlin's presentation of negative liberty, in which direct coercion is treated as an impediment to liberty, but not more subtle forms of impediments built into the market economy. In such economic systems, the economically underprivileged will often have no other choice but to sell their labour at a relatively low price in order to survive. They are not, however, strictly speaking coerced into an exploitative relationship with their employers, because they are not physically or legally barred from seeking their fortunes elsewhere. They are still free in negative terms, because they are, to paraphrase Anatole France, free to sleep under the bridges and beg in the street instead of selling their labour at a modest price.

Macpherson suggests that this will not do, and that one instead would profit from treating all 'extractions of liberty' on equal terms, whether they are actually willingly put into force or if they are unintended consequences of the way the economy is organised. Regardless of how an impediment came about, it should be regarded as an extraction and denial of a person's negative or 'counter-extractive' liberty. The upshot of Macpherson's small revision of Berlin is that well-placed economic policies such as redistributive taxation or laws regulating the labour market could lead to a net gain of liberty. While such policies will limit the negative freedom of the well-off, their loss would be compensated by a larger net gain of freedom for those lifted out of poverty and despair.

A closely related form of criticism is found in Thomas Meyer's book *The Theory of Social Democracy* (Meyer 2007; 2007a). At the beginning of his book, Meyer identifies two key problems in traditional liberal thought. The first is the conflict between property rights and personal freedom. If property rights are guarded too strongly, and property is distributed unevenly between members of a political community, then the result will most likely be a similarly uneven distribution of the ability one has to make the truly important decisions in one's own life.

If one really believes that everyone deserves a measure of personal freedom, then one needs a more 'fluid' conception of property rights. The demands of property-owners to keep all of their property no matter the consequences for the community as a whole are in essence a demand for negative liberty. This demand must however be weighed against the countervailing demand that everyone should have at least an opportunity to live in freedom without the need to subject oneself completely to the will of others. The most fundamental difference between the two main categories of liberal democracy Meyer identifies, libertarian and social democracy, is to be found in how they tend to make opposite priorities between protection of property rights and personal freedom for all.

The second problem in liberal thought is according to Meyer found in the conflict between negative and positive liberty. In this, Meyer mistakenly treats Berlin as a spokesman for the libertarian view that negative liberty ought to be given absolute priority over positive liberty and other values. This priority will, according to Meyer, lead to a dilemma because it is not given in advance how negative liberty and other goods ought to be distributed. One could easily enough admit everyone the same degree of negative liberty. If one does not redistribute the resources and opportunities necessary to make proper use of his or her negative liberty to everyone, one will end up in a situation where only few people have the opportunity to make the truly important decisions in their own lives. It is therefore necessary, if freedom is to be a meaningful goal for most people, to give both positive and negative liberty equal weight and status.

While these criticisms from the left are quite valuable, they all tend to misjudge large parts of Berlin's analysis. Berlin did not after all say much about what we *ought to* understand by liberty, apart from cautioning against some purely positive conceptions, which he thought would be too easily subverted into a demand for individuals to submit to some sort of all-powerful state. For this reason, the authors who have suggested that his twofold

distinction between negative and positive liberty ought to be revised, concern themselves with a different problem than Berlin's analysis of actual usage. Berlin did not either, as some of his critics have suggested, entirely reject positive liberty. Instead, Berlin was more inclined to say that we ought not to sacrifice all of our negative liberty in order to achieve some other goal. One could perhaps accuse Berlin for his failure to be perfectly clear about what he thought ought to be meant by liberty. To suggest, as Meyer does, that Berlin was a *laissez-faire* enthusiast amounts however to a misjudgement of what Berlin tried to caution against, namely the danger inherent in ascribing too much importance to one value at the expense of all others.

3.5 Liberal pluralism

3.5.1 Crowder: Pluralism and liberalism reconciled

Berlin has however his share of supporters as well as critics in the recently published literature commenting on his political thought. These supporters have taken upon themselves the task of defending his theories from various attacks and criticisms. It is especially the claims made by Gray, that pluralism and liberalism lead away from each other, which is the subject of these defensive efforts. Most determined among these authors are perhaps George Crowder (2002; 2004; 2007) and William A. Galston (2002; 2005), who both try to systematise Berlin's often scattered ethical and political theory.

Crowder's argument in favour of a combination of value pluralism and liberalism unfolds in four steps. In the first, liberalism is described quite generally as a political ideology centred around "four main values or principles", namely "the equal moral worth of individuals", "individual liberties and rights, limited government and private property" (Crowder 2002:22). This is not a particularly controversial understanding of what liberalism is. One could also see the contours of the familiar conflict between left and right within the

liberal tradition, where left-leaning liberals will tend to choose the first two values, and so-called ‘classical liberals’ the latter two, whenever these four principles come into conflict with each other. In these debates internal to liberalism, Crowder places himself on the left wing of the liberal tradition (Crowder 2002:226-236).

The second step in his argument consists of defining value pluralism (cf. section 2.1.1. above). The crucial move he makes is undoubtedly his reinterpretation of value incommensurability. In this, he concludes that the context in which concrete choices between values take place will in most cases make it possible to arrive at a reasonably rational decision. It would then be possible to choose rationally between alternative policies or actions that embody different moral values, even if ‘lexical’ priorities or general comparisons between abstract values and ideals are rejected (Crowder 2002; 2007).

As Crowder moves to the third and fourth stages in his argument, he also descends from the level of conceptual analysis to a more practical brand of political theory. The third step amounts, basically, to an acceptance of Berlin’s idea that anti-Utopianism follows from a pluralist outlook. According to Crowder, and it is difficult to see any possible counter-arguments to his view, anti-Utopianism flows naturally from pluralism. If pluralism is true, then the idea of a perfect society in which all values are fully realised become a conceptually incoherent notion. There is, however, “a considerable gap between the dismissal of utopian politics and the endorsement of liberalism” (Crowder 2002:97).

In the fourth stage of Crowder’s account, he makes three arguments for liberalism. The first argument he makes, ‘the argument from diversity’, is based on the idea that diversity and coherence, both counted among the fundamental values and frequently at odds with each other, are best realised in a liberal democracy which strikes a balance between the two (Crowder 2002:135-157). Conversely, Crowder believes it is unsound to sacrifice too

much “coherence” in order to achieve greater variety, a view he not entirely without justice attributes to Gray in his most ‘post-modern’ moments.

The second argument is inspired by Charles Larmore and John Rawls, and focuses on their shared notion of ‘reasonable disagreement’ (Rawls 1993:54-58; Larmore 1996:152-174). According to Crowder, reasonable disagreements could only arise when the idea of plural and potentially conflicting values has been accepted. Larmore himself even suggests that the concept of reasonable disagreement will not make sense under a “monistic view of the good life” (Larmore 1987:23). If we want to say that at least some collisions between different values are of a sort in which all sides in the argument are equally reasonable, then we must, so the argument goes, acknowledge the truth of value pluralism.

The third argument intended to forge a link between pluralism and liberalism, the “virtue argument”, is based in what Crowder views as similarities between liberal and pluralist virtues. The “pluralist virtues” he emphasises – generosity, realism, attentiveness and flexibility – overlaps to a considerable degree with “liberal virtues” such as broad-mindedness, moderation, personal autonomy and attention to local variation (Macedo 1990).

Has Crowder succeeded in making a definitive argument for a combination of pluralism and liberalism? The answer must be one marked with a measure of ambivalence. On one side, he does supply the liberal pluralist with three compelling arguments in her favour. On the other side, however, he seems to underestimate the potential for combining liberalism with monistic ethical theories, as Dworkin tries to do. Finally, it is at best unclear why the more detailed doctrine of liberalism, with its priority of private property rights and limited government over personal freedom for everyone should follow from pluralism. Instead, one could perhaps say that pluralism is indeed compatible with liberalism, but also with other political ideologies that are compatible with modern democracy, unless liberalism is understood very broadly as a strong preference for liberal democracy and little else.

3.5.2 Galston: Liberal pluralism and practical politics

Even if their basic conclusion is the same, namely that liberalism follows from an acceptance of pluralism, Galston's version of liberalism, given in the book *Liberal Pluralism*, is different from Crowder's. While Crowder thinks that personal autonomy is one of the most important liberal ideals, Galston rejects this and puts instead *expressive liberty* at the forefront (Galston 1995; 2002). The state should not, according to Galston, encourage autonomous behaviour among its citizens, but instead remain neutral in moral and cultural questions, and at most foster peace between the various ethnic or religious groups of which most contemporary societies consist.

The state should guarantee everyone the right to express themselves freely, but should not force people to adopt the lifestyle of the majority culture. In essence, the state should guarantee everyone the possibility of becoming autonomous and passively prefer such an outcome, but it should not actively persuade people to break with their illiberal subculture. In some ways, Galston's liberalism of peaceful coexistence forms a middle ground between Crowder's liberalism based around an ideal of personal autonomy, and Gray's 'post-liberal' political theory, which contends that both liberal and anti-liberal subcultures should be accorded equal status.

Like Crowder, Galston starts off his arguments with definitions of the basic concepts to his theory, namely pluralism and liberalism (Galston 2002). The closest thing we come to a core of liberalism is, according to Galston, what he calls "the principle of expressive liberty", understood as a "robust though rebuttable presumption in favour of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit, within a broad range of legitimate variation in accordance with their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value" (Galston 2002:3). Protecting and improving a state of expressive liberty for both groups and individuals is in other words an important, but not always an overriding concern for liberals.

The main argument is fleshed out in three stages. In the first, he presents his definition of liberalism. The second stage is a sorting out of the various political and theoretical consequences stemming from an acceptance of both liberalism and pluralism (Galston 1999; 2002:28-78). The third and final stage describes the practical consequences of adopting Galston's perspective, concentrated around policy areas in which expressive liberty collides with concerns for civic unity in the liberal state (Galston 1991; 2002:81-132).

In defining liberalism, his quarrel lies primarily with those who assert that personal autonomy is the most central value in liberalism, most notably Joseph Raz (1986; Galston 2002:9). Instead, a concern for diversity ought to be deemed equally important:

Any liberal argument that invokes autonomy as a general rule of public action in effect takes sides in the ongoing struggle between reason and faith, reflection and tradition. Autonomy-based arguments are bound to marginalize those individuals and groups who cannot conscientiously embrace the Enlightenment impulse. To the extent that many liberals identify liberalism with the Enlightenment, they limit support for their cause and drive many citizens of goodwill – indeed many potential allies – into opposition. (Galston 2002:25-26)

The next step in Galston's argument is to devise a theory of liberal pluralism. There are "three sources" to his liberal theory, namely expressive liberty, moral pluralism, and finally political pluralism (Galston 2002:28-38). Expressive liberty is the starting-point of his liberalism, but the principle is given a characteristically pluralist interpretation: "Although expressive liberty is a good, it is not the only good, and it is certainly not unlimited" (Galston 2002:29). For Galston, it is "concrete experience", rather than elaborate theoretical conjecturing, which provides him with "the most compelling reasons for accepting some form of value pluralism" (Galston 2002:33). Most importantly, he rejects monism for being dependent on the unacceptable metaphysical dogma that the appearance of moral conflict will simply go away if we try hard enough. We must therefore substitute the monistic view with the more complicated but also the more truthful theory of moral pluralism.

The third ingredient in Galston's liberal pluralism is *political pluralism*. The perspective adopted is one indebted to several writers all sharing the belief that the state ought not to be conceived as the only source of political authority (Hirst 1989). For this reason, the state should not try to envelope all other organisations under its own control. The very existence of non-governmental authority combined with the high costs at which political control of all aspects of society come in all modern societies is for Galston in itself an argument for maintaining a liberal political order in which some things are left beyond the reach of political control.

The three building-blocks that form the basis of Galston's liberal pluralism are neatly fitted together. Value pluralism, it is said, will lead to the view that there is a wide variety of worthwhile personal objectives and lifestyles (Galston 2002:37-38). It is the truth of value pluralism that makes liberal goals such as expressive liberty and political pluralism truly important. If there really is one and only one true answer to every normative problem, then why should we value the freedom to stray from the correct answers? Similarly, why should we want diversity or political pluralism, if it is really the case that there is only one type of good life? Without the support of value pluralism – without acceptance for the idea that there are several roads to happiness and meaningful existence – Galston suggests that the reasons for valuing liberty and political pluralism vanish from view.

The kind of liberal and democratic constitution envisioned by Galston is one where numerous conflicting views are weighted against each other and power is spread out over several branches of government. The most important conclusion he reaches is that liberal pluralism will dictate that democracy must be limited by constitutional guarantees which clearly state that some areas of life are not subject to political authority and public scrutiny. Galston's liberalism is not, however, an argument which describes a specific and detailed set of economic policies. It is rather an argument about how political institutions ought to be

structured. His argument, like Crowder's, is therefore not as a decisive argument for liberalism, including liberal economic policies, even if it is a largely successful defence of liberal democracy, using moral pluralism as a point of departure.

3.6 Pluralism and politics

At the very least, there is no shortage of creativity or differences of opinion in the literature commenting on Berlin's political thought. If one reads all of the authors presented above, one could easily come to the conclusion that almost any type of political ideology could be inferred from the assumptions about morality made by Berlin. I wish however to argue in favour of two ideas about how pluralism will influence the way in which we think about political issues. The first idea is that moral pluralism will not issue directly in an especially detailed political ideology. It seems to me that the arguments made so far put too much weight on pluralism. It is believed that pluralism entails one particular political theory covering a wider range of issues, but none of these attempts are particularly convincing. The second idea is that an acceptance of moral pluralism will nevertheless have quite distinct consequences when it comes to the question of how one best ought to go about deliberating about discussing and deciding more concrete policy issues.

The argument Gray and other 'anti-liberal pluralists' have made, that an endorsement of moral pluralism leads away from liberalism towards various types of vaguely specified ideologies such as conservatism or 'post-liberalism', are insufficient at best. But it is also likely that pluralism does not lead to a very well-defined type of liberalism, which is the common assertion made by Crowder and Galston. An interesting indication of this is found in the fact that they endorse different types of liberalism. Crowder's position is quite similar to what Galston has described as 'Enlightenment liberalism', which is a form of liberalism that has personal autonomy for everyone as one of its most important goals. Galston favours by contrast an older and in many ways less demanding form of liberalism, associated with

the period immediately following the upheaval created by the Reformation in northern Europe. This type of liberalism holds that domestic tranquillity and peaceful coexistence are more central ideals than personal autonomy and equality, especially in culturally diverse societies (Galston 2002).

Much of the apparent disagreements in the literature could be reduced, at least potentially, if one separated more clearly between liberalism on one hand, and liberal democracy on the other. Liberalism is in many ways a highly contested concept with a wide variety of meanings which vary across time and space (cf. section 6.2. below). A simple illustration of this is found in the fact that words such as ‘liberalism’ and ‘liberal’ refer to different political phenomena at opposite ends of the political spectrum in the United States and Australia, which are Galston’s and Crowder’s home countries. What liberal ideologies, parties and movements actually have in common is a matter of debate, and one could perhaps more profitably view liberalism as a ‘widely extended family’ with only a few and quite general commonalities shared by most of its members (Waldron 1987; Ryan 1993).

By contrast, liberal democracy is more easily defined in a way which is not subject to local variation. What follows from moral pluralism is not a detailed version of liberalism, or for that matter post-liberalism or any other particular ideology. What does follow from pluralism is a strong preference for liberal democracy, understood as a representative form of government which admits to all its citizens the measure of negative liberty Berlin in *Two Concepts* claimed was entailed by pluralism. At least, one may view liberal democracy as *the* form of government which comes closest to admitting everyone an adequate measure of negative liberty, especially if it is compared to other forms of government which have been tried from time to time.

Liberal democracy is in turn not only compatible with both Enlightenment and post-Reformation styles of liberalism, but also other ideologies which have made their peace with

liberal democracy, such as more moderate types of conservatism or socialism. It should come as no surprise that we find all of these ideologies in the more consolidated liberal democracies around the world. They are all political tendencies which will often disagree on for instance how we ought to distribute available resources, or how the economy in general ought to be structured. Such ideologies will nevertheless contain no ambitions to abolish democracy or civil rights already admitted to each individual citizen. In fact, they do not oppose the liberal-democratic constitutional order at all, and will in constitutional matters mostly disagree about how one could improve democratic institutions further.

In essence, both liberal pluralists such as Crowder and Galston, or anti-liberal pluralists like Gray should take more seriously what Berlin actually says is entailed by pluralism. As it turns out, that is actually not that much apart from the by now legendary measure of negative liberty, which is to be admitted to everyone. A preference for liberal democracy, which is the only type of society which has truly tried to admit all of its citizen personal freedom and opportunities for political participation, is however not anything near what one today might call a complete answer to some of the more pertinent questions of how society ought to be organised. One might therefore say that pluralism is compatible with all of the more pervasive ideologies seen in most liberal democracies. It is not the case that pluralism is only compatible with liberalism, narrowly conceived as an ideology occupying the centre ground or the moderate right wing of the political spectrum in many democracies. We may therefore have to look elsewhere than in the basics of value pluralism if we are to find compelling arguments in favour of a particular political ideology or ‘package’ of more nitty-gritty economic policies.

The second idea I will present here is that pluralism will have a definite impact on how political debates and normative political analyses are to be conducted, in spite of it not issuing directly in a complete ideology. In certain respects, pluralism is a less elegant theory

of morality than its monistic alternatives, making argumentation for or against a given set of political arrangements or policy decisions a more complex undertaking. For this reason, pluralism will lead to lowered expectations about political philosophy, and its ability to supply humanity with detailed guidelines for how to organise society in the best conceivable way. Instead, an acceptance of pluralism will lead to a renewed appreciation of the practical art of politics, and politicians who may not be able to give rigorous arguments to support their actions, but which nevertheless have made significant contributions to social and economic progress (Berlin 1996). In essence, pluralism will turn us away from lofty and highly generalised theorising, towards a more practical way of thinking about politics.

It is in its ability to accommodate our sometimes mildly inconsistent views on ethical and political problems one can find pluralism's strengths – strengths that compensate for its lack of simplicity and its inability to provide us with simple answers to hard questions. Its cumbersome nature might actually become an advantage as it leaves more room for flexibility and local variation in the practical implementation of more sweeping political decisions. In essence, the upshot of pluralism is not a specific ideology, but the will to install what Berlin called a sense of reality into the normative political analyses which goes on in a working democracy. If we accept pluralism, then we will also have to accept that other people might prefer to realise other ideals than the ones which we ourselves hold most dear. A general spirit of compromise, already indicated by Lamprecht, must therefore permeate normative political deliberations about how society ought to be structured.

3.7 Conclusion

I have found myself driven to several conclusions as I have surveyed the works of Berlin and what others have written about his moral and political thought. In the first place, it appears to me that Rawls and especially Dworkin are quite correct when they assert that no conclusive argument has been given in favour of moral pluralism. They remain therefore dismissive of

pluralists who say that we have to strike a balance between our various values and ideals by intuition and practical experience alone. Instead, they do not want to give up on moral and political theorising quite as easily as Berlin is willing to do. But neither of them supplies us with a decisive argument in favour of moral monism, even if they both claim that they have found a solution to the apparent conflict between freedom and equality. So the most fundamental issue raised by reading Berlin, namely whether or not pluralism is the correct description of our moral universe, remains unresolved. That being said, pluralism has the upper hand, as it corresponds more closely to ordinary everyday experience of pervasive and permanent conflict between different values.

I have not, moreover, been able to find any arguments which convincingly support the claim made by Gray, namely that pluralism and liberalism are incompatible doctrines. It is more likely that an acceptance of moral pluralism leads to an acceptance of liberal democracy similar to what is found in nearly all contemporary Western societies. Berlin's moral and political theories are therefore not all that subversive, as Gray suggests they are at the beginning his book on Berlin's political thought (Gray 1995). Most importantly, Gray seems to change the definitions of the basic concepts in the debate he started with his book. His version of moral pluralism is not identical to what Berlin understood by pluralism, and his definitions of liberalism makes it a more controversial doctrine than it actually is in our day and age. He makes no argument for extrapolating from the fact that his own version of pluralism is incompatible with some types of liberal thought, to the more general idea that liberal democracy is incompatible with moral pluralism. His attempts to present pluralism and liberalism as potentially opposing systems of thought come to nothing because of this.

There is also an important set of criticisms of Berlin's political thought coming from the political left, who claim that his concept of negative liberty disguises the fact that the absence of government intervention is by no means enough to secure personal freedom for

everyone. Instead, these critics maintain that liberty ought to be understood more positively, and that we as a society need to distribute freedom and opportunities more actively and evenly between ourselves. If everyone is to have the measure of effective control over their own lives which we in ordinary language associate with people who are free, then we need, as a community, to limit the way in which some could use their accumulated social and economic power to control the lives of others.

It is, however, far from certain that Berlin ever held the views which are sometimes attributed to him. He did not, to be sure, ever claim that positive liberty is unimportant, or that negative liberty is the only conception of freedom which really matters. Instead, he said something which comes across as less obviously controversial, namely that certain warped positive conceptions of liberty have been misused in the past by various authoritarian regimes, and that we should maintain that an ideal of freedom deserving its name *also* has a negative side to it. Berlin believed instead that both positive and negative liberty are important ideals and worthy goals, at least up until the point where they might come into conflict with each other and other values.

Finally, we have Crowder and Galston, who have delivered persuasive arguments in favour of the idea that pluralism is compatible with some forms of liberal political thinking after all. But their more ambitious claims, that pluralism generates a positive case for one specific kind of liberalism, are ever so slightly more dubious. There is, however, in spite of the differences in their arguments, quite substantial overlap in the basic political outlook of the two authors, and in the values they wish to emphasise. One might perhaps say, therefore, that a generic liberalism, containing little more than a defence of liberal democracy, follows from pluralism, but perhaps not one specific interpretation of what liberalism actually is.

The most prominent feature of Berlin's political thought is however his interest in and attentiveness to real world politics and particularly the complex history behind much of

what goes on in contemporary politics. This attention serves not only to set him apart from many contemporary political theorists, but also as an inspiration for his moral pluralism and his moderate perspective on politics. It might very well be true, as Crowder and Galston claims, that there is within the boundaries of ‘pure theory’ some sustainable inference to be made from ethical pluralism to a specific type of liberalism. It is however doubtful whether such a theoretical argument might actually give us any extra tools to build better societies and better lives for those who inhabit them.

Berlin’s historically informed and worldly approach to political theory stands in contrast to what have become the predominant approaches to normative political theory in our day. Political theory has in many ways become an academic exercise, general and abstract in character, touching only fleetingly with the outside world (Miller 2008). While much has been gained in stringency and concision of thought, a lot is lost in this retreat from the nitty-gritty world of practical politics (Swift and White 2008).

The most important challenge for political theory as a field of enquiry in the coming years will be to become *politically relevant* again. What I wish to suggest is that we need a continuation of Berlin’s approach to political philosophy and intellectual history, adapted to today’s world. It is also evident that there is a manifest need to connect political theory and the empirical social sciences, both in order to install a better sense of reality in the former, and to add an ethical and philosophical dimension to the latter. Political theory must, in essence, once again dare to invoke its alternate names of public and practical philosophy.

PART II: KARL POPPER

4. Karl Popper – knowledge, openness, and democracy

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will first of all discuss a few selected topics from Karl Popper's epistemology and philosophy of science. Of special interest to students of politics is perhaps his rejection of historicism, or the idea that the course of human history is, at least in outline, determined by a set of 'inexorable laws'. I will then describe some of his most important moral and political ideas, particularly ideas about how we could create a more open and democratic society. The next chapter will present some of the remarkably different interpretations of Popper's political theories.

Popper was, at least compared to Berlin, quite visibly much more of a philosophical system-builder. His works often give the impression that his political thought somehow builds on his ideas about human knowledge. This is most perceptibly found in his most important work, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, which is a large monograph covering topics ranging from theoretical epistemology via the philosophy of science to ethical theory. It is in addition a rather imaginative history of western philosophy. *The Open Society* is however primarily a political book, which combines criticism of other thinkers with the exploration of Popper's own political ideas.

Popper gave his philosophical system, his general perspectives on science and political problems, the name 'critical rationalism'. As the name suggests, critical rationalism is a kind of rationalism. Rationalism is, in Popper's own vocabulary, the belief that it is possible for us to come to know more about the world we inhabit, if we make an effort to understand it better. Another and perhaps more descriptive name for rationalism, also used by Popper, is 'epistemological optimism'. We see that Popper is using the word rationalism in an unusual sense, which includes both Cartesian rationalism and Baconian empiricism (Popper [1945] 1966a:224f; Markie 2004). Popper claimed to be both a rationalist and an

empiricist – he believed that we need both our creativity and our ability to experience the external world in order to produce new knowledge.

Popper's main opponent within the rationalist camp is an idea called 'comprehensive rationalism', or the belief that "any assumption which cannot be supported either by argument or by experience is to be discarded" (Popper [1945] 1966a:230). To Popper, our knowledge of the world is of a provisional nature, and should always be met with a measure of scepticism. It is not the case, according to Popper, that science leads to certain knowledge of the world. Accordingly, none of our beliefs ought in principle to be considered beyond the scope of rational criticism (Popper 1935; [1959] 2002; [1963] 2002a; Wiener Kreis 1929).

The essence, if I may be so bold, of critical rationalism is therefore that it is a combination of epistemological optimism and the belief that we could and should criticise even our most cherished and seemingly self-evident beliefs. In fact, it is through this critical attitude towards what we think we know that our knowledge of the world increases. It is moreover through criticism and refutation of traditional beliefs, as well as the subsequent formation of new beliefs which better explains what goes on in the world, we come to know more than we did at the outset.

Of special interest to Popper is the interesting phenomenon that the theories of history and society which have informed and inspired the enemies of the open society have been poorly conceived. Popper's criticism of Plato, Hegel, and Marx – among western philosophers the three main enemies of the open society in Popper's grand narrative – goes therefore to the theoretical core of their political thought. Their political theories are founded on a philosophy of history which according to Popper is logically flawed. Consequently, their normative political theories and analyses have to be rejected as well.

The Open Society, which for all intents and purposes is Popper's *magnum opus*, is above all a powerful argument in favour of liberal democracy as well as economic planning

and redistribution, making it a potent testament of a new political outlook which in many ways came to the forefront of political discussions during the last World War. This new outlook was and could indeed still be described as fundamentally liberal, and was simultaneously formulated by leading Liberal thinkers and policy developers such as John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. Like other and earlier proponents of what may be described as ‘new liberalism’ or ‘organised liberalism’ such as L. T. Hobhouse and Eduard Bernstein one may also describe their common political outlook as a relatively moderate and unflinchingly democratic brand of socialism.

Their shared ideas and policy proposals was however subsequently most systematically implemented in several countries under the auspices of social democratic rather than Liberal parties, and may because of its commitment to democracy and planning be described as a new brand of democratic socialism. In fact, Popper’s political theories and analyses bear a strong resemblance to modern-day social democracy, while Liberal parties to some extent have abandoned the interventionist ‘new liberalism’ of Keynes, Beveridge, and Popper, and have instead adopted more traditionally liberal or ‘neoliberal’ policies.

The most fundamental political goal for Popper is however to open up society, or to move it from a closed, tribal society to an open society which is more conducive to the growth of human knowledge. A key feature of the open society is that it is open to criticism, and that it tries to accommodate the free exchange and expression of ideas. Popper mentions several mechanisms which might help to open up a society – and among the most important are education, democracy, and legislation defining and defending individual rights and liberties, including freedom from want.

The better society is a society where we eliminate our false beliefs instead of each other. We must therefore accept the basic tenet of fallibilism: *“I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth”* (Popper [1945] 1966a:225). If we

accept and adopt that attitude, it will affect almost everything we do, especially when we consider how society ought to be organised, or what we ought to do in order to improve our own lot. That way, Popper may be fruitfully described as both a social democrat and a liberal; he was a liberal because he wanted a generous measure of personal freedom and democracy, but he was also a social democrat because he in addition wanted economic policies which would enable everyone to make effective use of the freedom and political rights admitted to them.

4.2 Science and the growth of human knowledge

4.2.1 Early problems

Popper's epistemology and philosophy of science, in his native German often collectively denoted as *Erkenntnistheorie*, was above all formed by his encounters with the Vienna Circle during a ten-year period from around 1925. By 1936, however, the ever increasingly violent nature of Austrian politics had led both Popper and many of the leading members of the Vienna Circle into exile. This decade was in many ways the formative years for Popper, during which he forged new perspectives on the fundamental problems of epistemology (Hacohen 2000). I choose not to treat his more recent discussions in epistemology at any greater level of detail, mostly because they primarily add detail to his earlier discussions. They also have little bearing on his political thought, which became more or less settled at an earlier date (cf. though Popper 1972; 1982; 1982a; 1983).

One can see the influence of the Circle clearly in the way Popper adopts large parts of the vocabulary they developed. He also shares with them the idea that all sciences are basically the same activity, because they search for the truth and use the same principles to decide whether a given theory is trustworthy or not. He differs from the leading members of the Circle, however, in that he is not as adamant in his rejection of metaphysics or as interested in finding an inductive method as they were (Magee 1985; Popper [1976] 2002b).

The Vienna Circle, whose official name was *Verein Ernst Mach*, was named after the Austrian physicist and philosopher who claimed science was an activity striving to describe the world truthfully *and* economically (Mach 1905). Mach's ideas made him the inspiration for a whole new generation of philosophers interested in epistemology. The Circle advocated a position called 'the scientific outlook on the world' (*wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*), which said that if we would only let experience and logic rather than metaphysics guide our actions, it would be possible to build a better world for ourselves and our posterity. Less rhetorically loaded, their positions were also called 'logical empiricism' and 'logical positivism', emphasising that logic and positive experience are the basic building blocks of human knowledge (Wiener Kreis 1929; Jørgensen 1951; Ayer 1959).

Popper was however hardly a card-carrying member of the Vienna Circle, but it is clear that he shared with its principal members a general epistemological optimism, as well a common idea about what the most important problems of epistemology actually were. It is thus only natural that it was in a series of pamphlets associated with the Vienna Circle that Popper's first published monograph, the *Logik der Forschung*, appeared in the fall of 1934 (Popper 1935; [1959] 2002). Popper was, in short, a sort of 'loyal opposition' to the Circle whose independent way of addressing these problems set him apart from the leading members of the Vienna Circle.

A second source of inspiration for Popper was his disenchantment with Karl Marx' analyses of society and the economy (Popper [1976] 2002b). Marx described his analyses of nineteenth century capitalism and his prediction that capitalism faced an imminent and violent collapse as a scientific theory or 'natural law'. To Popper, however, it became ever more striking how Marxian analyses of contemporary society contradicted his own immediate experience. It was however the way in which his fellow communists in Vienna

tried every trick in the book to save these analyses from refutation that led him to the conclusion that Marxism was a far cry from the scientific status to which it pretended.

The reverence with which Marxists treated their pet theories was to Popper strikingly different from the way even very successful theories like Newton's laws of motion were discussed and criticised in the natural sciences. But it was also the callousness with which committed Marxists regarded human lives as expendable in the struggle to overthrow the present order of society, which led Popper to regard Marxism as a deeply immoral system of thought. These perceptions led him in turn to consider more closely how, and in what ways, pseudoscience differed from real science. This problem of demarcation, of how to separate scientific discussions from other types of communication, became the start of a life-long interest in epistemology.

4.2.2 Two fundamental problems of human understanding

Popper claimed in the *Logik der Forschung* that he had solved what he thought was 'the two fundamental problems of epistemology', namely 'the problem of induction' and 'the problem of demarcation' (Popper 1935; 1979; 1979a; [1959] 2002; [1963] 2002a). His proposed solutions to these two problems are the cornerstones of Popper's ideas of how the scientific enterprise works – or at least should work – and more generally how human beings come to know more about the world they inhabit.

The problem of induction was originally put forward in 1748 by David Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Later, it simply became known as 'Hume's Problem'. The basic idea behind the problem is that we do not have a procedure to make logically sound inferences from a greater number of statements about particular observations to general or universal statements (Hume [1748] 2007). From the observation of hundreds or even thousands of black ravens, for instance, one cannot in a logically valid way infer that *all* ravens all over the world are black. We cannot preclude that we will encounter a white,

purple, or striped raven around the next corner. Since we cannot conclusively *prove* that future observations will be similar to past and present observations, we cannot conclusively decide whether or not general hypotheses or theories are true or false. Nevertheless, the formation and criticism of such general theories is what science is all about. In Popper's words, this problem of induction becomes *the* fundamental problem of epistemology:

Wir können immer nur bestimmte Ereignisse beobachten und immer nur eine beschränkte Anzahl von Ereignissen. Dennoch stellen die empirischen Wissenschaften *allgemeine Sätze* auf, zum Beispiel die Naturgesetze, Sätze also, die für eine unbeschränkte Anzahl von Ereignissen gelten sollen. Mit welchem Recht können solche Sätze aufgestellt werden? Was meint man eigentlich mit diesen Sätzen? (...) In anderer Ausdrucksweise: Können Wirklichkeitsaussagen, die sich auf Erfahrung gründen, allgemeingültig sein? (Oder beiläufig gesprochen: Kann man mehr wissen, als man weiß?) (Popper 1979:3)

Inductive reasoning is nevertheless an indispensable part of how human beings confront the world they inhabit. We simply make inductive inferences all the time, and cannot – literally speaking – live without them. If we did not put our trust in inductive inferences which we have no logical reasons to trust, but which we have no other compelling reasons to distrust either, it would be hard to imagine how we could sustain ourselves over a prolonged period of time. The problem of induction is therefore centred on the idea that we are entirely dependent on inductive inferences which are not strictly speaking logically sound, in order to be able to deal with the world in a reasonably purposeful way.

Popper's solution to the problem of induction is to turn inductive arguments on their heads, and translate them into a type of deductive arguments. If we, for the sake of argument, hold general theories and hypotheses to be provisionally true up until the point where they have been shown to be incorrect, we end up with a set of guidelines, according to Popper, of how to decide which general statements could be considered trustworthy and actionable conjectures, and which statements we instead should count as refuted. The simple idea behind Popper's manoeuvre is that we cannot infer from a plethora of similar observations

that the next comparable observation will be analogous to others made in the past. But we can say that the general theory has been proven wrong if enough observations contradicting it have been made. He called this manoeuvre ‘the hypothetico-deductive method’, or quite simply ‘the method of trial and error’. In essence, we ought to try as hard as we can to refute our best guesses, and then discard the ones which turn out to be mistaken.

Generally speaking, a single counter-example is rarely enough to conclusively disprove a general hypothesis (Popper [1959] 2002:57f). But if our experience over time shows that the hypothesis is misleading, we have good reasons to replace it with a new conjecture. Instead of trying to infer general statements and theories from a set of particular observations, Popper wants us to specify the conditions under which a general statement must be rejected. If these conditions are met, the theory is refuted. At that point, the challenge becomes to construct a new theory more in line with our observations, and which also explains why previous theories have failed. That way, our provisional knowledge of the world grows when we try to construct theories which are more in harmony with our experience, and which explain why alternative theories have failed.

Popper’s second fundamental problem of epistemology is called the problem of demarcation. How could we distinguish science, which is supposed to produce dependable knowledge, from pseudoscience, which might lead us astray both intellectually and morally? Since pseudoscience might look like science on the surface, even if it does not produce truly new knowledge and might merely supply us with new kinds of nonsense, we need a set of criteria which would clearly define what science is. What is it about for instance modern astronomy which sets it apart from astrology?

Popper’s solution to the problem of demarcation is related to his way of solving the problem of induction. It is activities which strive to falsify their own assumptions and hypotheses, even their most cherished presuppositions, which are to be counted as sciences

(Popper [1959] 2002). Practices which for some reason hold some of its assertions to be above scrutiny stand conversely on the other side of line drawn by Popper, as fundamentally unscientific pursuits. Prototypical examples of pseudoscience are according to this criterion astrology and theology, but also dogmatic Marxism and some equally dogmatic types of psychoanalysis, because of their almost inherent unwillingness to criticise some of its own fundamental assumptions.

This is not to say that science does not build on presuppositions which are hardly ever criticised. Rather, it is the way in which all of its assumptions are in principle, if not always in practice, open to criticism and refutation, which makes an activity scientific. While most scientific activities try to test hypotheses at a fairly high level of detail and specificity, scientists should always be open to new ideas which might potentially refute assumptions which undergird their entire field of research. For Popper, the revolution in theoretical physics around the turn of the century, when scientists such as Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr amended old ideas in their areas of research, stood as a model of this open and critically scientific frame of mind. It is, basically, not the employment of any specific type of method or technique which makes science scientific, but rather the open attitude with which new ideas and theories are met. And while this is an ideal which might be a far cry from how ‘the scientific community’ actually operates on a daily basis, it is still an ideal which that community should try to emulate and take seriously.

4.2.3 The poverty of historicism

Popper claimed furthermore that there was a connection between his political thought, as it appears in *The Open Society* and later essays, and the theory of human understanding he developed in his other works. It is primarily his book *The Poverty of Historicism*, originally published as a series of articles in 1944 and 1945, which forges a connection between Popper’s epistemology and his political theories (Popper [1957] 2002c). In it, he shows how

totalitarian ideologies build on theories of human understanding which are worlds apart from the scientific attitude he tried to describe and hold up as an ideal.

In Popper's vocabulary, historicism is the claim that the history of the world follows some unalterable and predictable patterns. One can, therefore, if one has discovered those patterns, become a prophet who will be able to describe what the future of humanity will be. Integrated in this mode of thought is the idea that our moral values and ways of thinking is bounded by the historical era in which we live. That way, criticisms of historicist theories could be brushed aside quite easily as a piece of temporal parochialism or 'false consciousness', as the more orthodox followers of Marxism are prone to do. Historicism is also closely connected to what Popper calls holism. For the holist, society is to be likened to an organism with a memory and a capability to act on its own, no matter who is part of that society at any given point in time. It is therefore not individuals, but different types of collectives which are the truly important actors on the stage of world history. Mere individuals are primarily thought of as expendable cogs in the machinery, or at the very best a cell in the vast organism that is society (Popper [1945] 1966; [1945] 1966a; [1957] 2002c).

A particularly mature expression of historicism and holism is to be found in the works of Karl Marx, who openly build on the idea that he has discovered the 'natural laws' which guide human history. The final breakup of capitalist society and the transition to other and according to Marx better types of societies are (at least according to Popper) presented as unavoidable future events. People living in the here and now can at most facilitate or sabotage this transition, but they can never alter the course of history. Marx is perhaps at his most lucid in his preface to the first volume of *Das Kapital*, where he claims that the most we can do is to 'soften the birth-pains' of the new society, which eventually and inevitably will force the old society off the stage:

Auch wenn eine Gesellschaft dem Naturgesetz ihrer Bewegung auf die Spur gekommen ist – und es ist der letzte Endzweck dieses Werks, das Ökonomische

Bewegungsgesetz der modernen Gesellschaft zu enthüllen – kann sie naturgemäße Entwicklungsphasen weder überspringen noch wegdekretieren. Aber sie kann die Geburtswehen abkürzen und mildern. (Marx [1867] 1975:15-16)

In much the same way, albeit presented in a less systematic way than Marx did, fascists have claimed that human existence is inevitably defined by the struggle between stronger and weaker life forms. It is therefore only the well-disciplined *Volk* or the thoroughly obedient society which will be able to sustain themselves in the perennial struggle for survival (Hitler [1925/27] 1943:311-362; Mussolini [1935] 1968; cf. Ofstad 1971). The crucial ingredient in the fascist frame of mind is the willingness to think of various collectives, rather than individuals, as the truly decisive actors. From that idea, the distance to the idea that human beings might be superfluous and expendable is chillingly short.

Historicism is according to Popper characterised by a dogmatic epistemology. The historicist will claim that some of the beliefs contained in his theory are unshakably true and therefore beyond the scope of rational criticism. That way, historicism is transformed from a theory claiming scientific status for itself, to a set of dogma which forms the foundation of a static view of the world. Popper later went on to demonstrate that historicist theories of society and human history were poorly conceived and unable to bear any intellectual fruit, in the sense that we will not learn anything new from these theories (Popper 1982a). Put briefly, he states that the course of “human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge”, an idea which ought to be fairly uncontroversial (Popper [1957] 2002c:xi). But we cannot, says Popper, predict the future growth of our base of scientific knowledge, or the direction that growth will take. Therefore, we cannot scientifically predict the future course of human history, not even in outline.

Consequently, there can be no “scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction” (Popper [1957] 2002c:xii). For historicism to be correct, one needs to reject epistemological optimism altogether, and instead adopt an attitude in which it

is thought that the totality of potential human knowledge have been revealed once and for all to some intellectual ‘authority’ at one point in time. This latter idea is so ludicrous to Popper that any theory which implicitly or explicitly builds on this assumption – that we cannot come to know more than some of us already know – must surely be a philosophical canard.

4.2.4 From epistemology to political theory

One important point of departure for Popper’s political thought is his rejection of dogmatic ways of thinking, and the ideologies which build on them. The idea that all human beings – even Plato or Marx – are fundamentally fallible, has in Popper’s book a set of significant political consequences. If we cannot know anything besides pure trivialities with absolute certainty, it follows that our answers to political questions might also be wrong, since our knowledge of political and historical processes is not exempted from the general uncertainty connected with any attempt to get to know more about the world.

Fallibilism will, according to Popper, issue in a wish to limit the harmful consequences of the mistakes we make. That way, his critical rationalism leads him to an idea he has described as *political protectionism*, which entails that the state ought to protect individuals from avoidable harm (Popper [1945] 1966:111f). The immediate background for Popper’s shift to political theory was his fear that critical thinking itself was under threat from various authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies. Only liberal democracy can guarantee a favourable political environment for critical thinking. Those who want to see human knowledge grow and ignorance reduced, must do what is needed to secure and diffuse an open and democratic type of society. This is the positive side of Popper’s political thought; in addition to his critique of political theories which build on dogma, he is also led to the idea that liberal democracy is worth fighting for.

His basic analysis is found in a small book of interviews called *The Lesson of This Century*. In it, he presents his idea that totalitarian challenges to democracy during the

twentieth century constituted a real and potentially global threat to individual liberty. It was of course not the case that Popper, the committed anti-historicist, thought that democracy would overcome the totalitarian ideologies because the natural laws of history would dictate such a turn of events. Quite the contrary, he claims that totalitarianism might have triumphed, making ‘the age of democracy’ a very short parenthesis in the annals of human history. If that happened, we could have witnessed a lasting annihilation of effective opposition to totalitarianism, and humanity would have plunged itself into a long period of stagnation comparable to the Middle Ages in Europe (Popper 1997).

It is according to Popper only possible to maintain one’s ability for critical thought in societies which admits its citizens the freedom of conscience and expression – what Popper called the open society. Consequently, those who value knowledge and truth ought to work for the establishment and maintenance of open societies. It is moreover the case that closed societies has to build on the idea that some beliefs, for instance those contained in an official political ideology or religious doctrine, should not be criticised. It is, accordingly, a close connection between one’s epistemological attitudes, and which answers one gives to the question of how society ought to be organised.

4.3 The morality of critical rationalism

4.3.1 Negative utilitarianism

Popper’s philosophical writings are uncharacteristically brief when it comes to issues of ethics and especially ethical theory. Popper never described a complete moral theory of his own, but he was nevertheless an intensely moral thinker who in part grounded many of his ideas in sincerely held ethical convictions. Especially discussions of abstract or foundational problems of ethics come across as relatively succinct in his works. It would therefore be a wild exaggeration to say that Popper was a particularly systematic moral philosopher. It might very well he did not find it worthwhile to put down a detailed and systematic sort of

ethical theory on paper. It is also likely that he found it exceedingly difficult to write coherently and truly interestingly about such matters. He is also concerned about the prospect of not being able to produce any new insights, and that his efforts would amount to just 'hot air' (Popper [1976] 2002b:225-230).

As a result, the parts of his writings which discuss topics from ethical theory are not as exhaustive as his theories of human knowledge and his normative political analyses. It is primarily in *The Open Society* one can find some of his better known, but always rather epigrammatic evaluations of different modes of ethical thinking. Popper made however frequent appeals to his moral convictions whenever he tried to say clearly why he held the views he defended in normative political theory and epistemology. It is the potentially good consequences of critical rationalism, especially the possibility that a truly critical attitude will reduce the amount of violence and suffering in the world which appeals to him. Dogmatic thinking will according to Popper create unnecessary suffering and violence, and we should for that reason alone avoid it (cf. Popper [1963] 2002a:477-488).

In political ethics, Popper's most deep-seated beliefs could be summed up under the heading of 'negative utilitarianism'. More conventional utilitarianism states, basically, that we ought to promote or maximise happiness for the greatest number of people. The doctrine of negative utilitarianism advocated by Popper turns this precept on its head, and claims instead that we should minimise the amount of avoidable human suffering. This is an idea, which according to Popper ought to lead us away from Utopianism, historicism, and irrationalism. Instead of trying to make society perfect, we should instead try to make 'piecemeal' or incremental improvements to our own present lot.

The fundamental maxim of negative utilitarianism – 'avoid suffering and violence' – is in addition more of a rule of thumb than a duty which Popper thinks ought always to determine our political actions. Many types of consequentialism, Popper's negative

utilitarianism included, could be stated in a way which makes it a merely partial answer to what we ought to do and how we ought to organise society. It is not a complete ethical theory, but rather an integral part of Popper's eclectic perspective on morality. Negative utilitarianism is also compatible with a commitment to the Kantian dictum that one should treat others as ends in themselves, and never merely as means to other ends. Negative utilitarianism is in one footnote to *The Open Society* for this reason thought of as one in a group of three important precepts for political action:

Although my own position is, I believe, clearly enough implied in the text, I may perhaps briefly formulate what seem to me the most important principles of humanitarian and equalitarian ethics:

- (1) Tolerance towards all those who are not intolerant and who do not propagate intolerance. (...) This implies, especially, that the moral decisions of others should be treated with respect, as long as such decisions do not conflict with the principle of toleration.
- (2) The recognition that all moral urgency has its basis in the urgency of suffering or pain. I suggest, for this reason, to replace the utilitarian formula 'Aim at the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people', or briefly, 'maximize happiness', by the formula 'The least amount of avoidable suffering for all', or briefly 'minimize suffering'. Such a simple formula can, I believe be made one of the fundamental principles (admittedly not the only one) of public policy. (...)
- (3) The fight against tyranny; or in other words, the attempt to safe-guard the other principles by the institutional means of a legislation rather than the benevolence of persons in power. (Popper [1945] 1966:235n6)

Instead of describing how society as a whole should be organised, this negatively defined doctrine urges us to get down to business, and try to alleviate suffering whenever and wherever possible. From an ethical point of view, says Popper, there is no symmetry between happiness and suffering. Human suffering has a direct moral appeal – the appeal from one human being to his fellow man for help and assistance. The demand to increase happiness for those who are already well off does not carry with it the same sense of urgency. Instead of maximising happiness we should therefore instead focus our best efforts at reducing avoidable suffering for all, and try to distribute unavoidable suffering as equally

as possible. In this sense, negative utilitarianism issues in the idea that we should alleviate suffering in the here and now, and eschew dreams of total human happiness and fulfilment:

The politician who adopts this method may or may not have a blueprint of society before his mind, he may or may not hope that mankind will one day realize an ideal state, and achieve happiness and perfection on earth. But he will be aware that perfection, if at all attainable, is far distant, and that every generation of men, and therefore also the living, have a claim; perhaps not so much a claim to be made happy, for there are no institutional means of making a man happy, but a claim not to be made unhappy, where it can be avoided. They have a claim to be given all possible help, if they suffer. The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good. (Popper [1945] 1966a:158)

Popper's ideas about how ideas shape the development of human societies contribute to the political potency of negative utilitarianism. He concludes *The Open Society* with the idea that Utopianism and historicism – key ingredients in totalitarian ideology – has led to much avoidable human suffering. Gradualism and democracy will on the other hand lead to less suffering. From a moral point of view which emphasises the importance of avoiding human hardship and violence, it should be relatively easy to choose between these two alternatives.

It is especially the idea that the present order of society has to be overturned in a revolution, or that we need to break down society entirely in order to improve it, which Popper reacts against (Popper [1963] 2002a:477-488). Any such basket-turning event must by its very nature include the use of force against disbelievers, moderates and potential traitors to the cause. In addition, the attempt to create a new order according to some premeditated plan will almost certainly have large unexpected and often calamitous consequences. Revolution is therefore at best a risky solution to whatever problems we face in the here and now. If one truly wants to alleviate human suffering one ought therefore, at least in most cases, to adopt a more gradualist approach to practical policy-making.

4.3.2 The humanitarian theory of justice

So what should we do next, if we accept Popper's idea that we should let our political actions be guided by the need to reduce the amount of violence and alleviate suffering? What Popper ultimately calls for is a more 'results-oriented' way of thinking about politics. This immediately sets his political ideas apart from Marxism and other political theories soaked in historicism, which claims that the tidal wave of historical laws is almost entirely outside our control, and that the most we can do is to open the floodgates and wait for history to happen.

Popper's moderately consequentialist approach to political ethics also sets him apart from political ideas which tend to view the methods employed in achieving some political goal are more important than the actual results achieved. Both dogmatic types of socialism and equally dogmatic brands of liberalism are political theories which tend to put much emphasis on how things are done, and relatively little emphasis on concrete results. Adherents of such theories tend to focus for instance on the importance of either public or private ownership. At the same time they come across as inattentive to what actually works, and if their reforms actually improve things. Negative utilitarianism points therefore in the direction of an empirical approach to politics, where one is open to new ideas, as long as they are compatible with a gradualist strategy of making the world a less awful place to live. Some social experiments are however always disallowed, namely those that demand that we should tear down everything and build something new from the rubble.

Popper's political ethics has however also a positive side. It is not only the avoidance and alleviation of suffering which is important to him. His so-called 'humanitarian theory of justice' appears as an aside in *The Open Society*, as an alternative to what Popper believed was Plato's answer to the question "What does it mean to be just?". This question was the point of departure in *The Republic*, which was described by Popper as "probably the most elaborate monograph on justice ever written" (Popper [1945] 1966:93). Popper, however,

thought that Plato's answers to that question were totalitarian in theory and consequence. As an alternative, he therefore tried to describe a 'humanitarian' alternative:

What do we really mean when we speak of 'Justice'? I do not think that verbal questions of this kind are particularly important, or that it is possible to make a definite answer to them, since such terms are always used in various senses. However, I think that most of us, especially those whose general outlook is humanitarian, mean something like this: (a) an equal distribution of the burden of citizenship, i.e. of those limitations of freedom which are necessary in social life; (b) equal treatment of the citizens before the law, provided, of course, that (c) the laws show neither favour nor disfavour towards individual citizens or groups or classes; (d) impartiality of the courts of justice; and (e) an equal share in the advantages (and not only in the burden) which membership of the state may offer to its citizens. (Popper [1945] 1966:89)

Plato, who is not a humanitarian in the sense in which Popper employed that term, meant almost exactly the opposite when he spoke of justice:

The humanitarian theory of justice makes three main demands or proposals, namely (a) the equalitarian principle proper, i.e. the proposal to eliminate 'natural' privileges, (b) the general principle of individualism, and (c) the principle that it should be the task and the purpose of the state to protect the freedom of its citizens. To each of these political demands and proposals corresponds a directly opposite principle of Platonism, namely (a¹) the principle of natural privilege, (b¹) the general principle of holism or collectivism, and (c¹) the principle that it should be the task and the purpose of the individual to maintain, and to strengthen, the stability of the state. (Popper [1945] 1966:94)

There is a strong egalitarian inclination in Popper's humanitarian theory of justice. It is clear from the brief quotes given above that Popper's idea of justice goes well beyond mere formal equality. What his theory of justice demands is something more, namely that human beings should be treated – and treat each other – as equals. Privilege of class should for this reason be abolished. It is in short a stark contrast to Plato's dream of a static and hierarchical society in which everybody know their place and perform their proper functions:

Plato identifies justice with the principle of class rule and class privilege. For the principle that every class should attend to its own business means, briefly and bluntly, that *the state is just if the ruler rules, if the worker works, and if the slave slaves*. It will be seen that Plato's concept of justice is fundamentally different from

our ordinary view as analysed above. Plato calls class privilege ‘just’, while we usually mean by justice rather the absence of such privilege. But the difference goes further than that. We mean by justice some kind of equality in the treatment of *individuals*, while Plato considers justice not as a relationship between individuals, but as a property of the *whole state*, based upon a relationship between its classes. The state is just if it is healthy, strong, united – stable. (Popper [1945] 1966:90, author’s own emphasis)

It is not entirely clear from the outset, however, how detailed a programme for political action to which Popper’s theory of negative utilitarianism and his humanitarian theory of justice amounts. These theories, which form the very basis for his normative political analyses, do however point in the direction of a general commitment to liberal democracy. They also lead to a corresponding rejection of more traditional ways of organising society around privileges instead of equal civil and political rights, as well as a rejection of more novel types of political authoritarianism and especially totalitarianism.

The combination of equal rights and individualism also point in the direction of an active state. In *The Open Society*, it is clear that the author thinks of the well-designed democratic state as a guardian of freedom (cf. section 4.4.2 below). It is however all too clear to Popper that personal freedom, especially an equal distribution of such freedom, is a very fragile state of affairs which will require a vigilant state if it is to become a lasting feature of human society. He is therefore most certainly no proponent of *laissez-faire* economic policies, simply because experience has shown that such policies will lead to an unequal distribution of freedom – and in the end lead to much avoidable human suffering (Popper [1945] 1966:111).

4.4 The politics of critical rationalism

4.4.1 Rationality, freedom, and democracy

Popper’s normative political theories begin with his conceptions of rationality and criticism.

A natural point of departure is his views of how a society could encourage or discourage

science. He is particularly worried about the quite recent development of a new kind of closed society based around totalitarian ideologies which contain the belief that “the state is everything, and the individual nothing” (Popper [1945] 1966a:31). In such societies, it is often the case that science has been put under close surveillance by the state. To Popper, totalitarianism was a threat which, if it managed to undermine democratic institutions and replace them with a dictatorial system of government, could put science and indeed all kinds of critical thinking in jeopardy (Popper 1997).

Popper is in several books and essays deeply worried about the prospects of securing a place for science in society. Knowledge cannot grow freely in totalitarian societies, precisely because science is an activity which needs a generous measure of intellectual elbow room in order to function properly. Science can only thrive in a society where it is possible to adopt a critical attitude towards all kinds of ideas, including the official ideology of the society surrounding the enquiring scientist. One can of course, at least in theory, conjure up the rather hazy image of enlightened despotism, or societies in which scientific but not political dissent can thrive. It is however – and this much was clear to Popper as well – a very short step from the idea that science ought not to be stifled to the idea that society ought to be governed in a democratic way.

To Popper, nothing short of liberal democracy would be acceptable to the person who wants to encourage and take part in the collective pursuit of truth called science. The open society is in many ways an ideal which is outlined in the negative by Popper, in the sense he is more anxious to describe what the open society is not, rather than what it actually is. The open society is quite simply the opposite of the closed, organic, and tribal society. The closed society, on the other hand, is a society which sees itself as a nearly perfect, harmonious totality, where everyone knows his or her place within that society. It is a

society where criticism of the present order, or the direction in which society is heading, is strongly discouraged or even outlawed.

The open society is however something more than the mere avoidance of a closed society. Popper's idea of an open society is also a positive vision of a self-critical and democratic society, which above all is open to new ideas. It is a society which encourages its members to look for the truth. In many ways, the scientific ideal points directly in the direction of a society where everyone has the opportunity to investigate and solve whichever problems grab their attention. But the ideal goes further than that; it also demands that all of us should be free to criticise ideas put forward by others.

That is why the ideal of an open society entails the establishment of democratic institutions. The government of open societies has to be responsive to rational criticism. If the government is not responsive, the society in question is not open in the Popperian sense. Holders of public office are no less human than anyone else, and occasionally they become emotionally attached to some of their pet ideas. It is therefore important that it is possible to remove them from office without having to resort to violence, if a majority of citizens become convinced that the government clings to erroneous theories and that other ideas produce better public policies and are generally speaking more appropriate.

The Popperian vision of the open society is hesitant and gradualist down to its very core. It is open to bold new ideas, but only those ideas which may lead to gradual change can become public policy in a society which is already sufficiently open. The high costs which might potentially arise from committing society to radical political theories should according to Popper alone lead to the rejection of such theories. If one cannot rephrase one's radical demands in terms of limited reform, the responsible member of society should withdraw such demands, precisely because of the high risks and unexpected consequences involved if such demands are implemented.

The name Popper gave to his preference for gradualism was ‘piecemeal social engineering’. To Popper, the idea of piecemeal social engineering was “the most central point in our analysis” (Popper [1945] 1966a:125). The idea carves out a clear alternative to thinkers like Plato and Marx, as Plato wants to arrest all change, and Marx wants to put society through a period of revolutionary upheaval – and only then arrest all change. The attitude to political reform embodied in the concept of piecemeal social engineering is by contrast open-ended, and accepts the idea that the further development of human societies is a never-ending undertaking, no matter how many small improvements one is able to bring about. The final goal is of no importance, the movement is everything.

According to Popper, Plato sent political theorists on a wild goose chase which continues to this day. Plato made the question ‘Who should rule?’ into one of the most fundamental questions of normative political theory. This question is of minor importance, and creates according to Popper much confusion. Instead we should rather ask how we can organise society and its institutions in such a way that people holding erroneous beliefs do the least amount of damage if they come to power. With this novel approach to normative political analysis in hand, we are better suited to strike a more suitable balance between change and continuity – a balance which is essential if we want a world with less suffering and more protection of individual liberty than we have today:

But if we approach political theory from a different angle, then we find that far from solving any fundamental problems, we have merely skipped over them, by assuming that the question ‘Who should rule?’ is fundamental. For even those who share this assumption of Plato’s admit that political rulers are not always sufficiently ‘good’ or ‘wise’ (we need not worry about the precise meaning of these terms), and that it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely. If that is granted, then we must ask whether political thought should not face from the beginning the possibility of bad government; whether we should not prepare for the worst leaders, and hope for the best. But this leads to a new approach to the problem of politics, for it forces us to replace the question: *Who should rule?* by the new question: *How can we so organize political institutions so that bad or*

incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage? (Popper [1945] 1966:120-121, author's own emphasis)

4.4.2 Political protectionism and 'planning for freedom'

The humanitarian theory of justice, discussed below in section 4.3.2., leads to a particular 'view of the state', namely that the state should be thought of as an instrument of protection against violence and other forms of oppression and exploitation, so that every person under its control can know both safety and freedom:

What I demand from the state is protection; not only for myself, but for others too. I demand protection for my own freedom and for other people's. I do not wish to live at the mercy of anybody who has the larger fists or the bigger guns. In other words, I wish to be protected against aggression from other men. (...) I am perfectly ready to see my own freedom of action somewhat curtailed by the state, provided I can obtain protection of that freedom which remains, since I know that some limitations of my freedom are necessary; for instance, I must give up my 'freedom' to attack, if I want the state to support the defence against any attack. But I demand that the fundamental purpose of the state should not be lost sight of; I mean, the protection of that freedom which does not harm other citizens. Thus I demand that the state must limit the freedom of the citizens as equally as possible, and not beyond what is necessary for achieving an equal limitation of freedom. (Popper [1945] 1966:109-110)

We should notice how Popper's idea of negative utilitarianism is intertwined with his idea of political protectionism, as well his ideas about which questions are most important in normative political theory. What matters is what the state does, and how competently it does it. It is only of indirect importance *who* controls the state. If the state successfully protects its citizens from violence and other forms of oppression, and otherwise succeeds in minimising suffering among all the people for which it claims responsibility, it is of minor importance *how* it does it. In practical terms, however, this principle will mean that the state's use of force is put under some or another form of democratic control.

Popper puts three different but interrelated ideas into his 'protectionist view of the state'. Most importantly, the state should, as indicated by the quote above, protect its citizens from violence and insecurity. This entails, at least according to Popper, a second meaning of

protection, namely that the state should also limit the freedom of those who threaten the livelihood and freedom of others. The final meaning of protectionism is that the state should organise itself in a way which protects its citizens from avoidable evils in the future as well. This means that the state should minimise suffering which crop up if it is controlled by governments which hold on to erroneous theories.

An important feature of Popper's line of thinking is the idea that politics is more fundamental than economic processes. This view is almost the exact opposite of the view put forward by Marx, who claimed that the state is an instrument of the ruling classes, which is defined in economic terms. Our lives are according to Marx shaped by the evolution of the economic system and economic class-relations. Political power comes only in third place, as a means of facilitating (or postponing) the inevitable development of the economy from a capitalist mode of production to a post-revolutionary mode. For Popper, on the other hand, it becomes important to insist that we should use political power to limit and control economic power in the here and now:

A directly opposite view is implied in the position we have reached in our analysis. It considers political power as fundamental. Political power, from this point of view, can control economic power. This means an immense extension of the field of political activities. We can ask what we wish to achieve and how to achieve it. We can, for instance, develop a rational political programme for the protection of the economically weak. We can make laws to limit exploitation. We can limit the working day; but we can do much more. By law, we can insure the workers (or better still, all citizens) against disability, unemployment, and old age. In this way we can make impossible such forms of exploitation as are based upon the helpless economic position of a worker who must yield to anything in order not to starve. And when we are able by law to guarantee a livelihood to everybody willing to work, and there is no reason why we should not achieve that, then the protection of the freedom of the citizen from economic fear and economic intimidation will approach completeness. From this point of view, political power is the key to economic protection. Political power and its control is everything. Economic power must not be permitted to dominate political power; if necessary, it must be fought and brought under control by political power. (Popper [1945] 1966a:126; cf. also Berman 2006)

To Popper, political intervention in the economy is not only possible, but necessary if we want a society in which everyone can come to know freedom and security. Freedom will disappear, at least for many people, if it is not constantly redistributed by an active state which limits the inegalitarian results of economic activity:

[T]he principle of non-intervention, of an unrestrained economic system, has to be given up; if we wish freedom to be safeguarded, then we must demand that the policy of unlimited economic freedom be replaced by the planned economic intervention of the state. We must demand that unrestrained *capitalism* give way to an *economic intervention*. And this is precisely what has happened. The economic system described and criticized by Marx has everywhere ceased to exist. It has been replaced, not by a system in which the state begins to lose its functions and consequently 'shows signs of withering away', but by various interventionist systems, in which the functions of the state in the economic realm are extended far beyond the protection of property and of 'free contracts'. (Popper [1945] 1966a:125)

Popper's positive view of economic interventionism has its roots in a general 'paradox of freedom'. The paradox of freedom simply states that "unlimited freedom leads to its opposite, since without its protection and restriction by law, freedom must lead to a tyranny of the strong over the weak" (Popper [1945] 1966a:44). Human beings should not only enjoy protection from physical violence, but from economic exploitation as well. There is however a sneaking suspicion of economic interventionism in Popper's work. Not all kinds of intervention are necessarily beneficial. There is such a thing as too much intervention, and we might easily get to a point where the state has been entrusted with too much power.

If the state gains too much power over the economy, some of our freedom may be lost. We must for that reason try to strike a balance between too many and too few acts of intervention. But there are some guiding lights along the way, whenever we set out to find the right quantity of intervention. Important points of orientation are found in negative utilitarianism and the humanitarian theory of justice. Economic interventionism is not desirable in and of itself, but only if leads to an increase in the freedom of individuals, or a decrease of avoidable human suffering. If a piece of regulation or economic interventionism

does not have the mentioned desired effects, then we should, *ceteris paribus*, of course refrain from implementing such a policy.

To sum up, Popper's protectionist view of the state entails an active state which takes the ideals of negative utilitarianism and the humanitarian theory of justice seriously. The state should minimise avoidable human suffering and distribute the burdens and benefits of citizenship equally. At the same time, state intervention should be used with caution, and only when it is absolutely necessary in order to ensure that we end up with the desired results. Popper called this last precaution a 'liberal razor', because the dictum would ensure that there would be no more intervention than necessary (Popper [1963] 2002a:471). We should plan for the future rather than leave things to chance, but always with individual freedom in mind when we do so. The ambition for government should always be to extend freedom and democracy to more people and new areas of society. At the end of the day, however, we have to find our way using the method of trial and error, so that we can steer a course between the two opposite perils of too much intervention and too much inaction.

4.4.3 Organised liberalism from Bernstein to Popper

The political theories espoused in *The Open Society* amounts to a position which could be described as 'organised liberalism'. This term, which I have taken from Eduard Bernstein's work *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* ("The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy"), is used by Bernstein to describe the relationship between socialism and liberal democracy:

Der Liberalismus hatte geschichtlich die Aufgabe, Fesseln zu sprengen, welche die gebundene Wirtschaft und die entsprechenden Rechtseinrichtungen des Mittelalters der Fortentwicklung der Gesellschaft anlegten. Daß er zunächst als Bourgeoisliberalismus feste Gestalt erhielt, hindert nicht, daß er tatsächlich ein sehr viel weiter reichendes allgemeines Gesellschaftsprinzip ausdrückt, dessen Vollendung der Sozialismus sein wird. Der Sozialismus will keine neue Gebundenheit irgend welcher Art schaffen. Das Individuum soll frei sein – nicht in dem metaphysischen Sinne, wie es die Anarchisten träumen, d. h. frei aller Pflichten

gegen das Gemeinwesen, wohl aber frei von jedem ökonomischen Zwange in seiner Bewegung und Berufswahl. Solche Freiheit ist für alle nur möglich durch das Mittel der Organisation. In diesem Sinne könnte man den Sozialismus auch organisatorischen Liberalismus nennen, denn wenn man die Organisationen die der Sozialismus will und wie er sie will, genauer prüft, so wird man finden, daß was sie von ihnen äußerlich ähnlichen feudalistischen Einrichtungen vor Allem unterscheidet, eben ihr Liberalismus ist: ihre demokratische Verfassung, ihre Zugänglichkeit. (Bernstein 1899:132; cf. Bernstein 1993:150; Steger 1997:120-150)

It is not so much any particular passage in Popper's works as the general direction in which the various arguments of *The Open Society* is going, which led me to think of Bernstein's concept of organised liberalism. The combination of negative utilitarianism and Popper's protectionist view of the state amounts to a powerful defence of liberal democracy. It appears, however, that Popper's willingness to use the state in order to extend democracy and freedom to everyone could just as easily be described as a form of socialism, at least as that term has been understood by social democrats like Bernstein.

Popper, however, was not silent on which tradition of political thought he himself thought he belonged to. He claimed to have been a socialist, but only in the past tense. By the time of the inception and publication of *The Open Society*, he is apparently more comfortable describing himself as a liberal. But he was a left-leaning liberal of the kind who wants more rather than less government intervention. So much so that he could be described as a proponent of economic planning. Popper tried several times, particularly in lectures and essays written in the years after he wrote *The Open Society*, to distance himself from socialism, and to describe himself as a liberal instead. In his intellectual autobiography *Unended Quest*, for instance, he devotes much space to a description of his disenchantment with revolutionary Marxism, and his subsequent conversion to liberal democracy. In the same work, he says however that he took this conversion further, and left socialism altogether, and adopted attitudes more closely resembling economic liberalism:

I remained a socialist for several years, even after my rejection of Marxism; and if there could be such a thing as socialism combined with individual liberty, I would be

a socialist still. For nothing could be better than living a modest, simple, and free life in an egalitarian society. It took some time before I recognized this as no more than a beautiful dream; that freedom is more important than equality; that the attempt to realize equality endangers freedom; and that, if freedom is lost, there will not even be equality among the unfree. (Popper [1976] 2002b:36)

Both socialism and liberalism are however terms with multiple meanings, and it seems to me that Popper was a liberal only in the most inclusive sense of the word. He is most definitely a proponent of liberal democracy and personal freedom, but his economic policies, never fully developed in his writings, resembles democratic socialism more than economic liberalism. It is nevertheless interesting to note that Popper is neither the first nor the last to develop an eclectic mix of liberalism and socialism. In fact, it is more of a rule than an exception among moderates of either persuasion to imply that they belong to both traditions, and that they see no inherent conflict between liberal democracy and economic policies which are more usually advocated by socialists rather than liberals.

Whereas socialists put economic policy at the centre, liberals tend to put a stronger emphasis on constitutional and cultural issues. Proponents of socialist economic policies could be either liberal or illiberal, in the sense that such policies could be combined with either type of attitude towards personal freedom and democracy. Conversely, right-wing liberals try to combine cultural and political liberalism with the idea that the state ought to leave the economy to its own devices. Left-leaning liberals, on the other hand, join together the same kinds of ideas with the idea that the state should become more actively involved in the economy in order to build a society characterised by 'equality of liberty'. There is therefore much common ground between democratic socialism and moderate liberalism, as both political currents believe that everyone deserves freedom, and that the state should restore someone's freedom whenever others have reduced it or removed it entirely.

The main difference between political moderates is therefore often found in the question of how many spheres of society to which democracy should be extended. While

centre-right liberals are sceptical of too much politicisation of the economy, democratic socialists claim that the economy is an area ripe for more democratisation. It is quite obvious that the author of *The Open Society* belonged to the latter category. It is, however, not entirely clear if Popper changed his mind and moved to the right after the war. That is one of the most central bones of contention in the literature commenting on his political thought, and it is a topic to which I will return in the next chapter. But his alleged shift from socialism to liberalism may profitably be thought of as a change of terminology rather than substance.

Instead, it is clear that Popper was, at least from the inception of *The Open Society* and onward, part of a tradition of ‘organised liberalism’ which envelopes both moderate liberals and democratic socialists, and which contains elements of both traditions. That tradition of organised liberalism is itself not devoid of powerful defenders both among politicians and political theorists. Besides Bernstein and Popper, one should also include proponents of the so-called *new liberalism* in Britain such as L. T. Hobhouse and William Beveridge in this tradition of ‘organised liberalism’. Democratic socialists, again confined to Britain, such as J. A. Hobson and R. H. Tawney should also be mentioned. While they chose different political parties as their organisational base, it is easy to spot the many similarities in their political thought, and equally difficult to observe any fundamental disagreements.

Looking at the combined tradition of ‘new liberalism’ and democratic socialism, it is quite obvious that it influenced the author of *The Open Society* a great deal. It is a tradition marked by a love of freedom and an intense dislike for inequality – a combination which is all but omnipresent in Popper’s *magnum opus*. Of course, a tradition which emphasise the need for personal liberty as well the public provision of economic equality often need to make many hard choices (Pierson 2001; Berman 2006).

That is where the need for politics comes into the equation. Proponents of organised liberalism share the belief that it is democratically elected political institutions which ought

to make these hard choices. In that sense, moderate liberalism and socialism is set apart from both traditional liberalism and neoliberalism (cf. chapter 6 below) as well as the main currents of Marxism. While the latter traditions tend to believe in the primacy of the economy over politics, moderates believe it is rather the other way around (Berman 2006; 2009). They believe that democratically elected governments should determine how the economy should be structured, and that they should not leave the shaping society in the hands of the blind forces of historical laws or unregulated markets.

4.5 Early conclusions

As I noted at the beginning, it is easy to get the impression that critical rationalism is a system of thought in which various topics and discussions are intertwined to a considerable degree. It is at least apparent that Popper thought that there was and is a close connection between his theory of knowledge and his political thought. There is however some controversy among commentators as to what the precise nature of that connection actually is. Is for instance Popper's political thought a sort of epiphenomenon which could be deduced from his other theories, and that it consequently ought to be revised if other political solutions is a better match for his epistemology? Or is it perhaps more fruitful to think of Popper's political and epistemological thought as two sets of ideas which originate from the same source and reinforce each other?

As we shall see in the next chapter, I find the latter interpretation to be more in line with the ideas put forward in Popper's many books and essays touching on the basic questions of normative political analysis. Popper's thought might be seen as a philosophical system in which the different parts of his thought overlap quite considerably. And it may be a philosophical system in which influence runs in all directions, and often in unexpected ways. There are, one might say, some common beliefs or attitudes which run through his political theories as well as his theories of human knowledge and his more scattered thoughts

about ethics and human morality, most prominently perhaps being his intense dislike – or hatred – of dogmatism and violence, coupled with his characteristically guarded optimism for the future. This guarded optimism issues in the idea that we might, in spite of it all, come to know more about the world than we did at the outset, and that we sometimes might succeed in creating and maintaining an open, democratic society. Neither of these two states of affairs, however, comes easy and without resistance.

Like Berlin, Popper used familiar ideological epithets rather infrequently. But whenever he did, he tended to claim that his political theories were part of a liberal tradition. And not unlike Berlin, he is a liberal primarily in a very general and inclusive sense of the word. He views liberalism first and foremost as a ‘practical’ political theory of how to build and maintain representative democracy, and not as a complete world view with for instance its own specific economic policies (cf. Sartori 1987). All through *The Open Society*, and in many of his later works, he is committed to the view that the state ought to take an active role in the economy in order to minimise avoidable human suffering and protect the rights and interests of all citizens. This, at least, is all but apparent in his presentation of ‘the protectionist view of the state’, in which he defends the combination of representative democracy and economic interventionism:

Although the political theory which I call protectionism (...) is fundamentally a liberal theory, I think that the name may be used to indicate that, though liberal, it has nothing to do with the *policy of strict non-intervention* (often, but not quite correctly, called ‘*laissez faire*’). Liberalism and state-interference are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, any kind of freedom is clearly impossible unless it is guaranteed by the state. A certain amount of state control in education, for instance, is necessary, if the young are to be protected from a neglect which would make them unable to defend their freedom, and the state should see that all educational facilities are available to everybody. But too much state control in educational matters is a fatal danger to freedom, since it must lead to indoctrination. As already indicated, the important and difficult question of the limitations on freedom cannot be solved by a cut and dried formula. (Popper [1945] 1966:111; author’s own emphases)

His intense hatred for dogmatism and violence is, at least according to his own words, what leads him to reject authoritarianism in every shape and form. He is actually quite clear about the matter; we need democracy – even economic democracy – if science is to thrive and if avoidable suffering, especially political violence, is to be minimised.

A key phrase in Popper's 'applied' political thought is 'planning for freedom', and with that phrase he must have intended to say that we need a high level of public control over the economy, not for its own sake, but in order to secure personal freedom for everyone (cf. opening quotation in section 1.3.1 above; cf. also Crossman 1965). Planning, that is piecemeal and limited planning or 'social engineering', is necessary if freedom is to be a reality for more than a lucky few. Neither laissez-faire nor centralised all-encompassing planning will lead to a truly liberal and democratic society, or a society in which individual liberty is a prominent feature. All extremes are counterproductive, and moderation is the only way to favourable results. That is the central lesson from Popper's political thought.

5. Analyses of Popper's political thought

5.1 Introduction

Going over the literature primarily concerned with Popper's political thought, one is struck by the fact that it mostly contains analyses rather than sustained criticism. The few analyses that have been published, however, contain obviously contrary interpretations of his political theories. This gives us several and mutually incompatible answers to the question of how we ought to understand Popper and his theories about politics, and which lessons we might draw from studying them.

For many commentators, the main concern has been to place Popper's political thought within a wider ideological context. The answers they have given are, to say the least, very different. Bryan Magee (1985) claims for instance that Popper described what the philosophical foundations of democratic socialism should look like. In this, Popper's war-time books become the pinnacle of his philosophical achievements, while his later works become mere footnotes and addenda. Jeremy Shearmur (1995; 1996), on the other hand, claims instead that Popper decisively rejected socialism and took up a more conservative and liberal position after the war. He also asserts that Popper should have moved even further in a liberal direction, towards what Shearmur calls 'classical liberalism', especially if Popper had taken his own epistemology more seriously.

Magee says that the Popper he first met in the late 1950's was "no longer a socialist" (Magee 1985:84). Popper's later works tend after all to emphasise the importance of traditions and formal democracy, and make light of the need to regulate the economy. But that development in Popper's thought may not be all that interesting, according to Magee. Even if he did adjust his political views, this does not diminish the force of his earlier arguments in favour of a state which protects its citizens from want and affliction. While Popper may have moved to the right in old age, he has still according to Magee described "as

no one else has ever done, what the philosophical foundations of democratic socialism should be” (ibid.).

Shearmur’s stronger emphasis on Popper’s later thought opens the possibility for an entirely different interpretation. Shearmur argues that Popper soon after the war revised his ideas about economic planning and piecemeal social engineering (cf. Popper 2008). He applauds this relatively cautious move towards liberalism, which he finds remnants of in several of Popper’s later essays (Shearmur 1996:175-178). But Popper should according to Shearmur have taken his new ideas even more seriously, and embraced a much more drastic form of economic liberalism than Popper himself was willing to do. Ultimately, claims Shearmur, it is classical liberalism which is the political upshot of the core ideas and assumptions of critical rationalism, and not democratic socialism.

Viewed in this way, Magee’s interpretation is a thesis from which Shearmur tries to create an antithesis (cf. Shearmur 1995). But there are other, more moderate interpretations which emphasise the eclectic nature of Popper’s political thought. Geoffrey Stokes says for instance that “contrary to widespread belief and Popper’s own declaration, his political ideas cannot be classified as liberal in any straightforward sense” (Stokes 1998:46). Instead, Stokes claims that Popper was an eclectic whose political thought is a personal mixture of liberalism, conservatism, and democratic socialism. There are also others, for instance Fred Eidlin, who emphasise the syncretic nature of Popper’s basic political analysis, and who claims that Popper is a social democrat whose political thought overlaps quite considerably with moderate liberal political theories, just like it does many other social democrats.

Another set of interpretations is found among thinkers closer to practical politics. Perhaps the most interesting of these is given in a book by the British local politician Roger James. What James proposes is that we should take Popper and his political thought more seriously, and ‘return to reason’ in order to make public policies more functional and

rational. Such ideas is also found in the writings of the former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who describe Popper as his 'house chemist', whose thought has inspired him to think in new ways about political problems put before him. In more ways than one, James and Schmidt add a sense of reality to Popper's thought, and make a genuine contribution to the interpretation of Popper's political theories, making his insights more immediately relevant to practical policy-makers.

In the following chapter I will therefore first examine Magee's interpretation of Popper's political thought. I will then discuss Shearmur's very different reading. The more moderate interpretations will be the focus of the third section of this chapter. Finally, I will discuss James and Schmidt's ideas about how Popper's political thought might be considered relevant for practical politics, before I end the chapter with a concluding section.

In this conclusion, I emphasise the eclectic nature of Popper's political theories. I reject the idea proposed by Magee and Shearmur that his political thought is an epiphenomenon and that his epistemology is somehow more fundamental. Instead, I suggest that influence runs both ways, and that both his theories of knowledge and his theories of politics are informed by his intense dislike for violence and human suffering. I also reject the idea that his thought fits neatly into any clearly identified ideological category. His positive attitude towards liberal democracy and economic planning makes it however much easier to describe him as a left-leaning liberal or social democrat. Consequently, I reject Shearmur's idea that Popper could and should be viewed as a 'classical liberal', and his suggestion that Popper decidedly rejected the basic political ideas and evaluations of *The Open Society* relatively late in life. Always incurably moderate, Popper's political thought defies efforts to make it a point of support for any rigidly defined political ideology. There are nevertheless no reasons to suppose that he ever entirely abandoned the defence of social democracy or 'organised liberalism' contained in *The Open Society*.

5.2 Magee: Popper, the reluctant socialist

In his introduction to Popper's thought, Bryan Magee presents Popper's ideas about knowledge, science, and politics as parts of a coherent, systematic philosophy. This philosophical system has moreover "a notably *practical* effect on people who are influenced by it" (Magee 1985:10, author's own emphasis). It will lead us to think differently about our place in the world, and how we might come to know more about it. In particular, it describes a better way to solve many problems put before us in science, politics – and everyday life.

Magee begins his book with a presentation of Popper's life largely consistent with the narrative found in *Unended Quest*, Popper's own intellectual autobiography. In it, Popper couples together a growing interest in epistemology with his changing political views during his late adolescence in Vienna (Popper [1976] 2002b). It is quite apparent that Magee views *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism* as the culmination of this intellectual development. There is, according to Magee, a strong connection between Popper's epistemology and his moral and political theories. This connection is in turn richly illustrated in Popper's two war-time books.

In his account of Popper's philosophy of science, Magee makes a distinction between Popper's view and what he calls 'the traditional view' (cf. section 4.2 above). In science, it is according to Popper above all vital to remain open to constructive criticism. This scientific attitude is helpful in politics as well. After all, a "policy is a hypothesis which has to be tested against reality and corrected in the light of experience" (Magee 1985:75). Those who engage in politics ought therefore to remain open to criticism and try to get nearer to the truth by a common effort.

In this exposition, Magee comes close to the view that Popper's epistemology and philosophy of science is somehow more fundamental than his moral and political theories, in the sense that influence runs primarily in one direction from his theories of human

knowledge to his theories about how society ought to be organised. An alternative view, equally plausible, is the view that influences run both ways, and often in unexpected ways. Magee, perhaps in an effort to make Popper's thought more accessible to wider audience, may have understated some of the complexities of his thought, and made Popper more of a systematic and uncomplicated thinker than he actually was.

The Open Society is above all a persistent defence of liberal democracy. Democracy is the only political system which actively supports open debate, and we find in Popper's thought a strong preference for a type of constitution which tries to institutionalise open debate and political equality. A dictatorship will never become nearly as effective at solving problems as a well-functioning democracy, because dictators must necessarily restrict the flow of information in order to stay in power. It is clear, however, that Popper prefer a more ambitious form of democracy in which there is open competition between different political alternatives, and in which all citizens truly take part in the political process.

But while Popper certainly is a democrat, Magee wants to show that he is a *social democrat* as well. He is particularly interested in what Popper calls 'the paradox of freedom' (cf. section 4.4.2 above). Put simply, Popper states that too much freedom for the strong and the wealthy will destroy the freedom of the weak and the poor, and in effect lead to a plutocratic tyranny. The alternative is to let the state assume an active role in the economy. Only then can one at the same time make sure that individuals and corporations have fair access to the market-place, and also build good relations between workers and employers. Ultimately, one may even hope to achieve a state of approximate political equality, thus making democracy a reality, rather than a mere formality (cf. Dahl 2006).

Formal equality of opportunity is not enough, because that will not stop the strong from exploiting the weak. Freedom must be curbed if it is to become a reality for all. Political protectionism is basically a theory which lends legitimacy to an active welfare state,

and to the view that the state ought to protect citizens from economic exploitation and physical aggression. This, of course, is directly opposed to the liberal doctrine of laissez-faire. The conclusion must be, according to Magee, that Popper's political thought is inspired by his epistemology, and also a philosophical foundation for a social democracy.

Put simply, we should according to Magee view Popper as a reluctant socialist. *The Open Society* is a work which describes, according to Magee, what the philosophical foundations of democratic socialism ought to be. In other texts, however, he comes close to adopting the more pessimistic analysis of many liberals and conservatives, who thinks that the price of greater equality is a dangerous erosion of individual and economic liberty. It may be the case that Popper became more of a conservative liberal in his old age, slipping further and further away from his socialist roots. This development in Popper's political affinities does not, however, in itself diminish the strength of his earlier arguments.

In the book *The New Radicalism* it becomes clear that Magee wants to use Popper's thought to justify social democracy or democratic socialism (Magee uses the two terms interchangeably), and defend it against Marxism on the far left and Toryism on the centre-right and right wing of the political spectrum. Popper is very much present throughout this book, and is described as the chief influence on Magee's own thought (Magee 1962:15). Magee's position is that the Left in Britain has been burdened with a very ambiguous legacy, and that socialists must choose between the moderation and optimism of 'the rational left' on one hand, and the pessimistic traditionalism embodied in orthodox Marxism. As Popper did in *The Open Society*, Magee accuses Marxists of eclipsing their own activism with historicism and a longing for the totalitarian final solution to all problems plaguing mankind.

Magee argues that socialists should abandon Marxism and the increasingly irrelevant watchwords of the past. Instead, the rational left should build on the left wing of liberal thought. Magee is particularly intrigued and influenced by thinkers who have claimed to be

both liberals and socialists, for instance John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell. But one can of course also see the influence from social democrats such as Tawney and Crosland, who wanted to build a democratic and generous society informed by science and open debate.

Magee begs the Left to construct a more relevant political analysis focusing on contemporary problems. Progressives must abandon old categories which prohibits rational political action such as “capitalism” and “socialism”, and instead try to make society more democratic, and its inhabitants more able to make use of their freedom (Magee 1962:11ff). Popper is never far away in Magee’s analysis; we must approach political ideas in a more scientific way, and judge new policies on their merits, no matter where they come from. It is of course not the case that everything called socialism is morally or rationally acceptable, and one should therefore discuss all policy proposals in an equally critical manner.

To care for the well-being of others is the moral foundation of political radicalism, says Magee, in much the same way in which Popper says that the care for fellow humans is the basis for negative utilitarianism. If one really cares about other human beings, one should try to alleviate avoidable suffering. This entails more economic equality and democracy – it entails a radical attitude to society, and a willingness to change it so that it suits better the needs of all people.

Magee is like Popper concerned with both science and politics, and share with him a common way of looking at things. They also share a preference for societies which remain open to progress in the sciences, and societies which gives all citizens the freedom to express their own ideas, especially ideas which run counter to established beliefs. But freedom is best preserved in societies which try to overcome ‘the paradox of freedom’, by distributing freedom more equally. One must avoid conservatism, which discourage experimentation and free thinking. But one must also avoid superficially radical ideas, such as *laissez-faire* and left-wing authoritarianism, which in spite of their promises of the opposite lead to less

freedom and fewer opportunities for scientific and political progress. The answer must therefore be some form of active welfare state which encourages all to pursue, as long as they remain tolerant of others, their own ideas about what the good life is and entails.

5.3 Shearmur: Popper, the enigmatic libertarian

In his book on *The Political Thought of Karl Popper* and the short pamphlet *Karl Popper's Politics*, Jeremy Shearmur sets out to analyse Popper's political thought and the connections between it and his theories in other areas of philosophy. Shearmur contends in his book that developments in Popper's philosophical thought after the war should have led to revisions in his political thought as well (Shearmur 1996:109ff). The central idea is that Popper's various epistemological theories and ethical ideas ought to have led him resolutely away from anything resembling socialism, towards what Shearmur calls 'classical liberalism' (Shearmur 1995; 1996). According to Shearmur, Popper should have pursued the parallels between his epistemology and his political thought even further than he actually did. This should have led Popper to conclude in favour of classical liberalism, far removed from the democratic socialism and the moderate defence of liberal democracy propounded in his war-time books.

Shearmur begins his analysis by describing the strong radical tendency in *The Open Society* (Shearmur 1996:23-30). Shortly after the publication of that book, however, Popper began according to Shearmur to display a new sceptical attitude towards economic planning and central control. This move towards economic liberalism becomes according to Shearmur ever more apparent in Popper's later essays and correspondence, even if he all through his life maintained some radical ideas of economic policy (Shearmur 1996:30-36; Popper 2008). Popper was certainly not at any point a proponent of all-out *laissez-faire*, but if one is to survey Popper's political thought in its entirety, one must nevertheless, still according to Shearmur, take his increasing sympathy for economic liberalism more seriously, at least more seriously than Magee is willing to do.

There is however also a normative side to Shearmur's analysis of Popper's political thought. Popper entertained a strong preference for relatively moderate economic policies all through his life, and only barely shifted his emphasis on some issues as time went on. One might still say, as Shearmur does, that he *ought to* have been a so-called classical liberal instead. There is, according to Shearmur, tensions between much of Popper's political thought and his other theories, tensions which have led him to the conclusion that portions of Popper's political thought ought to be revised. It is clear that Shearmur views Popper's epistemological theories as the most fundamental element of critical rationalism. One cannot, according to Shearmur, view Popper's politics entirely separate from his theories of human knowledge. One must always take into consideration what it is possible to know, whenever one tries to construct relevant moral and political theories. Shearmur's reading of Popper's political theories is accordingly an attempt to view them in light of his epistemology, as some sort of epiphenomena or product derived from his theories of human knowledge (Shearmur 1996:5).

Shearmur envisages a one-way relationship between epistemology and politics in Popper's thought. The guarded optimism which runs through his epistemology is reflected in his political thought. But there are strong influences from ethics as well. The Kantian influence on Popper is very much apparent in the way Popper extols individual liberty as a way of respecting the human capacity for reasoning (Shearmur 1996:109ff). Political institutions are in this justified only if they promote a critical and rational approach to problem-solving. Through the art of piecemeal social engineering, we might come up with solutions to new problems. Such solutions must, however, undergo critical scrutiny, so that decision-makers can spot errors in them, and ultimately repeal counterproductive policies. In that way, Popper's philosophy of science is mirrored in his political thinking.

A central theme in Shearmur's analysis of Popper's political thought is the changes he sees in Popper's later epistemological thought. One such development is the critique of exaggerated epistemological optimism (Shearmur 1996:66-70). In several essays, Popper criticizes all kinds of extreme views in epistemology, including undue optimism (Popper 1994b:185-209; [1963] 2002a:3-39). Popper presents in these essays an ever more hesitant kind of optimism. He rejects the idea that the truth is either permanently hidden, or (at the opposite extreme) that it is 'manifest' and always readily available for consultation.

This, says Shearmur, marks a development in Popper's thought after the war, which under Shearmur's analysis has quite tangible conservative implications. It is, however, unclear how big this movement actually is, and if it affects Popper's political thought in the way Shearmur claims it should. Nevertheless, we can see in parts of Popper's later thought a new-found empathy for conservatism, when he talks about the necessity of traditions in order to maintain the most basic aspects of social life and public order (Popper [1963] 2002a:161-182). This should, says Shearmur, lend support to the conclusion that Popper seriously thought, influenced by among others Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich Hayek, that the political theories of *The Open Society* ought to be revised in a more conservative direction. We should for instance acknowledge the purported fact that traditions are necessary and that they need to grow freely, even if it means that we in the short run must accept instances of economic exploitation and avoidable suffering.

Another development discussed by Shearmur is an alleged movement away from the 'methodological nominalism' of *The Open Society* towards a position which Shearmur calls 'modified essentialism'. Now, this may come as a surprise to many readers who are used to viewing Popper as a relentless critic of 'essentialism' (cf. e.g. Berlin 2000:14). Shearmur says however that Popper's thought became less hostile to essentialism, or the idea that we might find 'ultimate explanations' through the closer study of concepts and ideas (Shearmur

1996:124-131; cf. Popper [1963] 2002a:130-160). Modified essentialism will according to Shearmur add 'structure and depth' to our analysis of the social world, but it will also make it more difficult to understand and change it. It would make it much harder to develop and make use of scientific knowledge about human societies in the context of a mixed economy, which Popper in *The Open Society* argues is of immense importance and of great benefit to humanity. This is also further underlined by Popper's new theory of traditions, which underlines Shearmur's idea that economic planning is all but impossible to achieve in a democratic society (Shearmur 1996:130).

It is Shearmur's view that these new ideas should influence how a critical rationalist ought to think about politics (Shearmur 1996:110). Popper's position may be that we need a market economy, but a market economy in which the state regulates quite extensively in order to protect its citizens from exploitation and avoidable hardship. Shearmur is however highly critical of such state intervention in the economy, and he is in this heavily influenced by Hayek, who says that we should be particularly sceptical of any attempt to regulate the economy (cf. Shearmur 1996a). According to Hayek and Shearmur, the problem with any conscious attempt by the state to minimise suffering is that it would involve some measure of a planned economy, and it will involve the attempt to centralise knowledge which might not be easily centralised.

As said by Hayek and to some degree Shearmur, many of the problems identified by critics of the unregulated market economy might in fact be the price one has to pay to have a market economy in the first place. Poverty and inequality might seem unjust, but are actually inevitable in a market economy. Given that the unregulated market provides us with the best and most efficient way of allocating scarce resources, and that state intervention will probably only make things worse, one must simply accept such unfortunate side effects (cf. e.g. Hayek 1978:57-68).

There is also an ethical dimension to the kind of ‘classical’ liberalism which Shearmur thinks the committed critical rationalist ought to adopt. Just because someone believes strongly that society ought to be structured in a particular way, does not mean that one should put the contested issue in question up for a vote, which might involve the coercive imposition of that decision on the minority. That would be both immoral and probably ill advised. Coercion should only be used with the utmost of care, and only if no other solution is available. One should at least take care not to flout individual (negative) liberty in so doing, and refrain from establishing coercive institutions which might prove to be easily subverted and used as instruments of oppression. In this, Shearmur combines classical liberalism and conservatism in a characteristically Hayekian fashion.

Popper says, according to Shearmur, not enough about how political institutions should work, institutions which are supposed to transform his ideals of political protectionism and negative utilitarianism from theory to reality. Shearmur claims that the market is better at learning from mistakes than politicians, and points in the direction of less government and fewer fetters on the market economy. We should go, in other words, in the direction of classical liberalism or neoliberalism (cf. chapter 6 below). If we follow Popper, and admit that humans are fallible and that human knowledge is provisional, then we would want the diversity created by an unregulated market economy, so that everyone could learn from the mistakes they make – and from each other (Shearmur 1996:116-124). Quite regardless, it seems, of what the author of *The Open Society* claimed we ought to have learned from or experiences with the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century, under which it became all but apparent that a lack of governmental oversight of the economy directly led to much avoidable human suffering.

5.4 Popper, the incurable moderate

5.4.1 Stokes: political eclecticism

Like Magee and Shearmur, there are also others who conclude that Popper's thought could be viewed as a coherent or harmonious philosophical system. But this does not necessarily mean that they all believe Popper's political theories should follow from his allegedly more fundamental ideas in epistemology, as supposed by Shearmur. It is in fact entirely possible that Popper's political views might have influenced his epistemology. Geoffrey Stokes (1998) explores this idea in a survey of Popper's thought. We should, says Stokes, instead view Popper's philosophy as a series of overlapping answers to related problems in epistemology, science, and politics.

It is important for Stokes (1998:1) to emphasise that Popper's epistemological and political thought is enmeshed together in a complex relationship where influences run both ways. Popper starts out, according to Stokes, with an intense disgust for all kinds of violence, and in particular politically motivated mass violence. But this leads him immediately to an equally intense antipathy for dogmatism and historicism, which he believes leads to such violence. At the same time it is clear that critical rationalism is a general approach to problem-solving, which should influence the way one deals with problems of all kinds. All types of inherited ideas and beliefs should be scrutinised, so that one may hope to devise better solutions in science and politics alike.

We find, says Stokes, many examples in Popper's books of how his political thought influences his epistemology and philosophy of science. Throughout his works, Popper presents several attempts justify his general doctrine. The adoption of critical rationalism as a way of looking at things is in many ways the result of a radical choice not entirely based on arguments about which doctrine is the most truthful. Such a choice is also grounded in moral and political ideas about which ultimate goals one wants to see realised (Stokes 1998:16-18):

Thus I freely admit that in arriving at my proposals I have been guided, in the last analysis, by value judgments and predilections. But I hope that my proposals may be acceptable to those who value not only logical rigour but also freedom from dogmatism; who seek practical applicability, but are even more attracted by the adventure of science, and by discoveries which again and again confront us with new and unexpected questions, challenging us to try out new and hitherto undreamed-of answers. (Popper [1959] 2002:15)

For Popper, it is in particular the goal of attaining ‘freedom from dogmatism’ which permeates his thought in many different areas of philosophy. His epistemology presupposes the existence of political institutions which guarantee the freedom of thought and expression. His whole philosophy is geared towards promoting the values of the open society (Stokes 1998:46ff). It is moreover clear to Popper that scientific progress depends not only on the ‘internal’ ability of the scientific community to accumulate knowledge, but also on an ‘external’ competition between different ideas and theories. And such competition must be promoted politically if it is to last:

Science, and more especially scientific progress, are the results not of isolated efforts but of the free competition of thought. For science needs ever more competition between hypotheses and ever more rigorous tests. And the competing hypotheses need personal representation, as it were: they need advocates, they need a jury, and even a public. This personal representation must be institutionally organized if we wish to ensure that it works. And these institutions have to be paid for, and protected by law. Ultimately, progress depends very largely on political factors; on political institutions that safeguard the freedom of thought: on democracy. (Popper [1957] 2002c:143)

Stokes presents a widely accepted interpretation of Popper’s political thought, namely that Popper was first and foremost a proponent of liberal democracy (Stokes 1998:57). Democracy is important to Popper for two reasons. Democracy is vital because it encourages a free exchange of ideas, which leads to scientific progress and thereby to the growth of human knowledge. But democracy is equally important solely in political and moral terms, because it is the most effective way of ensuring effective protection against violence and economic exploitation of individuals (Stokes 1998:65).

Going through Popper's political thought, Stokes finds much to support the idea that democracy, freedom, and equality are very important ideals to Popper. They are however in addition values which provide, when they inform the way in which the government is run, an infrastructure which makes critical thought and truly scientific discussions possible (Stokes 1998:61). We can see that Popper perceives freedom of thought and expression as a precondition for the growth of human knowledge. Viewed in this way, it is obvious that the values of liberal democracy – individual freedom, equality, and toleration – permeate all aspects of Popper's philosophy.

We can also find, according to Stokes, a conservative supplement to Popper's liberalism, emphasising personal responsibility and the importance of traditions – at least traditions which support science and democracy. Traditions may be necessary, or even indispensable, as they regulate important aspects of social interaction. This does not, however, preclude criticism of established traditions. We may need order and regularity in our lives, but we should nevertheless be free to evaluate whether or not our traditions are ripe for revision. It may therefore be that the conservative ideas presented in some of Popper's later essays are noticeable but not particularly strong, and never quite as important as the democratic spirit which flows through all his works dealing with political questions.

One might even with Stokes claim that Popper's political thought resembles social democracy more than anything else. In *The Open Society*, he demands that the state should intervene in the economy in order to protect its citizens from harm and exploitation. He does not explicitly go back on such ideas in later works, and it is odd to suppose that a person who is supposed to have become a conservative and so-called classical liberal does not do so. Instead, one could assume that Popper stands by his demand for political and economic reforms which would secure individual autonomy and protection against economic exploitation. He was a social democrat, and like other social democrats, he shared a liberal

suspicion that the state may become too powerful, as well as a conservative scepticism of revolutionary change and abrupt departures from traditional arrangements.

Political and economic reform is after all possible and often desirable, but the goal behind such reforms must always be to secure emancipation through participation in democratic processes (Stokes 1998:68). That is the central lesson from Stokes' interpretation of Popper's political theories. The growth of government may however lead to a perilous concentration of power in the hands of politicians and public managers. At the same time, we see that Popper, because of his pronounced egalitarian and humanitarian impulses, rejects the idea that freedom is to be understood exclusively in negative terms, as the absence of state intervention. Ultimately, the dangers of a powerful state must be dealt with through the use of piecemeal approaches to political reform. In politics, we must move forward as we do in science, through trial and error – and through the acknowledgement of our own fallibility.

Put briefly, it is according to Stokes difficult to place Popper's political thought unambiguously in one of the familiar ideological categories of liberalism, conservatism, and democratic socialism. So eclecticism runs through Popper's political thought. But it might also be said that Popper is eclectic in much the same way as most social democrats are. That is why Stokes (1998:70-73) in the end must admit that Popper's thought closely resembles modern-day social democracy – of which Magee's book on *The New Radicalism* is a typical example – and that the liberal and conservative nuances in his thought are not more pronounced than what one would find among other moderate and egalitarian democrats.

5.4.2 Eidlin: Popper, the moderate socialist

A final comment in the debate over Popper's ideology comes from Fred Eidlin, who specifically – and much more directly than Stokes – attacks Shearmur's interpretation (Eidlin 2005:29). Shearmur's main theses, that Popper became a liberal late in life and that he should have moved further to the right if he had taken his own epistemological ideas more

seriously, are both rejected by Eidlin. Instead, Eidlin says that Popper always “recognized and accepted the enormous difficulties facing the social engineer” (Eidlin 2005:45), and that governance in a sufficiently open society is an activity wrought with moral difficulties and pitfalls. That is, however, at best a very weak argument for sitting idly by and watch avoidable human suffering take place, which is apparently what Shearmur with his political theory of ‘classical liberalism’ is recommending.

Eidlin claims, like Magee, that *The Open Society* is Popper’s most important work in political philosophy. And that book is certainly no defence of deregulation or ‘free-market liberalism’. Eidlin regards Popper’s other political texts as addenda to *The Open Society*. One can wonder, says Eidlin, why a person who allegedly changed his views from a moderately left-leaning position to free-market conservative liberalism did not bother to say so in subsequent editions of his perhaps most famous book. Not even in the ‘letter to Russian readers’, which Popper wrote as a preface to the first legal Russian edition in 1992, did he reject the positions presented in that book (Eidlin 2005:32; cf. also Popper 2008:394-401).

Eidlin is unable to spot any clear inconsistencies between the epistemological and political parts of Popper’s philosophy. Eidlin also says that it is difficult to see any direct inconsistencies between Popper’s war-time books and his later thought, even if he elaborated some ideas, and expanded into some new topics, most notably the ‘body-mind problem’, in his maturity. Even the young Popper was for instance very well aware of the fact that we can achieve our most ambitious political goals only with great difficulty, and that any effort to produce political change will likely come with many unintended and undesirable consequences. That however is not, to reiterate, an argument for doing nothing, and certainly no argument for classical liberalism.

While Eidlin (2005:45) admits that Popper’s views on public policy are “sketchy and theoretically underdeveloped”, he cannot see strong evidence in favour of the view that

‘classical liberalism’ is a political outlook which is ultimately compatible with Popper’s philosophy. Quite the contrary, the arguments against *laissez-faire* in *The Open Society* are still as valid today as they were then, and that proponents of such policies have not been able to devise convincing arguments to the contrary. According to Eidlin, however, it may actually be a positive aspect of Popper’s political thought that he refuses to discuss political matters in full detail. What Popper offers us is not solutions to particular problems, but a method which makes it possible for us to confront future and hitherto unknown problems. And that is, says Eidlin, exactly what we need. We have to give relevant answers to the question of what to do next, no matter how daunting the problems before us may seem.

We can however learn from our mistakes, and try to come up with better solutions next time. In this, Shearmur makes the same mistakes as Marx did. Both claim that human actions are always bound by economic structures, and that we need to wait for the vast, impersonal forces which control the economy to provide solutions to our problems. Economic liberals and Marxists believe in the primacy of economics, and that political processes will not be able to steer economic processes. Popper and social democrats believe on the other hand in the primacy of politics, or the idea that real change could come about through a coordinated political effort (Eidlin 2005:42-46; cf. also Berman 2006).

Popper is in this a democrat first and foremost. His idea of piecemeal social engineering is basically a method for political reform in a liberal democracy. And the fact that liberal democracies actually work, vindicates the piecemeal approach to political change. The burden of proof now lies with those who say that revolutionary upheaval is necessary, or those who say that we will profit most if we let the market economy solve our problems for us. This is perhaps where the continued relevance of Popper’s political thought lies; the doctrines which Popper criticised – historicism, essentialism, Utopianism and

holism – are still cherished beliefs today, and the fight for openness, freedom and democracy must therefore continue.

5.5 Popper's political thought in action

5.5.1 James: Reason and public life

Perhaps the most interesting contribution to the understanding of Popper's political thought is given by the British physician and local politician Roger James (1998). James does not try to fit Popper's thought under an ideological epithet. Instead he wants to get nearer to the core of Popper's political theory, to Popper's idea that we ought to prefer political reforms based on rational thought and concrete knowledge. We should take Popper and his political thought more seriously, and 'return to reason' in order to make public policies more functional.

James starts out by investigating the strange phenomenon he calls 'the power of wrong ideas'. In politics we can see how people prefer to believe in ideas which are demonstrably false because they are pleasing to the politician who does not care to study the matter at hand in a critical manner. This leads to a situation where people literally get the wrong idea, and nobody questions the conventional wisdom. Needless to say, this leads to inefficiency and unreasonable conduct in public life; political processes will not reach their professed goals, and not deal with real problems.

James believes that a dose of Popper's philosophy may ease the strangle-hold of wrong ideas. Failed policies, he contends, are for the most part caused by a few common delusions. These are simple mistakes which are all discussed by Popper, and we can use his thought to retrace what went wrong in each case. That way, we can become aware of popular mistakes, and avoid making them again in the future. The alternative to making the same mistakes over and over again is to adopt a rational attitude to problem-solving in politics. One must acknowledge one's own fallibility and try to open even one's most cherished and seemingly self-evident ideas and beliefs to critical scrutiny.

A central mistake is to believe that solutions or theories which *seem* substantiated are certainly and unshakably true. Those who want to make better public policies ought accordingly to value rational criticism as a resource which will enable everyone to produce better policies in the future. Instead of ignoring or punishing critics, the state should engage with those who voice such criticism, and try to establish institutions which would give these critics an opportunity to continue to scrutinise public policy. That way, we can gradually move closer towards better policies in public life, just like we through critical discussions move closer to the truth in science (James 1998:10ff).

According to James, there are five basic mistakes which are often made in politics and public administration (James 1998:3-6). One common mistake is to try to solve a problem before it is clearly understood what the problem actually is. A related mistake is to ignore that any solution or policy initiative no matter how elegant or well thought-through will 'have its snags'. Often, policy-makers end up undermining their own policies or stirring up unnecessary opposition because they did not care to engage seriously with critics, and to correct mistakes as they happen.

A third common mistake is to confuse laws with trends. Even if we can witness a strong trend, we cannot conclude that it will continue indefinitely. We cannot, either, confirm a hypothesis merely by finding facts that support it. Instead, policy-makers must like scientists criticise their pet theories. A final widespread mistake is the failure to distinguish 'established scientific theories' from 'unsubstantiated speculations' and 'theories which are partly dead, but will not lie down'. Beliefs which are at best partially accurate, but which continue to misinform the public because they are pleasing, contribute greatly to the continuation of ineffective policies.

Popper's idea that we move forward through trial and error and through the formulation of new theories which match our experience better, is according to James

relevant to policy-making as well as science. Democracy is in this not only a necessary condition for a healthy scientific debate, but also a platform for using the scientific method of trial and error for solving more immediate political problems (James 1998:66-68). If we open up policy-making processes to critical thinking, we might avoid policies which remove us further away from our ultimate goals of minimizing suffering and building better communities and societies.

Policy-makers need to know what the wishes of the people are, and how their policies affect the lives of ordinary citizens. Likewise must those at the receiving end of public policy be told what the state does, and why. That way, relevant criticism of public policy may arise. Put simply, both politicians and scientists make mistakes, and need critical comments on their thoughts and actions in order to correct the mistakes they make. Scientists cannot know whether or not their conjectures are the final truth about the matter in question, and policy-makers cannot know all the effects and side-effects of their reforms. This need to build institutions in which past mistakes are routinely corrected, is according to James the fundamental parallel between science and democracy in Popper's thought. Experts and specialists of all types, from physicians to bureaucrats, cannot find the truth all by themselves. For this, they also need a thriving and inclusive public debate.

We can see in Popper's thought, says James, that both science and politics must build on a method of trial and error. If this basic logic is not in place, the mistakes described above may lead to unnecessary hardship. The method is quite simple; first one must identify an actual problem, and then describe it in detail. Preferably, this should be done publicly, so that others can take part in the ensuing discussion. That way, one can reach a better understanding of what the features of a good solution may be. One can then, and only then, try to formulate a tentative solution, which may be criticised *before* its implementation.

This tentative solution to a political problem is akin to the tentative theory which scientists use to explain inconsistencies between the information available to us and old theories. The next step is to describe criteria for success and failure for the proposed solution which after debate becomes public policy. Finally, the implemented policy ought to be criticised yet again, so that one can make improvements in light of the experiences made, or suggest new reforms. This never-ending, critical approach to politics is according to James the expression of a typically ‘scientific’ attitude characterised by intellectual modesty and affection for rationality. It is also, incidentally, the very basis of any healthy democracy.

5.5.2 Schmidt: The defence of freedom and pragmatism

It is remarkably rare among prominent politicians to reveal any sort of interest in, let alone influence from, contemporary political theory. The influence of academic debates in political theory and philosophy on the world of practical politics and policy-making is in our day at best quite faint and indirect. Often, such influence comes only trickling down through think tanks or individual intellectuals who translate philosophical ideas about politics to a language which politicians and policy-makers may understand.

One interesting exception to this rule is found in the writings of Helmut Schmidt, who was Federal Chancellor of Germany from 1974 to 1982. During and after his tenure as Chancellor, he has taken a quite noticeable interest in both the findings of social science and various discussions in political theory, and in particular Popper’s political thought. In one place, he counts Popper as a philosophical mentor, alongside other sources of inspiration such as Max Weber and Marcus Aurelius. What these writers have in common is that they have written philosophical works about politics in a way which makes sense to active politicians (Schmidt 2008:336). The difference between Popper and these other philosophers is, of course, that Popper was Schmidt’s contemporary. Through occasional meetings and

correspondence, they discussed among other things Popper's political thought as well as burning political problems of their day, in which the two men both took a keen interest.

From Popper's political thought, it is especially the notion of piecemeal social engineering which has captured Schmidt's imagination, and which suits Schmidt's own often conspicuously pragmatic inclinations quite well. Like his fellow social democrat Magee, Schmidt also thinks of Popper's thought as a centre-left phenomenon. He does not even contemplate the possibility of viewing Popper's thought as a defence of so-called 'classical liberalism', and seems wholly unaware of the whole idea presented by Shearmur.

One of Schmidt's favourite sayings, *das Schnecken tempo ist das normale Tempo jeder Demokratie* or 'the snail's pace is the normal pace of every democracy', neatly captures the very core of Popper's theory of piecemeal social engineering. The democratic approach, which emphasises open and thorough debate, also ensures that society becomes more open to new ideas. In contrast, the Utopian method of social engineering will almost inevitably lead to internal conflict, war, and in some cases to mass murder. Worst of all, however, it will lead to a malignant form of conservatism, in which there is no room for new ideas in opposition to the official ideology:

Totale Utopien können zur totalitären Gewaltanwendung verleiten. Offene, das heißt demokratische Gesellschaften (oder modisch gesprochen: pluralistische Gesellschaften), sind mit den politischen Maximen einer totalen Utopie oder eine Handlungsanweisung zur Verwirklichung eines völlig anderen gesellschaftlichen Systems nicht vereinbar. Eine demokratische, eine offene Gesellschaft pervertiert zum geschlossenen, totalitären Staat, wenn zugunsten eines abstraktes Ideals die Pluralität der politischen Zielsetzungen selbst aufgegeben wird. Wenn man unseren Staat davon bewahren will, so bleibt der Politiker auf eine schrittweise Veränderung angewiesen, wobei jedem Schritt ein dafür ausreichender Konsensus (und das heißt: Kompromiß!) vorausgeht. Nur dies kann der Demokrat eine rationale Art der Politik nennen. (Schmidt 1996:150)

Schmidt is in this quote to be heavily influenced by Popper's political thought. At least, it is clear that Popper and Schmidt had overlapping political inclinations, and that Schmidt chose

to frame his own criticism of Utopian radicalism in a language originally shaped by Popper. To Schmidt, Popper's idea of an open society is a description of what a *democratic* and *pluralistic* society should look like, and of what existing democracies should aspire to become. Schmidt's ideal democracy is, not unlike Popper's open society, a far cry from a perfect society, but it is a society which strives to forge fragile compromises between different and often incompatible ideals and interests. Such a democracy must necessarily build on steady, incremental reforms rather than intermittent, revolutionary upheavals. Utopianism and radicalism is therefore in Schmidt's books a latent threat to democracy, because their revolutionary potential undermines the spirit of compromise which permeates, or at least should permeate, political processes in a democracy.

Schmidt is in many ways more straightforward than Popper, especially in his rejection of all kinds of Utopianism and other forms of political extremism. Whereas Popper treats Utopianism as a formidable philosophical opponent, Schmidt is much more directly dismissive of almost all kinds of visionary political thinking. The central lesson of Schmidt's political thought is however directly derived from Popper's theories of the open society and Utopianism, namely that one cannot have one's cake and eat it too. One must choose between democracy, with all its inherent conservatism and frustrating compromises, and Utopianism, with its fraudulent promise of a totally different, perfect society.

Like so many of the generations who were young before and during the two world wars, both Popper and Schmidt were keenly aware of the fragility of democracy and indeed ordinary human decency, as well as the dangers of political extremism. In fact, it is probably not possible to fully understand the sense of urgency contained in *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism*, without realising that they were written at a time when the enemies of democracy, human rights, and personal freedom were ready to extinguish the idea of an open society altogether. It is not an accident that Popper in his autobiography wrote about

these two books as his contribution to the war effort. To Schmidt, however, Popper's theory about the open society is still relevant, as an effective antidote to the hot air presented by visionaries and radicals of all political stripes.

Much in Schmidt's political writings is based on his own unique set of practical experiences in politics, but the basics of his political thought is either shared with or derived from the theories and narratives presented by Popper in *The Open Society*. In his foreword to the anthology *Kritischer Rationalismus und Sozialdemokratie*, Schmidt presents critical rationalism as his preferred alternative to Marxism, and as the foundation of his own social-democratic political convictions (Schmidt 1975). Later still, in a contribution to a *Festschrift* in Popper's honour called *In Pursuit of Truth*, Schmidt describes the idea of an open society as the main alternative to the authoritarianism. Freedom, democracy and a piecemeal approach to political reform coincide with each other, just like Utopianism, totalitarianism and political mass violence tend to appear together (Schmidt 1982).

Viewed in this way, Schmidt's political thought may be thought of as an applied and perhaps popularised version of Popper's social and political theories. And that may not be far from what Schmidt intended, even if he goes to great lengths to make Popper look like a pragmatic and incurably sceptical social democrat, not entirely unlike Schmidt himself.

5.6 The politics of critical rationalism

According to James (1998:vi), the usually observant British newspaper *The Observer* led its reports of Popper's death in 1994 with the headline 'Hero of the Right dies'. To place Popper and his political theories squarely on the right wing of the political spectrum must be, according to James at least, the result of a bald-faced misreading of Popper's thought. Nevertheless, Popper has been quite popular among some right-wing liberals who have sought to enlist his well-known concept of the open society in their quest to delegitimise and

reduce public intervention in and regulation of the economy (cf. e.g. Fogh Rasmussen 1993:194-205). But it may not be all that far-fetched to view Popper as a political thinker who occasionally has uttered and written sentences which may lend legitimacy to right-wing liberal economic policies. At least not as far-fetched as James apparently thinks.

There is agreement in much of the secondary literature that Popper moved to the right after the war, closer to the liberal economic policies and assessments which he met with outright scorn in his war-time books. Even Magee has said, as mentioned earlier, that the older Popper was ‘no longer a socialist’, and that it is primarily Popper’s war-time books which serves as an inspiration for Magee’s own relatively moderate brand of democratic socialism. Popper even attended at least some of the early meetings of the *Mont Pèlerin Society*, a professedly liberal organisation which was originally convened by his friend F. A. Hayek, and which later became a leading force behind several ‘neoliberal’ reform initiatives. A paper he read at one of these meetings in 1954 does not, however, come across as a decisive shift away from the relatively moderate political attitudes expressed in *The Open Society* (Popper [1963] 2002a:467-476). There are no indications, either, which suggest that Popper became a permanent or prominent member of this ‘neoliberal thought collective’ (cf. Mirowski and Plehwe 2009).

Even if Popper moved to the right, it is not clear to what degree he did so, and why he did not distance himself more resolutely from the quite radical economic interventionism he advocated in his war-time books. It is not clear, either, why Popper’s alleged shift in political attitudes should diminish the force of the arguments in his earlier works. But as Shearmur has shown it is not at all impossible to interpret Popper’s thought, or at least his most basic ideas, as leading to a ‘classical liberal’ political position characterised by a strong preference for unregulated markets and largely inactive states.

While Shearmur seems to me to have produced an exceptionally naive analysis of what the consequences of an unregulated market economy actually are, I accept that he is not alone in his faith in the blessings of the unrestrained market economy. He is also excessively pessimistic about the kind of role economic regulation and oversight may serve in a democracy, in order to create real political equality and a healthy public debate. Shearmur is in this nearly unable to see the subtle nuances between a democratic welfare state financed by high tax rates on one hand, and totalitarian, Soviet-style economic planning on the other. One must simply choose a traditional kind of liberalism in economic policy, or risk embarking on a slippery slope towards totalitarianism.

It seems to me however, and I believe that I am in agreement here with the author of *The Open Society*, that the *laissez-faire* policies advocated by Shearmur will lead to much avoidable human suffering. The many differences between the kinds of economic redistribution taking place in a democratic welfare state and the all-out *dirigisme* which is the hallmark of some twentieth century dictatorships must be all but apparent to anyone who wants to study the matter closely. One may even claim that these differences illustrate the basic distinction between piecemeal and Utopian social engineering, which Popper described in *The Poverty of Historicism*.

It is not, either, entirely clear how an entirely unregulated market economy is compatible with democracy, which relies on a public space where it is possible to reflect critically on, and propose solutions to, current political problems. In fact, unregulated markets, especially unregulated media markets, will frequently lead to a less open-minded public debate about the most pressing issues of the day. While Shearmur tries to recruit Popper's thought for classical liberalism, he is not entirely successful in so doing. Perhaps one needs regulation in order to minimise suffering and maintain an open-minded political conversation going after all?

In spite of the fact that Popper is occasionally and habitually described as a proponent of liberal economic policies (cf. e.g. Judt 2009), his influence is at least as strong on the left side of the political spectrum. Magee, James, and Schmidt are all prominent examples of moderate socialists with an interest in political theory who claim to be influenced, indeed heavily influenced, by Popper's thought. They apparently see little or no conflict between their own political beliefs and ideas, and Popper's philosophy. In fact, they seem to be able to integrate Popper's thought quite well with their other political attitudes and assessments, assessments which are far removed from Shearmur's 'classical liberalism'.

Magee is more outspoken than the other two, who remain quite satisfied with the drawing of quite general lessons from Popper's thought. Magee was of course aware of the fact that Popper was not at all very clear about his ideological affiliations, and that he after the war chose to talk of himself as a liberal, if he spoke in such overtly political terms at all. Popper was also late in life pessimistic about the whole idea of building a society in which extensive individual liberty is combined with equality and economic security for all, which with some justice might be considered central to the social democratic project to which Magee subscribes. But Magee definitely has a point, when he claims that Popper's war-time books points in the direction of a position quite close to modern-day social democracy.

Regardless of this, however, it remains that Popper's thought is quite nourishing food for thought, for both liberals and socialists. He is a political philosopher whose theories are perhaps too inaccurately formulated and too much soaked in historical narratives to be of any real value to political theorists in our day and age. They are generally more preoccupied with quite general and abstract conceptual analyses rather than concrete choices between different alternative policies. One can however see why politicians like James and Schmidt are attracted to Popper's thought, who may not be too rigorous, but which certainly is a breath of sweeping analysis in the world of practical politics. Popper is a political thinker who is not in

the business of providing clear and complete answers to any possible questions about how society ought to be organised. To leave some things open is the very core of Popper's idea of an open society. But this means, also, that his thought is adaptable, and that his theories could be read as a warning to radicals and Utopians of any political flavour, and as an inspiration to moderates across the political spectrum.

It is a mistake, and a regrettable attenuation of his thought, to view Popper just as a hero of the Right or classical liberalism, or indeed any other ideological tradition demanding that a fixed set of policies should be implemented no matter what. His thought might even be read quite profitably using different ideological spectacles. Much is left to considerations about which methods and organisational principles will bring about desired outcomes, such as increased rationality in political affairs, more democracy, and alleviation of avoidable human suffering.

Some people may think that an unregulated market economy will lead us closer to such results. Others may be more sceptical about markets, and prefer public redistribution of resources to a greater degree than others. Popper's thought is adaptable to, and not from the outset incompatible with these different background ideas about economic policy. The choice between a market economy and a more controlled economic system is at the end of the day a choice which must, and indeed ought to be, an empirical matter.

Sound economic policy must build on systematic efforts to find out which organisational principles work in which situations, and under what circumstances. To bind oneself to the mast, and commit to a set of general economic policies and not be willing to change them if they turn out to be counterproductive, comes close to being flagrantly irrational. Such ideological blindness goes against the very grain of critical rationalism. In contrast, it is a comparatively moderate and incremental approach to economic policy-

making, always open to revision, which is more in line with the spirit and letter of Popper's thought.

The perspective given by several commentators and presented above, that Popper is above all a political moderate, is most in line with what Popper actually says about how he wants society and the economy to be organised and structured. Stokes, for instance, claims that Popper's thought is a mixture of liberal, conservative and socialist components. Eidlin, on the other hand, agrees with Magee and claims that Popper is better described as a moderate socialist than a classical liberal. But both see that Popper is, in political terms, a moderate and an eclectic thinker.

It is clear, moreover, that it is a mistake to view Popper's political theories primarily as a product of and subordinate to his epistemological thought, as Magee and especially Shearmur directly or indirectly do. Instead, we might profit quite considerably if we viewed critical rationalism less like a rigid philosophical system, and more like a general outlook under which influences between political and epistemological theories may run both ways. In that way, Popper's political thought may appear more similar to Berlin's historically informed and locally situated defence of liberal democracy and tentative compromises between basic values such as freedom, distributive justice, and common decency.

5.7 Conclusion

Quite regardless of ideological categories there is a lot to learn from reading Popper's political essays and books. That we can see quite clearly in the writings of Roger James and Helmut Schmidt, who both have written about Popper's political theories from the perspective of public life and practical politics. They largely confirm the idea that Popper was first and foremost a proponent of liberal democracy against totalitarianism, thoughtful pragmatism against ideological radicalism, and in general terms a proponent of moderation

and gradualism in politics. That does not mean however, that his political thought is uninspiring or uncontroversial.

The most central lessons conveyed by Popper to politicians and the general public transcend conventional ideological differences. *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism* present, above all, arguments for the kinds of political processes which go on in modern, liberal democracies. In other words, they present arguments against autocracy, both traditional despotism and ideological totalitarianism – and the kinds of closed, political processes which go on in these types of political systems.

As Eidlin has pointed out, *pace* Shearmur, there is also little evidence to support the idea that Popper did not remain a critic of *laissez-faire* economic policies, which he went to great lengths to criticise in his war-time books. In that sense, the early conclusions given at the end of the preceding chapter still stands, and they suggest that Popper was a liberal in a very general and almost all-encompassing sense, and that he above all was a proponent of liberal democracy and ‘planning for freedom’. Political measures should, according to Popper, be used whenever and wherever such measures will lead to more freedom and less avoidable human suffering. Leaving things to the blind forces of chance – and the animal spirits which sometimes govern mankind – is however one of the least attractive options available to us (cf. Akerlof and Shiller 2009; Posner 2009).

Viewed in this way, it becomes perhaps clearer how one should view Popper’s political thought. It is a reflection of his wider philosophical outlook which he sometimes called critical rationalism. We can at least see that there are strong parallels and affinities between his thoughts about how a democratic society should be structured around an open search for better ways of organising human affairs, and his idea that scientific method should be described fundamentally as a method of trial and error. In practical terms this means that politicians and policy-makers, and not only scientists should try to learn from past mistakes,

and try to weed out the erroneous theories and assumptions which occasionally have inspired counterproductive or even disastrous modes of political action.

For Popper, all this issues in a characteristically historical approach to normative political analysis, in which theories which may on the surface have impeccable philosophical credentials are rejected because they lead to less freedom and more avoidable human suffering than what would otherwise be the case. Such theories include historicism and Utopianism, which many of the greatest philosophers and ideologues of human history have subscribed to. But even if we should take our cues from experiences made, we should also remain open to new ideas in politics, which may turn out to be instruments of human improvement. In that way, the modern-day social experiments called liberal democracy and the welfare state show quite a lot of promising results, and should be encouraged further.

PART III: THE NEOLIBERAL CHALLENGE

6. What is neoliberalism?

6.1 Introduction²

The term ‘neoliberalism’ has since the 1980’s become a widely used catchphrase in many political and academic debates. It is a term that is primarily used by authors and political theorists who claim to be critical of neoliberalism, and one could quite easily come to suspect that for some of these authors ‘neoliberalism’ has become a catch-all term of abuse or condemnation (Hartwich 2009). Several of these critical authors have nevertheless suggested that neoliberalism is ‘the dominant ideology shaping our world today’, and that we live in an ‘age of neoliberalism’, characterised by a massive surge of popularity for neoliberal ideas (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005).

The word neoliberalism usually describes what many political theorists and public intellectuals perceive of as a lamentable spread of global capitalism and consumerism, as well as an equally deplorable demolition of the proactive welfare state in Western Europe, and especially the political theories used to justify these changes (Bourdieu 1998; 1998a; 2001; Chomsky 1999; Touraine 2001; Harvey 2005; Hermansen 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005; Hagen 2006; Plehwe et al. 2006; Garbo 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Steger and Roy 2010; Nilsen and Smedshaug 2011). The immense importance many of these authors have accorded to the alleged spread of neoliberal ideology does not, however, signify that the term ‘neoliberalism’ is very often used to denote a clearly defined concept.

The term suggests its own definition; ‘neoliberalism’ must surely be a revival of ‘liberalism’. This rather intuitive definition suggests that liberalism has been absent from political discussions and policy-making for a period of time, but that it has now re-emerged

² This chapter draws on an earlier article, published in Norwegian and with Amund Lie as co-author, under the title “Kva er nyliberalisme?” in the book *Nyliberalisme – ideer og politisk virkelighet* (Thorsen and Lie 2007). An earlier version of this chapter has also been published as a separate article in English (Thorsen 2010).

in a rejuvenated form. It suggests, in other words, that liberalism has undergone a process of initial growth, intermediary decline, and finally a recent renewal. Alternatively, neoliberalism might be perceived of as a distinct ideology, descending from, but not identical to 'liberalism' in more general terms. Under this interpretation, neoliberalism would share some historical roots and some of its basic vocabulary with liberalism in general. This alternative interpretation would make neoliberalism analogous to 'neoconservatism', which is a 'political persuasion' quite similar to and yet on some central areas of policy markedly different from conventional conservative thought (cf. e.g. Kristol 1983; Wolfson 2004, Fukuyama 2006).

An initial mystery facing anyone who wants to study neoliberal ideology in more detail is that there hardly is anyone who has written about neoliberalism from a sympathetic or even neutral point of view. The term itself has over the years become the property of critics of neoliberalism, and it has been quite uncommon to use the word in a positive sense, or as a form of self-identification (cf. though Moslet 1984; Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Norberg and Bejke 1994; cf. also Norberg 2001; 2003). Consequently, practically everyone who writes about neoliberalism does so as part of a critique of neoliberal ideology, or what they perceive of as such. Neoliberalism is in this 'critical literature' customarily thought of as the return and spread of one specific type of liberalism, which in the period around the penultimate turn of the century, with the rise of a type liberalism characterised by a more positive attitude to public intervention in the economy, became known as *economic liberalism* (cf. e.g. Hobhouse [1911] 1994).

Economic liberalism and neoliberalism is therefore by most commentators held separate from liberalism in general, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) may be understood rather broadly as a political ideology which is "[f]avourable to constitutional changes and legal or administrative reforms tending in the direction of

freedom or democracy”. The same dictionary describes neoliberalism also, which is said to be “a modified or revived form of traditional liberalism, esp. one based on belief in free market capitalism and the rights of the individual” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989a). Neoliberalism is thus understood, basically, as the belief that states ought to abstain from economic intervention in order to protect the rights of individuals, and instead leave as much as possible in the hands of allegedly self-regulating markets. While these definitions are somewhat illuminating, they do need further elaboration. It is for instance uncertain how, and in what sense, neoliberalism is a descendant of – or offshoot from – liberalism in general.

Neoliberalism might still, however, be given a more precise definition. If this is done, then the concept could become a useful analytical device in order to describe some recent trends in economic and political thought. In this chapter, I will first present a short conceptual history of liberalism. This analysis of liberalism in general will serve as a background to the third part, which will attempt to sort out the concept of neoliberalism. At the end of this section, I will propose a definition of neoliberalism.

The next section will analyse neoliberalism as a common name for the political and economic thought of several prominent political theorists in recent times. In that section, entitled ‘the neoliberal thought collective’, a term copied from Mirowski and Plehwe (2009), I will briefly describe the political and economic thought of among others Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick. Of these, Hayek – who has been described by one commentator as the ‘pathfinder of neoliberalism’ – is perhaps the most central theorist of the neoliberal tradition of political thought (cf. Fogh Rasmussen 1993:49-57). I will then in the final two sections discuss neoliberal ideology more thematically and generally, and ask if neoliberalism is a useful concept, before I will end this chapter by asking to what degree neoliberalism is a governing force in the world today, as many of the ‘critical’ authors would have it. These final comments will set the stage for further discussions in the next and last

chapter, which will round off this study, and it which I will compare the political thought of the central members of the neoliberal thought collective, with the political theories of Berlin and Popper.

6.2 Liberalism

The word ‘liberal’ took on a specifically political meaning with the establishment of liberal parliamentary caucuses throughout Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, shortly after the first French Revolution (Gray 1995a). When these embryonic political parties coined the term ‘liberal’, they wanted to signal their positive view of the slowly emerging democratic systems of government in Britain and the United States, as opposed to their conservative opponents, who wanted to return to pre-revolutionary forms of government (Sartori 1987:367ff). Liberalism is however usually thought of as a considerably older ideology, dating at least back to John Locke and his philosophical and theological defence of property rights and religious toleration in the closing years of the seventeenth century (cf. e.g. Laski [1936] 1997). Because of its long history, the term ‘liberalism’ has come to represent a rather nebulous concept, and usage has varied quite considerably over time, and in accordance with different regional experiences. The opening sentences of an entry in a reference book should suffice to describe the lexicographer’s headache:

Anyone trying to give a brief account of liberalism is immediately faced with an embarrassing question: are we dealing with liberalism or liberalisms? It is easy to list famous liberals; it is harder to say what they have in common. John Locke, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, T. H. Green, John Dewey and contemporaries such as Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls are certainly liberals – but they do not agree about the boundaries of toleration, the legitimacy of the welfare state, and the virtues of democracy, to take three rather central political issues. (Ryan 1993:291)

The matter is not helped, either, by the fact that many have used ‘liberal’ as a general term “of praise or obloquy in the political struggle”, while others have tried to “define liberalism

in such a way that only the very deluded or the very wicked could fail to be liberals” (Ryan 1993:292). In addition, liberal parties and political philosophers have frequently put forward differing opinions of what the true meaning of liberalism actually is. There is almost no limit to the kinds of policies, especially economic policies, which have garnered the support of political parties and individuals who have found it useful to call themselves liberals. We could however, following Alan Ryan’s introductory essay, identify some common forms of liberalism such as ‘classical liberalism’, a term used by Shearmur as a name for his own position (cf. section 5.3 above), and the ideology Ryan describes as ‘modern liberalism’.

Classical liberalism is, according to Ryan, the ideology of earlier liberals such as John Locke and Adam Smith. In addition, he identifies F. A. Hayek as a more recent representative of classical liberalism. Classical liberalism is often associated with the belief that the state ought to be *minimal*, which means that practically nothing except armed forces, law enforcement, and other ‘non-excludable goods’ ought to be the concern of the state. This kind of state is sometimes called a ‘night-watchman state’, since its sole purpose is to uphold the most fundamental aspects of public order. With their perspective on the state, classical liberals are usually thought of as right-wing liberals. Classical liberalism has thus much in common with what I described above as ‘economic liberalism’, and it is quite often the case that contemporary proponents of classical liberalism are portrayed by their critics and other commentators as advocates of neoliberalism.

Modern liberalism is, on the other hand, according to Ryan characterised by a greater willingness to let the state become an active participant in the economy. Modern liberalism is therefore a profound revision of classical liberalism, especially of the economic policies traditionally associated with it. Whereas classical liberals favour *laissez-faire* economic policies because it is thought that they lead to more freedom or a better democracy, modern liberals tend to claim that this analysis is inadequate and misleading. Instead, they think that

the state must play a significant role in the economy, if the most basic liberal goals of freedom and democracy are to be made into reality. Such views could be associated, still according to Ryan, with early theorists such as Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill. More recently, John Dewey, William Beveridge, and John Rawls have articulated similar ideas. They have nevertheless still chosen to hold on to liberalism as a name for their political thought, in spite of the fact that their policy recommendations often coincide or overlap with those of many democratic socialists (cf. Brandal et al. 2011, chapter 1).

An overlapping fault line within liberalism described by Ryan is the more recent conflict between ‘liberal egalitarianism’ and ‘libertarianism’ (Ryan 1993:296-297; Kymlicka 2002:53-165). This dimension is to a certain degree similar to the division between classical and modern liberalism, but not entirely so. One might perhaps perceive of libertarianism as a more systematic version of classical liberalism, at least as this position has been expressed by for instance Robert Nozick (1974) and Murray Rothbard ([1962/1970] 2004). Liberal egalitarianism could, on the other hand, be thought of as a collection of more systematic restatements of modern liberalism (cf. especially Rawls 1971; Ackerman 1980).

Libertarianism is, as its name suggests, characterised by a categorical concern for individual liberty and property rights, coupled with a corresponding de-emphasis of other traditional liberal goals such as democracy and distributive justice. This sets libertarians apart from many earlier classical liberals such as Smith and Tocqueville who, while they advocated quite extensive freedom of action in the economic sphere, also acknowledge the validity and legitimacy of other concerns.

Later classical liberals such as Hayek are however hardly distinguishable from the libertarians, at least if we look at the economic policies he tended to recommend. Even if he and other economists of the so-called ‘Austrian school’ of economics insisted on describing themselves as classical liberals, they accuse at the same time mainstream liberals of

advocating “a program that only in details differs from the totalitarianism of the socialists” (Mises 1962:v; cf. Hayek 1973; 1976, 1979). Liberal egalitarians, meanwhile, generally share the view that legitimate goals and ideals are many, and that individual liberty and the effective enforcement of private property rights are merely two of these goals. The name, liberal egalitarianism, indicates that liberal egalitarians would like to see equality as well as liberty, which places them alongside other modern liberals, politically to the left of classical liberals and libertarians alike.

Surveying the history and recent developments of liberal thought, one could quite easily come to agree with Ryan that it would be difficult to pinpoint exactly which political ideals, goals, and beliefs liberals have in common. There have, however, been made several attempts to construct a reunified definition of what sort of ideology liberalism actually is. John Gray’s solution is to emphasise what he believes most liberals have in common. He therefore identifies four elements of a conception of man and society which he believes liberals of all quarters adhere to, and which sets them apart from non-liberals:

Common to all variants of the liberal tradition is a definite conception, distinctively modern in character, of man and society. What are the elements of this conception? It is *individualist*, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity; *egalitarian*, inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms; and *meliorist* in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements. It is this conception of man and society which gives liberalism a definite identity which transcends its vast internal variety and complexity. (Gray 1995a:xii, author’s own emphases)

Another attempt to submit a fairly broad and inclusive definition of liberalism has been given by George Crowder (2002:22):

The idea of liberalism is, of course, complex and contested, but there is general agreement that liberalism involves a commitment to the following four main values or principles: the equal moral worth of individuals (issuing in a principle of equal treatment), individual liberties and rights, limited government and private property.

Ryan's introductory essay on liberalism also contains a catalogue of core tenets, in the form of three 'liberal antipathies', and three 'liberal prescriptions'. The liberal antipathy towards political absolutism, theocracy and unrestricted capitalism are common to all liberals from Locke to our day, according to Ryan (1993). Of these, the last may come across as a bit of a surprise, given the emphasis put on mercantile autonomy by the classical liberals. As Ryan shows, however, there are many differences between the moderately positive view of the market economy given by early classical liberals such as Smith, and the more unqualified support of the market economy displayed by twentieth century libertarians and classical liberals, which Ryan implicitly places outside of the main stream of the liberal tradition.

The prescriptions he alludes to are perhaps more familiar. Liberalism is, he says, a set of political theories which emphasise first of all that individuals ought to be free to choose between different options in life-defining decisions. Secondly, liberalism includes the view that society ought to be subjected to the rule of law and democratic governance. Finally, Ryan connects liberalism with the idea that state power ought to be exercised with caution and within constitutional limits, for instance within a system based on the separation of powers, as suggested by earlier liberals such as Locke and Montesquieu.

'Liberalism' is, undoubtedly, a rather vague and often highly contested concept. It usually describes a disposition towards individual liberty and democracy which might be present in a person's political point of view, or ingrained in the political culture of a country, rather than a well-defined and clearly demarcated set of political beliefs (cf. Sartori 1987; Waldron 1987; Larmore 1990; Galston 1995). This means that liberalism today is not a 'partisan' ideology, and more like a shared heritage between those that are committed to goals and ideals such as democracy and freedom. It is clear, however, that liberalism has in effect become an 'essentially contested concept', at least for the foreseeable future (Freedman 1986; 1996; Abbey 2005; cf. Gallie 1956).

6.3 Neoliberalism: conceptual history and definitions

6.3.1 The 'critical' literature

According to Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005:1), “we live in the age of neoliberalism”. Along with the other authors of the book *Neoliberalism – A Critical Reader*, they share the quite common view that power and wealth are to an ever increasing degree being concentrated within transnational corporations and global elite groups. This concentration of power comes as a result of the practical implementation of an economic and political ideology they identify as ‘neoliberalism’. On the volume’s back cover blurb, the publisher of the book goes even further, and describes neoliberalism as “the dominant ideology shaping our world today”. But in spite of its purportedly overshadowing importance, Saad-Filho and Johnston find it “impossible to define neoliberalism purely theoretically” (ibid.).

It is not, according to another contribution to the same volume, possible to date the emergence of neoliberalism precisely. Its foundations are all the same traced back to the classical liberalism advocated by Adam Smith, and to the specific conception of man and society on which he founded his economic theories. Neoliberalism is, according to this view, thought of as an entirely new ‘paradigm’ for economic theory and policy-making – the ideology behind the most recent stage in the development of capitalist society. At the same time, it is a revival of the economic theories of Smith and his intellectual heirs in the nineteenth century, especially David Ricardo and the proponents of ‘Manchester liberalism’, such as Richard Cobden and John Bright (Clarke 2005).

This line of argument is continued by Palley (2005), who argues that a ‘great reversal’ has taken place. Neoliberalism has according to him replaced the economic theories of centrist or (what Ryan calls) modern liberals such as John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge (Keynes 1936; Beveridge 1944; 1945). Keynesianism has been replaced by a more ‘monetarist’ approach inspired by the theories and research of for instance Milton

Friedman (cf. e.g. Friedman and Schwartz 1963; Friedman 1969; 1991). Since the 1970's, neoliberalism has according to Palley been the dominating ideological force in macroeconomic policy-making. This has led to less severe public regulation of the economy and greater emphasis on stability in economic policy, rather than goals which were more popular in the first decades after World War II, such as full employment and the alleviation of abject poverty.

Munck (2005) maintains that the possibility of a 'self-regulating market' is a core assumption in classical liberalism, and an important presumption among neoliberals as well. Efficient allocation of resources is, according to Munck, viewed by neoliberals as the most important purpose of an economic system, and the most efficient way to allocate resources goes through market mechanisms. Acts of intervention in the economy from government agencies are therefore almost always undesirable, because intervention can undermine the finely tuned logic of the marketplace. As 'the dominant ideology shaping our world today', neoliberalism wields great power over contemporary debates concerning international trade and reforms of the public sector. One is forced, basically, to take a stand against neoliberalism, or else contribute to its further entrenchment.

The *Critical Reader* is in many ways a typical representative of a recent wave of 'critical literature' whose main goal it is to denounce a powerful tendency which goes under the name of 'neoliberalism' (cf. e.g. Blomgren 1997; Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Touraine 2001; Rapley 2004; Harvey 2005; Plehwe et al. 2006; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Several of these works accord neoliberalism an overwhelming significance, while they at the same time seem quite happy to leave the concept itself completely without a clear definition. In effect they claim, along with Saad-Filho and Johnston, that it defies definition. One might therefore easily begin to suspect that the concept has become, in some quarters at least, a

generic term of abuse describing almost any economic and political development deemed to be undesirable.

6.3.2 Neoliberalism: A conceptual history

Even if the recent upsurge of critical literature suggests that neoliberalism is a new phenomenon, recorded usage of the term stretches back to the end of the nineteenth century (Oxford English Dictionary 1989a). It then appeared in an article by the prominent French economist and central ideologue of the cooperative movement, Charles Gide (1898; cf. also Gide 1922). In his article, which is a polemic against the so-called ‘neoliberal’ Italian economist Maffeo Pantaleoni (1898), Gide foreshadows later usage of the term. Neoliberalism is, according to Gide, a return to the liberal economic theories of Adam Smith and his attendants. After Gide, however, few make use of his concept, and usage is inconsistent (cf. e.g. Barnes 1921; Merriam 1938; Rüstow [1945] 1950).

The first book-length work I have been able to discover, employing the term ‘neoliberalism’ in its title, is Jacques Cros’ doctoral thesis *Le ‘néo-libéralisme’ et la révision du libéralisme* (Cros 1950). To Cros, neoliberalism is the ideology which resulted from efforts to reinvigorate classical liberalism in the period immediately before and during World War II, by political theorists such as Walter Lippmann (1937), Wilhelm Röpke (1944; 1945), and Friedrich Hayek ([1944] 2001; Hayek et al. 1935). Cros’ main argument is, basically, that these ‘neoliberals’ have sought to redefine liberalism by going back to its roots, to a more traditionally liberal stance on economic policy issues, akin to what Ryan has described as ‘classical liberalism’. Cros generally applaud these ‘neoliberals’ for speaking out against totalitarianism and political extremism at a time when only few people did so, especially among intellectuals. He remains however sceptical to the central thesis of some of the proponents of ‘neoliberalism’, common to most classical liberals, that individual liberty demands that the market economy should be left almost entirely unregulated.

After Cros, there is a long period of almost forty years in which the term ‘neoliberalism’ is used only infrequently. In this period, the term was mainly used to describe the situation in Germany, as an epithet for the ideology behind West Germany’s ‘social market economy’ (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*), for which in particular Röpke and other so-called ‘ordo-liberals’ served as central sources of inspiration (cf. Arndt 1954; Friedrich 1955). In particular, it is the German social theorist and Catholic theologian E. E. Nawroth (1961; 1962) who attempts, building in part on Cros, to concentrate his analyses of the political and economic developments of the Federal Republic around a concept of *Neoliberalismus*.

In Nawroth’s studies, it is the attempt made by Konrad Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard, the first two Federal Chancellors of West Germany, to combine a market economy with liberal democracy and ‘Catholic social teachings’ (*katholische Soziallehre*), which is described as ‘neoliberalism’. Nawroth himself, however, remains sceptical to this rather eclectic ideology behind what became better known as the ‘social market economy’ (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*), and he is especially concerned by his perception that the market economy inspires people to become acquisitive and self-centred, and thus hampering their moral development and weakening the internal solidarity of West German society. In short, Nawroth’s conservative critique of West German ‘neoliberalism’ inaugurates a new tradition of using the term depreciatively.

This concept of neoliberalism was slowly and gradually exported to the rest of the world. We can witness the early stages of this movement in an article by the Belgian-American philosopher Wilfried ver Eecke (1982), which explicitly is an attempt to export Nawroth’s concept of neoliberalism to the English-speaking world. In his text, ver Eecke uses the concept of neoliberalism to describe the German ordo-liberalism of Wilhelm Röpke and others, as well as the American monetarism of for instance Milton Friedman. According

to ver Eecke, the ordo-liberalism and monetarism share a strong preference for a state which reserves for itself the right to intervene in the market only in order to preserve the market economy as such, for instance with monetary policies solely aimed at price stability.

In his article, we can therefore see the concept of neoliberalism in a more mature state, compared to the expositions given by Cros and Nawroth. Under ver Eecke's understanding, neoliberalism is a concept reserved for a particular *kind* of liberalism, which is marked by an ingrained commitment to *laissez-faire* economic policies. Among the proponents of such policies one finds classical liberals such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. We also find monetarists and other economic theorists who want to establish and preserve what they perceive of as 'free markets', such as the afore mentioned Friedman. Finally, we also find libertarians whose much-repeated insistence on individual liberty issues in a demand for a minimal or virtually non-existent state, like Nozick and Rothbard. In sum, they are an internally diverse crowd of theorists, who may find a lot about which they could come to disagree, for instance *why* they would like to 'roll back' the frontiers of the state, especially the contemporary welfare state. On the level of practical policy proposals, they are however united in their wish to reduce the size and grasp of the state in general and individual government institutions, akin to the basic goal found in the nineteenth century liberalism, in the heyday of so-called classical liberalism.

6.3.3 Some recent definitions of neoliberalism

In the recent 'critical' literature, David Harvey stands out as being one of the few who tries, in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, to give the concept a wide-ranging definition, which in part harks back to the analyses given by Cros, Nawroth, and ver Eecke (Harvey 2005). His definition does shed a ray of light on the issue of what kind of phenomenon neoliberalism is:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual

entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit. (Harvey 2005:2)

Harvey's definition of neoliberalism is tightly knit to his overall analysis, which includes the firmly held belief that the world has experienced "an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970's" (*ibid.*). Harvey proposes with his definition to view neoliberalism, not as the renewal of liberalism in general, but as a distinctive economic theory. It is also apparent that Harvey sees neoliberalism not as a continuation of liberalism, but as something which lives independently of more traditional liberal values and policies.

In fact, some leading neoliberals are not liberals in any meaningful sense at all, as Harvey sees clearly anti-liberal autocrats such as Deng Xiaoping and Augusto Pinochet among the political vanguard of neoliberalism, alongside democratically elected leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Nevertheless, many neoliberal theorists and ideologues share a liberal identity. Among these, liberal political theorists and economists such as Hayek and Friedman figure prominently alongside nominally conservative politicians such as Thatcher and Reagan in Harvey's gallery of neoliberals.

With his definition, which incorporates a set of rather diverse political and economic ideas, ranging from 'Thatcherism' and 'Reaganomics' to 'Socialism with Chinese

characteristics', Harvey emphasises quite rightly that neoliberalism is 'a theory of political economic practices' rather than a systematic political ideology. It remains, however, that neoliberalism is a set of economic policy proposals which is most often advocated, at least in the Western world, because it is thought that they will reinforce traditionally liberal goals such as democracy, individual liberty, and private property rights.

Another attempt to study neoliberalism, but this time from a perspective rooted in political theory, comes from Anna-Maria Blomgren (1997). In a 'critical analysis' of the political thought of Friedman, Nozick, and Hayek, she describes their respective political and economic theories as representatives of a 'neoliberal political philosophy'. In addition, Blomgren (1997:14n5) mentions David Gauthier, Jan Narveson, Milton's son David Friedman, Murray Rothbard, James Buchanan, and Ayn Rand as being other prominent neoliberal political philosophers. Blomgren's basic definition of neoliberalism overlaps, also, to a considerable degree with Harvey's definition, but emphasise more clearly the internal diversity of neoliberal thought:

Neoliberalism is commonly thought of as a political philosophy giving priority to individual freedom and the right to private property. It is not, however, the simple and homogeneous philosophy it might appear to be. It ranges over a wide expanse in regard to ethical foundations as well as to normative conclusions. At the one end of the line is 'anarcho-liberalism', arguing for a complete *laissez-faire*, and the abolishment of all government. At the other end is 'classical liberalism', demanding a government with functions exceeding those of the so-called night-watchman state. (Blomgren 1997:224)

Under Blomgren's view, Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick all give separate theoretical groundings to neoliberal evaluations and economic policies. Friedman is, according to Blomgren, on the surface a typical representative of *consequentialist* neoliberalism; he favours neoliberal policies such as deregulation, privatisation, and tax cuts because of the perceived positive consequences such courses of political action will have for the overall economic situation. When Blomgren delves deeper into the matter, however, she finds that

his policy recommendations are actually based on a conception of natural law. This means that Friedman wants to implement a package of neoliberal economic policies because human beings are by nature social, and that they should be 'free to choose' in as many situations as possible (cf. Friedman [1962] 2002; Friedman and Friedman 1980).

Hayek, on a similar note, is perceived by Blomgren to be a more conservative type of neoliberal who, while approximating at places a utilitarian argument in favour of neoliberalism, also bases his political thought on an idea of natural law. Central to Hayek's theory is the notion of a 'spontaneous order' of social life, which is preferable to any kind of artificially created order, at least when it comes to securing individual liberty and well-being. A proactive welfare state will inevitably, no matter how benevolent its intentions are, stifle economic growth and put an unjustifiable limit on individual liberty, all in the name of an ideal of social justice which according to Hayek is little more than a mirage (cf. especially Hayek [1944] 2001; 1973; 1976).

Nozick is, still according to Blomgren, a representative of a *deontological* kind of neoliberalism, at least in his earlier works. He advocates many of the familiar neoliberal policies, but they are grounded in an idea of his that a set of immutable natural rights have been conferred to all human beings. These rights make it difficult to see that the state could have any legitimate role to play at all (Nozick 1974, especially the preface at pp. ix-xiv). Nevertheless, Nozick wants the state to rectify past injustices, even if this in the short run will mean much government intervention in the economy. Unlike Friedman and Hayek, Nozick does not allude to the purportedly *good consequences* of neoliberal – or more precisely libertarian – policies when he argues in their favour. Instead, he believes that such policies are the *right measures* for creating a society in accordance with his conception of justice and natural rights.

These categorisations of different types of neoliberal political philosophy, which Blomgren makes in her book, are however not entirely unproblematic. A strong case could be made for other interpretations, in which for instance the political theories of Friedman and Hayek are given indirectly utilitarian foundations, rather than the kind of foundation in natural law envisioned by Blomgren (Lundström 1993; 1998; Malnes 1998). What remains quite easy to recognise in her overall analysis, however, is her final question: Is it meaningful to view neoliberalism as a unified tradition of political thought, given the widely different theoretical justifications for the neoliberal package of policies in circulation?

Perhaps it is better, after all, to view neoliberalism not as a monolithic piece of political thought, but as a convenient common name for a loosely connected set of political theories instead. Such theories – often hastily subsumed under the common heading of neoliberalism – range from Rothbard’s ‘anarcho-capitalism’, which includes the belief that the state ought to be abolished altogether, to the re-invented ‘classical liberalism’ of Mises and Hayek, who firmly believes that a strong but largely inactive *commonwealth* is a necessary precondition for social life, as well as individual liberty. Frequently, however, these political philosophies speak with one voice on the level of practical policy-making, advocating a ‘rolling back of the frontiers of the state’, and the creation of a society in which the market economy plays a greater role than it does in most societies today. At the end of the day, a practical and almost unanimous agreement about what we should do next among political theorists that are usually thought of as representatives of neoliberalism, may quite easily overshadow the philosophical differences between them.

6.3.4 Neoliberalism: a tentative definition

In light of the literature presented above, it is possible to give a tentative definition of what neoliberalism is, which builds on some of the more systematic contributions to the large body of ‘critical literature’. The definition proposed below is as I see it more to the point,

and better able to function within the framework of a more disinterested analysis of the political ideas and theories which are usually subsumed under the heading of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism may be defined as a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to be a safeguard for individual liberty, especially the mercantile liberty of individuals and corporations to act as agents in an unfettered market economy. Any transgression by the state beyond its sole legitimate *raison d'être* is unacceptable. This conviction usually issues in a belief that the state ought to be “minimal and dispersed” or at least considerably reduced in strength and size (Mont Pèlerin Society, no date; cf. also Mises 1962; Nozick 1974; Hayek 1979; Friedman [1962] 2002). Neoliberalism is thus defined not as a complete ideology or perspective of how most aspects of human societies ought to be organised, but as a basic idea about how the relationship between the state on one hand, and individuals, corporations, and markets on the other, ought to be structured.

The kinds of political thought which have led neoliberals to embrace the ideal of the minimal state could moreover be made to apply to the international level, and quite a few neoliberals have thought that a system of ‘free trade’ ought to be implemented between countries as well. The only acceptable reason for regulating international trade is, according to this perspective, to safeguard the same kinds of mercantile liberty and the same kinds of strong property rights which in the first place ought to be realised on a national level (Norberg 2001; 2003; T. Friedman 2006). Neoliberal convictions often also include the belief that market mechanisms almost always constitute the optimal way of organising the production and exchange of goods and services (Friedman [1962] 2002; Friedman and Friedman 1980; Norberg 2001). Unregulated markets and international trade will, it is believed, set free the creative potential and the entrepreneurial spirit which is built into the ‘spontaneous order’ of human society (cf. Hayek 1973). A rolling back of the frontiers of the

state will thereby lead to increased individual liberty and higher levels of well-being, a more efficient allocation of resources, and ultimately to higher rates of economic growth and overall prosperity (Hayek 1973; Rothbard [1962/1970] 2004).

Neoliberalism may also include a perspective on individual moral virtue; the virtuous person is one who is able to access the relevant markets and function as a competent actor in these markets. He or she is willing to accept the risks associated with participating in unregulated markets, and to adapt to rapid changes arising from such participation (Fogh Rasmussen 1993; cf. Friedman and Friedman 1980). Individuals are also seen as being solely responsible for the consequences of the decisions they make. Inequality, even inequality of the most conspicuous sort, is under this perspective morally acceptable, at least to the degree in which it could be seen as the result of long chains of freely made decisions by individuals (cf. Nozick 1974; Hayek 1976; Joseph and Sumption 1979). If a person demands that the state should regulate the market or make reparations to those who have been caught at the losing end of a freely initiated market transaction, this is viewed as an indication that he is morally depraved and underdeveloped, and scarcely different from a proponent of a totalitarian state (Mises 1962).

Thus understood and defined, neoliberalism becomes a loosely demarcated set of ideas of how the relationship between the state and its external environment ought to be organised, and not a complete political ideology which tries to answer all questions relating to how society ought to be organised (Blomgren 1997; Malnes 1998). In fact, it is generally not understood as a theory about how the everyday running of political processes ought to be organised. Neoliberals may therefore disagree on many matters, and may provide very different answers to questions such as whether or not the state ought to be run as a democracy or if there ought to be a free exchange of political ideas. This means, as Harvey (2005) has indicated, that typically neoliberal policies aimed at deregulation and

privatisation could be implemented under the auspices of autocrats as well as within liberal democracies (cf. especially Steger and Roy 2010).

Proponents of neoliberal policies are therefore sometimes in the ‘critical literature’ portrayed as being of the opinion that the democratic process ought to be sidestepped and replaced by the rule of experts or legal instruments designed for that purpose, whenever it slows down neoliberal reforms, or threatens the mercantile liberty of individuals or corporations, which it sometimes does (cf. especially Harvey 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). The practical implementation of neoliberal policies will therefore, in some cases at least, lead to a relocation of power from political to market-economic processes, from the state to markets and individuals, and finally from the legislature and executive authorities to the judiciary (cf. Østerud et al. 2003; Tranøy 2006).

In the following, we must however bear one thing in mind, namely that concepts such as liberalism and – perhaps especially – neoliberalism are very much contested concepts (cf. especially Hartwich 2009). We must in addition make allowance for the fact that a lot of surprising emotions are sometimes stirred up with the use or disuse of such concepts. At the end of the day, one must nevertheless try to overcome such emotions, and try as best as one can to discuss what the future of human societies should be, preferably using readily available concepts from ordinary political parlance.

6.4 The neoliberal thought collective

6.4.1 Beginnings

If we grant that neoliberalism is indeed a fairly coherent – albeit loosely demarcated – tradition within political theory, as many of the authors of the ‘critical literature’ appear to think, we can start to present the political thought of individual political and economic theorists which we with some degree of justice may describe as the most central *neoliberal*

political thinkers. We should also, however, bear in mind at least the outlines of a history of neoliberalism, particularly neoliberal thought, in the twentieth century and beyond.

We may for instance begin with the narrative given by Jacques Cros (1950; cf. also Denord 2009), who starts out his account of what he calls neoliberalism with a description of an intellectual movement founded in the years immediately before World War II. In his native France, Cros sees the beginning of a political movement as well as a tradition of normative political thought, centred on the *Colloque Walter Lippmann*, named after the American political theorist and public intellectual mentioned above.

This colloquium, convened in Paris in the fall of 1938, counted an impressive number of liberal economists and political theorists from across Western Europe and North America among its attendees. During the colloquium, the German philosopher and political theorist Alexander Rüstow apparently even suggested that it should adopt the word neoliberalism as a term of self-description, but this idea never caught on among the others present (cf. Rüstow [1945] 1950). Taken together, its members were a diverse group of people with very different opinions on matters of economic policy, but they were united in the idea that a liberal tradition of political and economic thought needed a revival in order to turn back the tide of totalitarianism at opposite ends of the political spectrum. While the colloquium itself never amounted to much, primarily because of the beginning of World War II in Europe, several of its attendees contributed to a flurry of new ideas in economic and political theory in the years to follow.

Shortly after the war, however, some centrist liberals such as Rüstow drifted away from the intellectual movement that began in Paris some years earlier, while other members of the colloquium went on to found the *Mont Pèlerin Society* (MPS) in 1947, named after the resort town outside Lausanne in Switzerland in which the society met for the first time. The MPS was, from its establishment to 1960, led by the Austrian economist and political

theorist Friedrich Hayek, who had made a name for himself three years earlier with the publication of *The Road to Serfdom*.

With the establishment of the MPS, we see the beginnings of an organised movement who wanted to implement and spread a collection of related political and economic ideas, tending in the direction of small or ‘minimal’ government, unfettered markets, and strong private property rights (Mont Pèlerin Society, no date; cf. Plehwe 2009). Like the *Colloque Walter Lippmann*, the MPS thought – and presumably still thinks – that liberal political and economic ideas had been put under siege by outright totalitarianism, but also that liberalism faced a more oblique threat from increased use of economic planning in the nascent democratic welfare states:

The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the earth’s surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power. Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own.

The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved. (Mont Pèlerin Society, no date)

Hayek is indeed a central figure in the history of neoliberalism, both as a leading political theorist and an organiser of people with views and interests similar to his own. In his opening address to the first meeting of the MPS, he suggests that a new liberal tradition which harks back to the ‘basic principles’ an older liberal creed has to be erected, and that

the aberrations of intermediary liberals in favour of 'socialism' and 'nationalism' has to be expunged from the liberal consciousness:

The basic conviction which has guided me in my efforts is that, if the ideals which I believe unite us, and for which, in spite of so much abuse of the term, there is still no better name than liberal, are to have any chance of revival, a great intellectual task must be performed. This task involves both purging traditional liberal theory of certain accidental accretions which have become attached to it in the course of time, and also facing up to some real problems which an over-simplified liberalism has shirked or which have become apparent only since it has turned into a somewhat stationary and rigid creed. (Hayek 1967:149)

It is, I think, important that we fully realize that the popular liberal creed, on the Continent and in America more than in England, contained many elements which on the one hand often led its adherents directly into the folds of socialism or nationalism, and on the other hand antagonized many who shared the basic values of individual freedom but were repelled by the aggressive rationalism which would recognize no values except those whose utility (for an ultimate purpose never disclosed) could be demonstrated by individual reason, and which presumed that science was competent to tell us not only what is but also what ought to be. Personally I believe that this false rationalism, which gained influence in the French Revolution and which during the past hundred years has exercised its influence mainly through the twin movements of Positivism and Hegelianism, is an expression of an intellectual hubris which is the opposite of that intellectual humility which is the essence of the true liberalism that regards with reverence those spontaneous social forces through which the individual creates things greater than he knows. (Hayek 1967:154-155)

In this opening address, Hayek identifies a set of enemies which in combination identifies the outlines of the new liberal creed he hopes that he and others will be able to recreate. Socialism, nationalism and excessive rationalism are all viewed as central enemies. The most central goal is apparently to create a broad alliance of different political forces united in the belief that the state should not try to create an 'artificial order' in order to fulfil an ideal of social justice or community, which may potentially eclipse the 'spontaneous order' of the market economy. Perhaps more surprisingly, we can also see that Hayek tries to make an enemy out of the idea that one could and should try to construct a society based around the ideal that increased scientific knowledge could help build a social order more characterised

by human fulfilment and happiness. This certainly sets his type of liberal creed apart from the technology-driven optimism which to a much greater extent has characterised other political thinkers who have found it useful to describe themselves as liberals. This move must, however, also surely set Hayek's political thought apart from the more cautiously optimistic type of egalitarian and 'organised' liberalism recommended by Berlin and Popper.

If Hayek and other leading members *Mont Pèlerin Society* are viewed as the instigators of a neoliberal thought collective, we may easily come to view him as one of the most influential political and economic theorists of the twentieth century (Plehwe and Mirowski 2009). From a situation around the middle of the twentieth century, which was a period of time in which the ideas of nineteenth-century economic liberalism were at a nadir of popularity, they have spread across the world and influenced policy-making in many countries and international organisations (Judt [2005] 2010, especially chapter 17; cf. also Harvey 2005).

Hayek himself, however, is a political and economic theorist which it is possible to interpret in several different ways. Such interpretations may view Hayek's political and economic thought as a fairly eclectic and moderate mixture of conservatism and liberalism, or they may view it as a particularly radical form of neoliberalism centred on a belief in the minimal state – or almost everything in between (cf. e.g. Røe Isaksen 2008; Nilsen and Smedshaug 2011, especially Astrup and Nilsen 2011). This is of course quite easily done when one considers his numerous works, spanning almost six decades, which also makes it all but impossible to give an exhaustive or representative review of his work in the course of a few pages.

Some of these works are undoubtedly also more nuanced and detailed than others, ranging from quite comprehensive and systematic works within political and economic theory, to shorter and more general essays about politics and economics intended for a wider

audience. In his more substantial works such as *The Constitution of Liberty* (Hayek 1960) or *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Hayek 1973; 1976: 1979), as well as several of his more polemical books such as *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek [1944] 2001), we see the development of several common policy proposals tending in the direction of smaller government and more unfettered markets. On the level of practical policy recommendations, it is therefore only natural to interpret his political theory as a plea for a transfer of political power from the state to individuals, corporations, and the market economy largely overlapping with attitudes described above under the heading of neoliberalism.

In several of his later essays and books, Hayek even considers the very idea of a public redistribution of wealth and resources according to an ideal of social justice to be fundamentally anti-liberal, even if many liberal thinkers and political parties have incorporated such ideals into their body of beliefs about how society ought to be organised:

Especially in contrast to socialism it may be said that liberalism is concerned with commutative justice *and not* with what is called distributive or now more frequently 'social justice'. (Hayek 1978:139, emphasis added)

The ideal of distributive justice has frequently attracted liberal thinkers, and has become probably one of the main factors which led so many of them from liberalism to socialism. The reason why it must be rejected by consistent liberals is the double one that there exist no recognized or discoverable general principles of distributive justice, and that, even if such principles could be agreed upon, they could not be put into effect in a society whose productivity rests on the individuals being free to use their own knowledge and abilities for their own purposes. (Hayek 1978:140)

Hayek attempts to justify the establishment of an almost completely unfettered market economy, and a corresponding dismantling of public economic planning on purely formal grounds. He believes we are faced with an inevitable choice between totalitarianism on one hand, and a system in which the state does not try to plan or give shape to society and the economy at all on the other. According to Hayek, and this seems to be one of his most deeply held beliefs as he repeats it throughout his works, a third option does not exist. This is

so, because any attempt to impose political decisions on the market economy and the population at large, decisions which he insists on calling arbitrary, even if they are made by democratically elected legislatures, inevitably will lead to disappointment and a gradual descent into totalitarianism.

If a democratic society tries to restrict the market economy, for instance by redistributing wealth and resources through taxation and the public provision of basic goods and services, it has already according to Hayek begun its move away from democracy to totalitarianism. If we follow Hayek in this train of thought, a mixed economy built around an idea of distributive justice becomes quite simply unthinkable, at least as a stable of affairs. We must instead choose between an entirely unfettered market economy on one hand, and a planned economy, which in the end will destroy both democracy and individual liberty, on the other. In his *magnum opus* called *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, he sums up this for him fundamental belief towards the end:

There exists no third principle for the organization of the economics process which can be rationally chosen to achieve any desirable ends, in addition to either a functioning market in which nobody can conclusively determine how well-off particular groups or individuals will be, or a central direction where a group organized for power determines it. The two principles are irreconcilable, since any combination prevents the achievement of the aims of either. And while we can never reach what the socialists imagine, the general licence to politicians to grant special benefits to those whose support they need still must destroy that self-forming order of the market which serves the general good, and replace it by a forcibly imposed order determined by some arbitrary human wills. We face an inescapable choice between to irreconcilable principles, and however far we may always remain from fully realizing either, there can be no stable compromise. Whichever principle we make the foundation of our proceedings, it will drive us on, no doubt always to something imperfect, but more and more closely resembling one of the two extremes.

Once it is clearly recognized that socialism as much as fascism or communism inevitably leads into the totalitarian state and the destruction of the democratic order, it is clearly legitimate to provide against our inadvertently sliding into a socialist system by constitutional provisions which deprive government of the discriminating powers of coercion even for what at the moment may generally be regarded as good purposes. (Hayek 1979:151)

Reading Hayek's most seminal works, one could quite easily get the impression that it is the actual policy recommendations, and not how they are justified, which are most important to Hayek. On the more fundamental level of ethical theory Hayek therefore appears to fluctuate between different ways of justifying his support of neoliberal policy recommendations. His justifications ranges from the consequentialist view that the frontiers of the state ought to be rolled back because such a move will have favourable consequences, to the deontological view that government ought to be scaled down because it would make a society more morally acceptable, quite regardless of the likely consequences of such a move.

It is, however, possible to view Hayek's thought in a way which will transform it into a fairly coherent philosophical system, and not merely a collection of different attempts to justify policy proposals aimed at introducing smaller government and fewer fetters on the market economy. Such an interpretation, which I find quite convincing, builds on the idea that Hayek has constructed a political theory in two layers, consisting of one 'deontological' theory at an instrumental and ideological level, which is the theory Hayek wants be the basis of routine politics, as well as a 'consequentialist' theory at a more fundamental level, which is supposed to provide a basis for the more instrumental theory:

Many of his interpreters find Hayek's political philosophy to be inconsistent and contradictory. A major theme in this dissertation is that many of these contradictions can be eliminated if his claims are interpreted in terms of two levels. Hayek has two fundamental aims in his writings. The first is to posit a fundamental theory expressing a correct point of view. The second is to formulate ideological conceptions which can provide human actors with the appropriate guidance regarding what, in Hayek's view, is right behaviour. On the first level he assumes responsibility for the good society. However, on the ideological and instrumental level he provides an alibi for not taking responsibility. He argues [at an instrumental and ideological level] for an objective conception of the sources of norms. He defends a deontological conception of ethics and an antirationalistic attitude towards social processes. (Lundström 1993:223)

At the more fundamental level, however, Lundström interprets Hayek as a 'consequentialist' and even as a 'nihilist', and not as a believer in the existence of objective ethical norms or

imperatives. Hayek did moreover hold what Lundström calls “an instrumentalist view of human conceptions”, which “enables him to defend ideas which he himself does not accept” (Lundström 1993:224). In essence, Hayek is interpreted to defend ‘The Great Society’ (cf. Hayek 1976), i.e. a society built on ‘catallaxy’, or a market order which is not planned or put into place as a result of political decisions, in two different ways. In practical terms, ‘The Great Society’ is a society of ‘liberal institutions’, primarily small government and unfettered markets. One such defence is ‘deontological’ and ‘instrumental’, or intended for a wider audience, and another defence is ‘consequentialist’ and more ‘fundamental’, intended for an audience with a more developed taste for philosophical stringency:

Like Sidgwick before him, Hayek defends liberal institutions [at a more fundamental level] for consequentialist reasons. He applies the same perspective to the conceptions underlying liberal institutions. Putting it somewhat provocatively, one can say that Hayek views liberalism as a necessary ‘false consciousness’ supporting ‘The Great Society’. (ibid.)

Quite regardless of how one should ultimately interpret the entirety of Hayek’s political and economic thought, it remains however that at least his practical recommendations in the longer run steadily became more popular. Perhaps one could explain this slowly rising popularity in part because Hayek so skilfully supplied his economic policy recommendations with different types of justification, at different levels and with different audiences in mind, as time went on. Another contributing factor was the flexible way in which Hayek and others organised ‘the neoliberal thought collective’ as a relatively loose network of think tanks, foundations for economic research, and meetings which brought political and economic theorists together with politicians and entrepreneurs. When Hayek and others founded the *Mont Pèlerin Society* in 1947, however, they believed that the kinds of liberal economic policies they wanted to defend were under siege by the rising popularity of socialism and economic planning (Plehwe 2009:16). Consequently, they needed to organise themselves at an international level, and then hammer out a strategy for how to make their preferred

policies more popular, ultimately hoping to push back the tide of Keynesianism and economic planning.

6.4.2 Towards a more mature tradition of political thought

In Western Europe, the economists and political theorists of the *Mont Pèlerin Society* had some measure of success at least in the longer run, and Hayek himself and other prominent members of the MPS became a central source of inspiration for liberal and conservative politicians, at least from the 1970's to our own day (Denord 2009; Tribe 2009; Ptak 2009). In the United States, however, we see an earlier turn away from 'big government', and towards the kind of liberal economic policies recommended by Hayek during and after World War II, with the rise of 'movement conservatism' from the 1960's onwards (Krugman 2007:101-123; cf. also Goldwater [1960] 2007; Madrick 2009; Judt 2010). Here, we also see a more complete turn towards traditionally liberal economic policies, away from the welfare state which was developed in that country in the first twenty years after the war.

One of the more influential intellectuals of this movement was the American economist Milton Friedman, himself an erstwhile follower of Keynesianism, who in 1962 published his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (Friedman [1962] 2002). After the publication of *The Road to Serfdom* and the establishment of the *Mont Pèlerin Society*, Hayek moved to Chicago in 1950, where he helped establish a thriving new atmosphere for economics research, characterised by a negative attitude towards Keynesianism and economic planning. He was less successful, however, in his ambition to write an American edition of *The Road to Serfdom*, and ended up writing the slightly less accessible book *The Constitution of Liberty* instead in 1960, shortly before he moved back to Europe. Friedman was undoubtedly less of an accomplished political theorist than his fellow economist Hayek, but his book was ultimately better suited to a general American audience than anything Hayek ever wrote, and

it went on to become one of the most influential texts produced by the so-called Chicago School of economics research (cf. Van Horn and Mirowski 2009).

In his book, Friedman wrote in a characteristically practical way about the kinds of liberal economic policies both he and Hayek recommended. This has led some political theorists to view him as an unsophisticated thinker (cf. e.g. Malnes 1998:312-313). Sadly for political theorists, however, it is not only the philosophical rigour of a book which determines its influence and its political importance. Friedman's book was however never intended, like some of Hayek's more extensive works, to describe how the philosophical foundations of his political views and policy recommendations ought to be understood. His book is, rather, an informative attempt to describe in an American context what the basic political attitudes and priorities of a 'consistent liberal' actually are, and which policies such a type of liberal ultimately would recommend. This ambition, which is also present in other books such as *Free to Choose* (Friedman and Friedman 1980), is clearly more of a political than a theoretical nature – the basic aim is to present arguments which will inspire politicians and others to help establish a 'free society'. His books are not intended to convert philosophers to his cause.

Both Hayek and Friedman recommend, throughout their works, a rolling back of the frontiers of the state. As Friedman ([1962] 2002:34-36) writes, even the relatively limited government of the United States ought to be rolled back and reduced in size, in order to secure the establishment of a 'free society', and government programs from agricultural subsidies, via regulation of the financial industry, to national parks and toll roads, ought to be completely abolished. At the same time, the state has a legitimate role to play when it comes to the fulfilment of a handful of rather central tasks:

A government which maintained law and order, defined property rights, served as a means whereby we could modify property rights and other rules of the economic game, adjudicated disputes about the interpretation of the rules, enforced contracts,

promoted competition, provided a monetary framework, engaged in activities to counter technical monopolies and to overcome neighborhood effects widely regarded as sufficiently important to justify government intervention, and which supplemented private charity and the private family in protecting the irresponsible, whether madman or child – such a government would clearly have important functions to perform. The consistent liberal is not an anarchist. (Friedman [1962] 2002:34)

Both Hayek and Friedman view the states in their own time as too extensive, and too involved in affairs which ought to remain in the hands of citizens living in a ‘free society’.

At the same time, they do not recommend a complete elimination of the state. The state should rather only do the tasks it alone may perform fairly successfully, in particular the effective enforcement of laws which are necessary to have a functioning market economy in the first place, as well as a few other tasks which would otherwise be left undone. They both agree that beyond this the state should not venture, because any attempt by the state to redistribute wealth and power – or even the means necessary to stave off hunger, disease, and squalor – is a threat to liberty, democracy, and the rule of law, at least in the long run (Hayek [1944] 2001:59-90; Friedman [1962] 2002:7-36). Underpinning the thought of both authors is the view that there is no attractive alternative to a political system in which the state is limited to the performance of a small and relatively clearly defined set of tasks. If the state tries to perform other tasks, particularly economic planning, it will embark on a slippery slope towards totalitarianism. Hayek sums up this shared argument in *The Road to Serfdom*:

It is the price of democracy that the possibilities of conscious control are restricted to the fields where true agreement exists, and that in some fields things must be left to chance. But in a society which for its functioning depends on central planning, this control cannot be made dependent on a majority being able to agree; it will often be necessary that the will of a small minority be imposed upon the people, because this minority will be the largest group able to agree among themselves on the question at issue. Democratic government has worked successfully where, and as long as, the functions of the government were, by a widely accepted creed, restricted to fields where agreement among a majority could be achieved by free discussion; and it is the great merit of the liberal creed that it reduced the range of subjects on which agreement was necessary to one on which it was likely to exist in a society of free men. It is now often said that democracy will not tolerate “capitalism”. If

“capitalism” means here a competitive system based on the free disposal over private property, it is far more important to realise that only within this system is democracy possible. When it becomes dominated by a collectivist creed, democracy will inevitably destroy itself. (Hayek [1944] 2001:73)

Neoliberalism may be viewed as a tradition of political thought, not consciously defined and described by its most important theorists, who largely claimed that they, instead of creating an entirely new tradition of normative political theory, rather thought that they were resurrecting an older creed, namely the economic liberalism which rose to prominence in the nineteenth century, only to be abandoned by the rise of economic planning and the welfare state (cf. especially Hayek [1944] 2001:10-23). Like other traditions of art, literature, and political thought which are usually named using the addition of the prefix ‘neo-’ in front of an older name, it shares a varying degree of common ground with the older tradition, but also adds some new features of its own. This is explicitly made clear by Hayek in the introduction to *The Constitution of Liberty*, in which he motivates his own political theory as a restatement of an older liberal creed for a new age (Hayek 1960:1-8).

Hayek’s philosophical explorations of this way of looking at things, and Friedman’s various popularisations of a more political point of view largely overlapping with Hayek’s own, remain the most important and influential contributions to what one with some degree of justice may describe as a neoliberal tradition of political thought.

Other theorists have, however, jumped on the bandwagon (to use a traditional expression from the scientific study of political behaviour), and tried to develop their basic ideas further, and in different directions. One of the most influential and important contributions from these more recent neoliberal theorists comes from Robert Nozick. Nozick later revised some of his views (Nozick 1989:286-296), but he nevertheless argued – in his most famous work in political theory called *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* – in favour of a liberal, or more precisely libertarian, political theory based around an idea of a ‘minimal

state' inspired, in part least, by Hayek and Friedman (Nozick 1974). Nozick does so, however, not from an indirectly consequentialist perspective on political morality (cf. Lundström 1993; 1998; Malnes 1998), but from a conception of natural rights which precede and predate the state, and which determine what the state ought and ought not to do:

Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far-reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, the state and its officials may do. (...)

Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement [sic] of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate persons' rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and that the minimal state is inspiring as well as right. Two noteworthy implications are that the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their *own* good or protection. (Nozick 1974:ix, author's own emphasis)

In some places, Nozick is more direct than the other two, for instance when he calls his ideal form of government 'a minimal state', rather than using the immediately more attractive-sounding name 'free society', like Hayek and Friedman tend to do. In other places he does not go nearly as far as Hayek does, for instance in the essay *The Atavism of Social Justice* (Hayek 1978:57-68), when he claims that he builds on a conception of distributive justice. Nozick holds, *pace* Hayek, that concepts such as social justice or distributive justice are not entirely devoid of meaning. He does, however, favour a conception of justice which is singularly adapted to illustrate the attractiveness of a minimal state which does not redistribute wealth and the resources needed for a decent existence, except in exceptional circumstances:

The complete principle of distributive justice would say simply that a distribution is just if everyone is entitled to the holdings they possess under the distribution. (Nozick 1974:151; cf. also Thorsen 2008:415-417; 2011:361-363)

There are many differences of a philosophical nature between these three leading members of the neoliberal thought collective – Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick – but there are rather

striking similarities between as well, especially if one looks at the practical policy recommendations at which they ultimately arrive in their most famous works. If we define neoliberalism not as a complete philosophical system or political theory, but rather as a set of policy recommendations which may be justified using different philosophical or ‘metaphysical’ background theories (cf. Rawls 1985), we may come to appreciate the many manifest similarities between these three theorists, and others who recommends similar economic policies, as well as a similar view of the state.

We can now see that a neoliberal tradition of political thought developed in the intermediary and latter parts of the twentieth century, which mixed together an older tradition of economic liberalism with new restatements of its core policy proposals, better suited for a century which witnessed the advent of the welfare state and economic planning.

This tradition is decidedly not a very conservative tradition (cf. Hayek 1960:397-411), even if it has received quite considerable acclaim in some nominally Conservative political parties around the world, in addition to several self-styled Liberal parties. It is, rather, an alternative way of viewing the modern state, not as a champion of freedom as social democrats and social liberals tend to do, but rather as the primary threat to individual liberty and the autonomy of markets. It is not, either, a necessarily radical political ideology in the sense that it may be considered an extreme or revolutionary ideology, for there are countries around the world which come much closer than others to its basic ideals and policy recommendations, and where neoliberals would tend to be defenders of the status quo. It may, however, in other parts of the world be viewed as a radical set of policy proposals, in the sense that it amounts to a political ideology which wants the political development of some countries to turn in a different direction – towards smaller government and more unfettered markets.

6.5 Neoliberalism – is it a useful concept?

On a less fundamental level, it is pertinent to ask a few questions about the scientific utility and fruitfulness of the concept of ‘neoliberalism’. It may have its use as an epithet for a collection of political theorists with overlapping view about what the state ought and ought not to do, but does the concept help us to understand better what goes on in the world, or does it rather lead us astray? Will it make us overstate some trends and underestimate others, of which some will counteract and even neutralise developments inspired by neoliberal political and economic theories? Has the concept itself somehow become tied up with a particular narrative found in the ‘critical literature’, in which the popularity of attitudes commonly associated with neoliberalism has been greatly exaggerated?

Much of the ‘critical literature’ tends to mix several different currents of thought into a jumble which they then give the name neoliberalism. It is one thing to point to political and economic theorists who share a quite considerable ‘family likeness’, such as Friedman, Hayek, and Nozick, and try to discuss them together under the heading of neoliberalism, in the way Blomgren does with a mixed degree of success. It is an entirely different matter to combine, as Harvey and many others do, *their* political theories with more ideologically neutral ambitions to find efficient and practical solutions to wasteful spending in the public sector, or the desire to see more effective and coordinated regimes for international trade. It does seem to me, however, that the word neoliberalism describes, in the convenient way that only a single word can describe an influential set of beliefs, some patterns of thought which for some time have been a highly significant force in policy-making around the world (Thorsen 2009).

In particular, attitudes resembling what I above defined as neoliberalism have become more popular among business leaders, politicians, and to a lesser extent the general population, during the last few decades. There are however signs which suggest that this

upsurge in popularity for neoliberal ideas has petered out in the new century, especially after the ‘dot-com bubble’ of the years around the turn of the century, and especially the global financial crisis which burst onto the scene in 2008 (Thorsen 2009; Duménil and Lévy 2011). Used in a limited and cautious way, avoiding the temptation to use ‘neoliberalism’ as a shorthand for ‘everything I think is wrong and horrible’, as several authors of the ‘critical literature’ seem to be doing, it can therefore potentially describe some important currents of thought in recent times.

A further argument against using the concept of ‘neoliberalism’ too prolifically in more systematic discussions is that the concept unleashes a surprising amount of emotion. Because it is a concept used almost exclusively by critics of economic liberalism, many who tend to approach or even adopt neoliberal attitudes tend to shy away from describing themselves as neoliberals. Often, people who want to ‘roll back the frontiers of the state’ and remove fetters from the market economy, deny that they are supporters of neoliberalism. On a similar note, many who describe themselves as liberals tend not to be proponents of typically neoliberal ideas and policies. In a situation where the concept of ‘neoliberalism’ has become a conspicuous part of political parlance around the world, there is therefore often a semantic gulf between the term ‘neoliberalism’ on one hand, and the more general term ‘liberalism’ on the other. While the latter is used as a name for the ideology of many centrist and centre-right politicians and political parties, the former is a name more often used to describe an ideology or body of political thought belonging more clearly on the right wing of the political spectrum.

One author, Gunnar Garbo, who for good measure was the leader of Norway’s Liberal Party in the 1960s, has even tried to construct a narrative in which neoliberalism is thought of as being ‘neither new nor liberal’ (Garbo 2008; cf. also Steger and Roy 2010). In fact, he goes on to say that political theorists and politicians who advocate a rolling back of

the contemporary welfare state are not liberals at all. Perhaps more surprisingly, he also claims that ‘good liberals need to be good socialists just as much as good socialists need to be good liberals’. The whole concept of ‘neoliberalism’ is according to his perspective an instance of ‘political counterfeiting’, because it is an attempt to muddle together the moderate and egalitarian types of liberalism behind which Garbo throws his allegiance – roughly corresponding to what Ryan calls ‘modern liberalism’ – with the kinds of policy proposals put forward by the neoliberals. In that way, authors of the ‘critical literature’ have succeeded in confounding neoliberalism and the wider liberal tradition, so that people who call themselves liberals are automatically associated with the dismantling of the welfare state, and the establishment of a minimal state in its stead.

The contrast between Garbo and another Liberal politician, Denmark’s former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (1993), is almost too illustrating to be true. Fogh Rasmussen is actually one of the few, and to my knowledge the only prominent politician, who have stated that there is a need to formulate a new type of liberalism (which he occasionally calls ‘neoliberalism’) which takes more seriously the supposed threat which expansive welfare states poses to individual liberty. His own analysis of the development of liberal political thought even mirrors the narratives found in parts of the ‘critical literature’, and he describes neoliberalism as a rejuvenation of an older liberal creed, which reached the height of its popularity in the nineteenth century. Intermediary liberal theorists and politicians who wanted the state to become an active participant in the economy, or who wanted to construct a welfare state in order to distribute health and wealth more evenly, is by Fogh Rasmussen viewed as liberals in name only, and as adversaries of core liberal tenets.

Fogh Rasmussen (1993:36-64) goes on to describe Hayek, being the ‘father of neoliberalism’, as a central source of inspiration, but he also claims that Nozick and his idea that natural rights could be thought of as an auxiliary philosophical foundation of the

neoliberal political agenda. His stated goal is a society in which each individual person has a direct responsibility for all aspects of her own well-being. 'The liberal agenda' should be, according to Fogh Rasmussen, a political programme which will facilitate the move 'from the welfare state to the minimal state'. He is therefore an honest proponent of the attitudes defined above as the very core of neoliberalism.

Both Garbo and Fogh Rasmussen may be extreme examples of Liberal politicians who situate themselves at opposite ends of the economic policy spectrum. But even if they are extreme examples, their analyses are indicative of the tremendously wide variety of economic policies which could be described as part of the liberal tradition. Neoliberalism is in many ways part of this tradition, but neoliberalism is itself hardly a revival of liberalism in general terms. It is, rather, a selective revival of what Hobhouse and others in earlier times called economic liberalism, which in the contemporary world amounts to a political programme with which other liberals may find it very hard to agree.

6.6 Do we live in 'the age of neoliberalism'?

In the preceding, we have seen that neoliberalism is not merely, as the term itself might suggest, a recent revival of liberalism in general. Neoliberalism is perhaps best perceived of as a set of economic policies rather than a complete political ideology, characterised by a practical demand for a general deregulation of the economy, liberalisation of industry and international trade, and privatisation of the public sector (Steger and Roy 2010:14). Some neoliberal theorists and politicians have even suggested that the ultimate goal should be to establish a 'minimal state', or a state which has ceased to do anything apart from upholding the most basic aspects of public order. More traditional liberal demands for 'equality of liberty' and 'equality in liberty' have been set aside by a demand for a systematic rolling back of the frontiers of the state. In this, neoliberalism resembles the parallel phenomenon of

‘neoconservatism’ which is not, either, a new form or recent revival of traditional conservatism or conservatism in general, but rather a set of political ideas which only bears some degree of semblance to the ideology from which it is supposed to be descended.

This chapter originated as a part of a larger research project called ‘Politics in the Age of Neoliberalism’ (Claes et al. 2007). The name of the project suggests that a transition from a previous but unspecified stage in the world’s political and economic development to ‘the age of neoliberalism’ is taking place right before our eyes. According to this analysis, which is related to the one found in for instance the *Critical Reader* and Harvey’s *Brief History*, one has moved away from a society marked by proactive welfare states and a large room for exercising political authority, to a new type of society in which the ‘conditions for politics’ have been severely curtailed because of the increased popularity of neoliberal political thoughts and theories.

There are a number of perhaps irreverent questions which naturally arise when one is confronted with the belief that we live in an age of neoliberalism. Is it really the case that neoliberalism is ‘the dominant ideology shaping our world today’? Are we really on the move towards ‘the neoliberal society’, understood as a society in which neoliberal ideology has become a major governing force? Could we really in any meaningful sense think of ourselves as living in ‘the age of neoliberalism’? There are also other questions to be asked. If there is a trend towards reforms of the public sector, the economy, and international trade inspired by neoliberalism, is it a trend which is gathering speed? Or are there perhaps indications that the push for ‘neoliberal’ reforms might be slowing down or stalling altogether (cf. e.g. Duménil and Lévy 2011), especially after the financial crisis of the last few years?

There are evidently many quite exaggerated analyses around on both sides of the argument, both among neoliberals who promise economic growth and increased individual

liberty to those who implement their preferred economic policies, and critics who think that neoliberal ideology is something one should oppose and not something one should embrace.

Maybe it is a bit boring as a solution, but perhaps truer and more accurate, to instead think of our age as an age of greater complexity, uncertainty, and volatility, rather than an age dominated by neoliberal ideology. If that is the case, the concept of neoliberalism ought to be set aside as a description for a set of ideas which or a tradition of political thought which only has had a varying degree of impact on contemporary societies. It is still, however, an open question whether or not neoliberalism is a prevailing trend in the world today, which much of the critical literature suggests, or if it is better perceived of as body of political thought which may have had an influence on society and politics in recent times, but not anything more than that.

It might even be true that the recent negative trends in the world economy has reduced the relevance and importance of neoliberal ideas for some time to come, and that we in some sense have slipped out of a strong trend leading towards an implementation of neoliberal policies. But as the rather surprising revival of economic liberalism during the last quarter of twentieth century has shown, ideas which today may be thought of as neoliberal ideas have had a remarkable resilience and longevity, and a surprising ability to survive long periods of declining popularity. It remains therefore that neoliberalism ought to be studied more closely by political theorists, economic historians, as well as other social scientists.

7. Berlin and Popper – The defence of liberal democracy

7.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, we saw that the set of ideas conventionally named neoliberalism may be characterised by a thoroughgoing demand for a ‘rolling back of the frontiers of the state’, and for a state characterised by ‘minimal and dispersed’ government institutions (cf. especially Mont Pèlerin Society, no date; Fogh Rasmussen 1993). We also saw that neoliberalism is hardly a complete political ideology, or a wide-ranging answer to the quite general question of how society ought to be organised, but more like a package of economic policies which may be supplied with different kinds of justifications. Finally, we saw that this package of economic policies may be implemented in liberal democracies as well as within other, more autocratic forms of government.

Neoliberals such as Hayek, Friedman or Nozick – described above as the most central members of ‘the neoliberal thought collective’ – have hardly criticised democracy directly, even if they have wanted to remove a great deal of issues from the political agenda. Whenever they write about democracy in their most influential works, they tend to write about what democratic institutions may *not* do if one wants to avoid the gradual development of a totalitarian society. Democratically made political decisions characterised by benign or benevolent intentions may lead us down a path to totalitarianism, or a society in which individual liberty and private property rights have been effectively extinguished by governments which begin to redistribute capital and resources (Nozick 1974:276-294; Hayek [1944] 2001:59-74; Friedman [1962] 2002:7-21).

The most central political goal in neoliberal thought – including of course the political thought of Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick – is at any rate not to construct a more energetic liberal democracy where the most important political decisions are made by the people or its representatives. The most central goal is instead to reduce government

interference in the lives of individual citizens and especially in the economic sphere. So much so, that it is not particularly clear what democratic institutions could and should do in a neoliberal society with ‘minimal and dispersed’ government institutions.

Berlin and Popper, on the other hand, both saw democracy - understood as a set of political institutions and practices in which the population of a country at large tries to devise solutions to shared problems – as the very core of the kind of liberal tradition to which they claimed to belong. Indeed, a central theme in Berlin and Popper’s political thought is the defence of liberal democracy, primarily against totalitarianism, but also against what they perceived of as a gradual withering-away of democracy in societies which allow poverty and other sources of avoidable human suffering to remain rampant.

During World War II, when Popper wrote *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism*, a sense of doom and despair loomed over debates in political theory and social philosophy. Many even thought that totalitarian governments were destined to conquer the world, and that liberal democracy suffered from a crisis from which it would be hard pressed to escape. We can even find this pervasive pessimism in relatively hopeful works written during this period (e.g. Mannheim 1940; Schumpeter [1942] 1976). The optimism of *The Open Society* stands in sharp contrast to this defeatism, even if we take into account that Popper’s war-time books were published in 1944 and 1945, at a time when an allied victory seemed to be a foregone conclusion.

Totalitarianism was according to Popper always a blind alley, and definitely not a viable way to realising even the relatively modest goal of minimising avoidable suffering. Throughout his books, Popper argued that a dictator must try to limit the flow of information in order to stay in power. Scientific progress, so vital if one is to solve the many problems facing mankind, depends however on a free exchange of ideas, even potentially subversive ideas. A free exchange of ideas has only been approximately achieved in democracies, and it

is therefore a close link between Popper's humanitarian theory of justice and the more specific idea of liberal democracy.

In 1958, thirteen years after the publication of *The Open Society*, when Berlin wrote *Two Concepts of Liberty*, a new geopolitical order had been established. Western democracies displayed a new sense of self-confidence, even if most of the world was still ruled by autocratic governments, including colonies ruled over by Western states which practiced democracy at home. Totalitarianism was very much a part of the collective consciousness, but its apologists were dwindling in number, at least in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the general perception was that liberal democracy was under siege by totalitarianism, especially Soviet totalitarianism, and still in danger of extinction.

For Berlin, democracy was almost self-evidently the basis for any type of political system worth defending. Berlin thought, like Popper, that authoritarianism was a threat to liberty and progress, and something which had the potential of stunting the intellectual growth of whole nations (Berlin 2004). But democracy has to be limited if it is to function properly. It has to respect a measure of individual, negative freedom. The ideal democracy is therefore not a political system in which every conceivable decision is put up for a referendum. Instead, one has to strike a good balance between personal freedom and democracy, and try to find an honourable compromise between the two ideals (Berlin 2002:283-286).

Throughout their books we see that Berlin and Popper defended liberal democracy against totalitarianism. It must be remembered, however, that they wrote their most seminal works in political theory at a time when proponents of liberal democracy were faced with stiff opposition from intellectuals and political movements who praised some or another form of autocracy. Debates in political theory were therefore encircled by the larger public debate of whether or not democracy was the best available form of government. Democrats

like Popper and Berlin therefore had to take advocates of totalitarian ideologies rather more seriously, and defend their own theories against those who actively supported the abolition of representative government.

But how will their defence of democracy fare when it is turned in a different direction? Neoliberalism is decidedly not a totalitarian ideology. The neoliberal challenge to the kind of energetic liberal democracy envisaged by Berlin and Popper is much more indirect. No prominent neoliberals have spoken out against democracy, even if Nozick (1974:276-294) comes close to doing so, and neoliberals have instead tended to voice their support for democratic ideals. It is however not entirely clear what role the institutions of representative government could and should play in the minimal state, if they have a role to play at all (cf. especially Hayek [1944] 2001:59-74; Friedman [1962] 2002:7-21).

In this chapter the main question is therefore how the defence of a quite limited democratic welfare state given by Berlin and Popper compares to the view submitted by neoliberal political theorists. A central, shared idea among these theorists is the belief that there is no permanently sustainable middle ground between ‘minimal and dispersed’ government institutions on one hand, and the totalitarian state on the other. Consequently, they want to reduce the scope of democratic politics down to a bare minimum, in order to preserve individual liberty, private property rights, and in some cases even democracy itself.

I will therefore in the two next sections in outline discuss their key doctrines of value pluralism and political protectionism against the backdrop of neoliberal ideology. In so doing, I will employ a combination of Williams’ ‘history of philosophy’-approach and Rawls’ and Daniels’ ‘wide reflective equilibrium’-approach, which I briefly described above, in sections 1.4.2 and 1.4.3. The basic aim is to try to describe how the political thought of Berlin and Popper may inspire us to think about politics in a new century, and to discuss how their theories may be understood in light of recent experiences with various

types of economic policy. I will compare Berlin's ethical and political theory of value pluralism, as well as Popper's 'protectionist view of the state', with neoliberal ideology, all in order to tease out the most fundamental aspects of the political thought of both theorists. I do this in the hope that I may contribute to making these theories more lucid and better suited to form a basis for future, more practical policy proposals and recommendations, as described in section 1.4.3 above, on the methods employed in this thesis.

My ambition with this chapter is, briefly put, to complement the political thought of both Berlin and Popper with a discussion of how one should understand some central aspects of their political thought in practical terms, using neoliberal political thought as a way of contrasting *their* type of moderate and egalitarian liberalism, against alternative and yet – to some degree at least – related modes of political thought. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion about the relationship between the fallibilism and 'organised liberalism' of Berlin and Popper on one hand, and neoliberalism on the other, before I round off this study with some final words about the democratic attitudes which inform both theorists.

7.2 Value pluralism and neoliberalism

7.2.1 Two concepts of negative liberty

It is common among prominent neoliberals – such as Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick – to view what Berlin called negative liberty as an overriding value. Freedom from state-sponsored interference in the economy and the lives of individual citizens is so important to them, that they consider other central liberal values such as democracy or social justice to be of derived importance, or not important at all (Nozick 1974; Hayek 1978; Friedman [1962] 2002; cf. also Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Norberg and Bejke 1994). This alone makes neoliberalism different from the value pluralism and liberal gradualism Berlin described, even if negative liberty is an important value to him. Instead, Berlin tends in his essays to voice the idea that freedom may be a very important concern, but it is certainly not all that

matters (cf. especially Berlin 2002:3-54). Negative liberty could instead be thought of as a potentially dangerous ideal if it is pursued at the exclusion of other values and goals, such as justice, generosity, decency, and equality – and indeed compound values such as ‘equality of liberty’ and ‘equality in liberty’.

In addition, Berlin’s view of negative liberty is itself different from the way in which the most central neoliberal political theorists tend to view individual liberty. Berlin was primarily worried about what he thought of as a dangerous erosion of negative liberty in some autocratic political systems. He was also worried about a downplaying of the importance of negative liberty in some types of radical political thought. He was less interested in whom or what threatened the negative liberty of individual human beings, and very well aware of the fact that threats to personal freedom may come from several different sources. The most important neoliberal theorists, on the other hand, have from the outset rejected government intervention as a way of guaranteeing the personal freedom of individuals whose negative liberty is under threat. They have also tended to be less concerned than Berlin about threats to individual freedom which comes from other individuals, private corporations, or other types of non-governmental organisations.

When neoliberal theorists talk about liberty or freedom, they tend to build on a more specific conception of liberty, at least compared to Berlin’s talk of the importance of a measure of negative liberty for all (Friedman and Friedman 1980). A common way of looking at things among neoliberals is that individual rights and liberties are given in advance, as parts of how things naturally are and ought to be (cf. especially Nozick 1974). Liberty itself is a prearranged state of affairs, not something which needs to be established by way of political decisions, or fought for against those who wish to dominate others (cf. e.g. Hayek 1973; 1976: 1979). But liberty is nevertheless under threat from states which are considered too powerful and too intrusive in the lives of individuals and the organisations in

which they choose to take part (Hayek [1944] 2001). The basic demand neoliberals put forward is therefore quite naturally that the state should control and govern less, and most definitely less than states tend to do in our day and age.

Together with this demand for less government, many neoliberals – but certainly not all – tend to promise that a whole host of good things will befall the society which implements their preferred policies. This promise is based in a firm belief in the idea that most things will end more happily, if only the state intervenes in the economy to a lesser extent. The neoliberals' idea of freedom is for instance actually rather simple. If the government abstains from economic intervention and redistribution, then the free market will take care of most of our needs anyhow, or at least the needs of those who can access the relevant market-places in a competent way. This will in turn lead to greater freedom of choice and ultimately to a greater happiness for each individual citizen. That way, greater commercial liberty leads to more personal freedom and contentment for all (cf. especially Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Norberg 2001; 2003).

Of course, there will always be counter-examples which may rebut this surprisingly prevalent belief. The absence of regulation and redistribution does not always lead to greater freedom or happiness for all. In fact, it is built into the whole logic of the market economy that some actors must lose, namely those suppliers that are unable or unwilling to provide buyers with the goods and services they demand. It may also happen that the market-place fails to function in an optimal way, for a wide variety of reasons. For instance, buyers and suppliers may fail to access the same market-place, so that a demand for certain types of goods and services are not met, even if there are people or corporations who would be able and willing to meet the demands in question. One may also occasionally come across actors who are not at all interested in maintaining market efficiency. Instead, they use intimidation,

violence, or accumulated financial resources in order to make sure that they receive a greater profit for themselves, even if society at large will stand to lose from such behaviour.

A traditional argument for the market economy, that ‘private vices’, most of all greed and selfishness, inevitably will lead to ‘public benefits’, or that an ‘invisible hand’ will make sure that optimal overall results will come out of a series of self-interested market decisions (cf. Mandeville [1732] 1924; Smith [1776] 1993:IV.2.9). In fact, these metaphors are found everywhere in the literature usually described under the heading of neoliberalism, even if the original intentions of Mandeville and Smith are rarely understood particularly well.

In contrast, Berlin observes that “total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted”, and that “liberty (...) may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to leave room for the liberty of others, to allow justice or fairness to be exercised” (Berlin 1990:12).

So we see that Berlin recognises that the threats to liberty are many, and that liberty needs to be traded off to some extent if we are to realise other values such as equality, democracy, and ordinary human decency. The most central members of the neoliberal thought collective, on the other hand, bring a much less complicated analysis of the conditions for human liberty to the fore. The neoliberal theory of liberty, if such a thing could be gathered from the political thought of the most central neoliberal theorists, claims that non-intervention in the market economy will automatically lead to increased individual liberty. Berlin’s liberal theory, on the other hand, holds that other values have to be upheld if personal freedom is to become a reality for most people. In essence, the two views of negative liberty – Berlin’s view and the neoliberal view – represent different ideas about what the preconditions for individual negative liberty actually are.

7.2.2 Neoliberalism in a world of plural values

The most central assumption of value pluralism is, as indicated in chapter 2, that there is a plurality of different but equally fundamental human values, between which one must try to strike some sort of balance. If one tries to pursue only one such value at the expense of all others, or if one tries to put together a perfect society, one will according to Berlin's way of looking at things end up with a worse overall result. The alternative is to establish an 'uneasy equilibrium' between different values and ideals (Berlin 1990:19).

The idea that fundamental human values are many, that they sometimes clash with other values of a roughly equal importance, and that they are not always commensurable with each other, leads Berlin to the idea that everyone should be accorded a "measure of negative liberty" (Berlin 2002: 216). One should let everyone pursue their own ends, as long as that pursuit does not exclude others from being admitted a parallel degree of personal freedom. In practical terms this means that open-ended gradualism and liberal democracy should be the basis of politics and government. But it also means that negative liberty should not be considered the only value of importance to politics, and that it should merely be part of a compromise with other ideals such as social justice and common decency. Value pluralism thus has some real political consequences, in that it stresses the importance of compromise between different interests through inclusive political processes, and not just extensive personal freedom (Lamprecht 1921).

Neoliberalism comes across as a quite different type of political theory. The more enthusiastic neoliberal politician will probably claim that the best results come not through compromise, but through the determined pursuit of one single end, namely the greatest degree of freedom from government intervention in the market economy. If the government deliberately reduces its strength and 'rolls back' its reach, then society as a whole will be better off because of it. This is the case in part because a reduction in the scope and reach of

government intervention is thought of as an end in itself, and in part because it is thought that unregulated markets will lead to increased economic growth and overall prosperity (Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Reinfeldt 1993).

This neoliberal attitude is perhaps best described by Thomas Paine's famous aphorism: 'that government is best which governs least'. The unfettered market economy will, according to the typical neoliberal politician, as well as the most central neoliberal political theorists, tend to society's needs more efficiently than the cumbersome and compromise-ridden political processes which take place in an energetic liberal democracy. A state which intervenes in the economy as little as possible is therefore preferable to a more extensive state, quite regardless of whether or not it is a democracy. Of course, if all the state is supposed to do is to uphold the most basic aspects of public order, then it hardly matters that much if the state is run by a popularly elected government, or if some other method is chosen to decide who is to lead the state.

It would of course be a wild exaggeration, and gravely misleading, to suggest that neoliberalism is related to the authoritarian ideologies which Berlin criticises in his essays, as some of the authors of the 'critical literature' actually comes close to suggesting. Neoliberalism, described above in chapter 6, has however quite a few features in common with the political theories Berlin called monism and Utopianism. At the very least, neoliberal doctrines resemble monism more than pluralism, and Utopianism more than the kinds of open-ended gradualism and liberal scepticism which Berlin ultimately recommended (Berlin 2004a).

The probably most famous illustration of the idea that severely weakened political institutions – the so-called minimal state – could form a central ingredient in a vision of an ideal society is Robert Nozick's book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. In it, he claims that the goal of demolishing more extensive states, and instead replacing them with minimal states

which only ensures the very basics of public order, is not in any way a worst-case scenario. It is instead an inspiring semi-Utopian dream of a society in which the so-called natural rights of men are finally respected, and not routinely trampled on by the state (Nozick 1974). Strong governments are a large part of the problem, and not a part of the solution according to this way of looking at things. In fact, it is often claimed – at least by more practically oriented politicians and political theorists than Nozick – that increased personal freedom and prosperity, will follow if we roll back the frontiers of the state as much as possible (Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Reinfeldt 1993; Norberg and Bejke 1994; Booth 2006).

Neoliberalism fits Berlin's description of monism and Utopianism quite well. It is monistic because the typical neoliberal will claim that good things come in a single package. Even the more thoughtful political and economic theorists included in the neoliberal thought collective, described above in the preceding chapter, come close to this view (Hayek 1960; Friedman and Friedman 1980). It is therefore not necessary to strike a compromise between individual and mercantile liberty on one hand, and other values and ideals on the other. Neoliberalism is also, at least in some versions, Utopian because it entertains the idea of a perfect or nearly perfect society or state of affairs (Nozick 1974; Booth 2006). For these reasons, neoliberalism should be treated with a considerable amount of scepticism, at least if one believes that fundamental human goals are many and that we should try to pursue several of them all at the same time (cf. especially Berlin and Williams 1994; Berlin 2002:55-93).

7.2.3 Pluralism, ethical and political

Is neoliberalism then compatible with the kind of pluralism envisioned by Berlin? If we want to answer a question such as this, we must of course take into account that neoliberalism is not a monolithic body of political thought, but a diverse set of economic policy initiatives which nevertheless pull in the same direction, towards a state which governs less, especially

a state which intervenes less frequently in the market economy. It is certainly not the case that all things someone at one or another point in time may have found it pertinent to place under the heading of 'neoliberalism' is always at odds with value pluralism, and its concern for negative liberty in conjunction with other values and goals. Instead, limited political and economic reforms inspired by neoliberal thought, limited because they merely propose that a restricted amount of activities should be handed over from the state to private citizens and corporations, may not be incompatible with value pluralism from the outset.

It is in fact conceivable that such limited reforms, which many critics routinely characterise as 'neoliberal', might contribute to greater economic efficiency and more personal freedom, without at the same leading to significant and unfortunate side-effects on other accounts. This is especially the case if limited reforms come about in societies marked by too much centralised public control of the economy. If for instance a society comes out of a prolonged period of excessive *dirigisme*, such as the countries of Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism at the close of the twentieth century, limited reforms tending in the same direction as neoliberal political theory, towards a rolling back of the frontiers of the state, may be quite appropriate.

A case may even be made for the view that countries which have only recently adopted a market economy in the first few years needed to go through a 'valley of transition', in which the establishment of a market economy would be followed by an economic depression before lasting improvements could take place. This valley of transition was characterised by expedited neoliberal reforms, which many thought were absolutely necessary if the countries in question were to re-emerge after a few years with a fairly well-functioning market economy, even if that meant violent economic fluctuations in the short run for the population at large (cf. especially Przeworski 1991). Only after the establishment

of an effective market economy could one then start to worry about the distribution of income, or about the establishment of a more extensive welfare state.

Too much control over the economy may however not be the most pressing problem in most advanced industrial economies in our day and age. It may even be the case, as indicated by a large part of the conventional wisdom after the financial crisis of 2008, that economic policy-making has moved too far in a neoliberal direction in many places around the world (Gamble 2009; Posner 2009). The increased popularity of neoliberal ideology around the turn of the century could therefore in itself be perceived of as an important root cause of the crisis (Thorsen 2009; Duménil and Lévy 2011). It is, however, not always the case that neoliberal economic reforms are at odds with a pluralist outlook, and occasionally it might even be the case that such reforms might be a prudent course of action – perhaps even the only prudent option available to us – if an economic system has moved too far in the opposite direction towards an all-out type of *dirigisme*.

I said above in chapter 2 that it may not have been an accident that Berlin chose to use the term ‘pluralism’, already familiar from political theory and to some degree from ordinary political parlance, to describe his ethical theories. Moral pluralism is in Berlin’s works vaguely related to a phenomenon others have given the name of political pluralism, or the idea that we need compromises between several different ways of organising society and the economy, if we want to be successful at pursuing several different values concurrently (cf. e.g. Dahl 1967; 1985; Galston 2005). With such a pluralistic way of organising society and the economy we may be able to diversify and spread the risks to which we are subjected, and ultimately be able to reap the benefits of different organisational principles in different areas of economic activity.

Berlin’s political thought is indeed a plea for pluralism in politics and economic affairs, as well as moral theory. If one accepts that fundamental human values are many and

that we need to build a compromise – however tenuous and fragile – between them, the most important recommendation for makers of economic policy is that several different ways of organising the economy have to be tried and tested. It is through the use of different organisational principles in different areas of economic activity, which we may find out which policies works best in each particular area. That way, one may be able to identify which package of policies will lead to the most favourable overall results, and lead us towards the kind of ‘uneasy equilibrium’ between different values envisioned by Berlin. The central idea is that we should try different policies to see which of them gives the most encouraging results, and replace those which produce grave side-effects that outweigh whatever advantages they may provide.

The basic idea behind political and economic pluralism is that the production of different goods and services require different methods of organisation. Some goods, for instance consumer products such as running shoes or strawberry preserves, may be most efficiently produced by privately owned corporations competing with each other on a market with only quite limited government oversight. Other things, basic services such as healthcare and education, may not be produced in an optimal way if they are bought and sold in an open market-place. Society as a whole may therefore stand to profit quite considerably if the production of such services is conducted by the state itself, or at least in some or another fashion controlled by political processes at a local or national level. As a society, we need varying degrees of government oversight, if the goal is an overall satisfactory distribution of the various things people need or would like to have. Another basic idea is that practical experience with public and private ownership, and with varying levels of public regulation and intervention, may show what type of organisation will suit the needs of society – and the individuals which populate it – best.

The most central policy recommendation of neoliberal political and economic theorists is, however, to roll back the frontiers of the state, and in effect use the market economy as a predominant way of organising the ways in which society is run on a daily basis. Like those who maintain that the government should plan and regulate practically everything, a group of people perhaps more numerous when Berlin wrote *Two Concepts of Liberty* than they are today, neoliberal theorists insist that a single mode of organisation should be used across the spectrum of economic activity. But this insistence may make it difficult to achieve a good balance or compromise between various goals and values such as equality and liberty, or even stability and general contentment. This is especially the case if an almost entirely unregulated market economy will lead to violent fluctuations between boom and bust in production and investments, or to a type of economic inefficiency caused by very large disparities of income and a lack of access to basic goods and services for the less fortunate.

It is quite likely that an all-encompassing and largely unregulated market economy will have such unfavourable effects. The most central neoliberal theorists, on the other hand, promises that we will be better off if governments do less, and some of them even suggest that governments should do as little possible quite regardless of the likely consequences. If more things are left in the hands of a largely unregulated market economy and the free dealings between individuals which allegedly take place there, society as a whole will reap the benefits of increased economic growth and efficiency (cf. especially Friedman and Friedman 1980; Norberg 2001; 2003; T. Friedman 2006). But if this is not case after all, then what we are left with is just another body of political and economic thought resembling the monistic moral and political ideas which Berlin claimed shared the most dangerous belief ever entertained by mankind – the belief that there is an ultimate solution to all the problems with which humankind and human societies are faced.

7.3 Political protectionism and neoliberalism

7.3.1 The neoliberal promise

Many neoliberals, but certainly not all, are consequentialists of sorts. Some of them, Hayek among them, may favourably be thought of as proponents of an ‘indirect consequentialism’. They believe that neoliberal policies will lead to a better state of affairs than would otherwise be the case, even if they evidently also believe in the usefulness of other, non-consequentialist ways of justifying neoliberal economic policies and the institution of smaller government and fewer fetters on the market economy. The more direct consequentialists, however, advocate a set of policies and reforms tending in the direction of deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation of the economy precisely *because* it is thought that such policies will lead to a better end result, compared to a continuation of the status quo (cf. especially Friedman and Friedman 1980; Fogh Rasmussen 1993; Friedman [1962] 2002; Norberg 2001; 2003; cf. also Steger and Roy 2010). But how exactly are such policies better, compared to policies which lead to a higher degree of government regulation and oversight of the economy?

The most central promise of these (more or less) ‘results-oriented’ neoliberals is that things will go rather well, and better than what would otherwise be the case, if only governments do less than they tend to do in our day and age (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Instead, it is thought that the modern ‘nanny state’ ought to be replaced by a more traditional ‘night-watchman state’ which does fewer things to make sure that its citizens have a fairly tolerable existence. A good example of this attitude is found in Friedrich Hayek’s monumental work on *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Hayek 1973; 1976; 1979). Hayek claims here that a ‘spontaneous order’, better than any ‘artificial order’ based on political and economic planning, will emerge if individuals and the market economy are left alone, and if

we abandon any notion that the government should regulate the economy in order to implement an ideal of social justice.

Hayek is apparently however not a political and economic theorist who believes in the unregulated market economy only because it will deliver better overall results compared to economic planning. He also advocates the idea that unregulated markets and ‘minimal and dispersed’ states are part of how human affairs ought to be structured, even if it is likely that consequentialist arguments are more important to him, at least at a more fundamental level. He therefore builds on the assumption that less regulation and less public provision of basic goods and services will lead to increased economic efficiency. That is why Hayek thought that neoliberal policies would benefit society as a whole, even if most people might be badly placed to reap the benefits. In essence, the benefits of deregulation are thought to outweigh any possible drawbacks such as rising levels of inequality, simply because the drawbacks of such policies are explicitly thought of as being less important than the benefits. In this, he turns the thought of other neoliberals such as Nozick (1974), who believes that a rolling back of the frontiers of the state is a way towards a state of affairs in which human societies are structured in way they fundamentally ought to be quite regardless of the likely consequences, on its head.

Fundamentally, it is an empirical question whether consequentialist arguments in favour of ‘minimal and dispersed’ governments and *laissez-faire* economic policies actually holds true or not. In the long history of economic liberalism, of which the increased popularity of neoliberal thought of the last few decades is just the most recent offshoot, we see that there are actually several periods in which economic ideologies quite similar to what we described above as neoliberalism has been quite popular (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009). There are of course many differences, but the most central policy recommendations of the leading neoliberal theorists are actually surprisingly similar to for instance those of the

French physiocrats in the second half of the eighteenth century, or for that matter the Ricardian economists and ‘Manchester liberals’ of Great Britain in the first half of the nineteenth (cf. Reinert 2009).

Deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation of the economy have however only been popular in some periods, followed by longer periods of dwindling popularity. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this is so because the kinds of policies recommended by the champions of so-called free markets have been tried and tested several times, with rather mixed results every time. The great economic crises of the 1780s and the 1840s are all examples of sharp downturns preceded by an implementation of policies tending in the direction of deregulation and privatisation. It is only natural, therefore, that neoliberalism and related theories gain popularity only whenever vivid memories of the last crisis caused by laissez-faire policies fade away, and the alluring fictions of this economic ideology becomes believable yet again (Reinert 2009; Reinhart and Rogoff 2009; Thorsen 2009). This is of course not in any way a conclusive argument, and it is of course always conceivable that the neoliberal package of economic policies will work better the next time someone tries them out, quite independently of how many times such policies have failed in the past. For every time they come to naught, however, neoliberals and close intellectual relatives need an argument in order to convince others that they will not fail to deliver on their promises the next time around.

Popper wrote his war-time books at the end of an economic and political crisis. This crisis was of course not exclusively caused by deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation of the economy, but it was made deeper by a widespread and ideologically informed unwillingness by states to intervene effectively in the faltering industrial economies of the world. *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism* are books which primarily warn against totalitarian dictatorships of all political stripes, or quite simply governments which

try to do and control too much. They also contain, however, several criticisms of the opposite outcome, namely a situation in which governments do not control and do enough, especially not enough to make sure that people do not suffer needlessly.

One important way of making sure that people are not placed at a disadvantage in vain is to guard against economic instability. So Popper's war-time books are a call for governments to make sure that personal freedom and financial stability is guaranteed, so that avoidable human suffering is kept at a minimum. For Popper, of course, the economic crisis of the 1930's was a quite vivid memory when he wrote his books, alongside the immediate, contemporary experience with Communism and Nazism alike, and he scarcely need to remind his immediate audiences of the fate of a largely unregulated capitalist economy after the crises at the close of the 1920s.

The connection between economic troubles and increased popularity for political authoritarianism must have been all but apparent to Popper, especially considering his first-hand experience with his native country of Austria's steady descent into totalitarianism. But even if he did not postulate any inescapable causal effect from policies aimed at deregulation and privatisation through economic crises to amplified attractiveness for anti-democratic ideologies, he does make a rather compelling argument for avoiding the apparently quite opposite 'traps' of laissez-faire and totalitarianism. He most certainly rejects the idea that policies resembling what would later become known as neoliberalism is an attractive and inspiring sort of solution to many of our problems, at least in the long run. In this, he follows what appears to be the conventional wisdom of his day, namely that a measure of economic oversight and 'planning for freedom' has to be in place if a society is to avoid the worst side-effects of the market economy, and if one is to ensure that most people have access to the resources necessary for a decent existence (cf. e.g. Keynes 1936; Beveridge 1942; 1944; Polanyi [1944] 2001)).

7.3.2 Planning for freedom

The central economic policy recommendation in *The Open Society* is that the state should do everything in its power to protect its citizens from avoidable harm and exploitation, while at the same time maintaining and guaranteeing a generous measure of personal freedom for all. This basic policy recommendation is based in the idea that the state should guarantee the free exchange of ideas, which in turn will ensure the growth of human knowledge, and hopefully lead to the reduction of political violence and human misery. As we have seen, this recommendation is at odds with the political and economic thoughts and theories of the leading neoliberal theorists. Neoliberals want to curb public intervention in the economy and extend mercantile liberty quite regardless of how that liberty is used. Popperian political protectionism, on the other hand, is a doctrine which cares more about achieving concrete results, in particular a state of affairs under which individual citizens are protected from harm and exploitation, and under which avoidable human suffering is kept at a minimum.

The key phrase in Popper's economic thought, if such a thing could be pieced together from his works, is 'planning for freedom' (cf. quote in section 1.3.1 above). The central insight on which Popper builds his analyses of economic policy is that freedom, especially freedom from fear and want, does not come about entirely by accident (Popper [1945] 1966a, ch. 17). We should instead do what is within our powers to minimise fear and want, with the aim of increasing personal freedom for all. In this, we obviously need, coordinating efforts in the form of political decisions which aim to make sure that we actually do make it easier for people to live lives with which they have a reasonable chance to be contented. But there is according to Popper absolutely no reason to suspect that neoliberal or related economic policies will lead to more widespread contentment or increased personal freedom for the vast majority of people (ibid.).

I said above, in section 4.4.3, that Popper's political thought might be described quite accurately by the term 'organised liberalism', which is a term originally used by Eduard Bernstein to describe his own democratic and anti-Marxist brand of socialism (Bernstein 1899:132; cf. also Steger 1997; Pierson 2001). Bernstein contends in his book, succinctly named *Evolutionary Socialism* in one of the English translations, that socialism and liberalism are ideologies which are not worlds apart when it comes to which values and goals they seek to promote. On the level of abstract values, they are both direct heirs to the Enlightenment, and they both try to live up to the revolutionary slogan of 'liberty, equality, fraternity'. They do differ quite considerably, however, when it comes to their respective analyses of what level of genuinely *political* organisation is necessary in order to realise those shared values and goals (cf. Lukes [1962] 2005).

The positive political and economic ideas, described in *The Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism*, tend in the direction of a high degree of organisation. Popper's analyses of concepts such as political protectionism and planning for freedom basically claims that a hands-on approach by the government in economic policy issues is necessary in a liberal society which takes its own goals of freedom, equality and democracy seriously. Popper may be right about his claim, that the state should protect its citizens from harm and exploitation. If he is, however, also correct in his belief that much avoidable harm and exploitation will come about if the state fails to actively control the economy, then surely the natural policy recommendation must be that democratically elected governments should do more and not less, at least compared to what the neoliberals tend to claim (Popper 1966a, chapter 17; cf. Hayek 1960; [1944] 2001; Nozick 1974; Friedman [1962] 2002).

7.3.3 Negative utilitarianism

Whether or not neoliberal economic policies will lead to the least conceivable amount of avoidable human suffering, or if some other 'package' of economic policies is preferable

from a negative-utilitarian point of view, is fundamentally an empirical question. As Popper indicates in *The Open Society*, however, historical experience shows quite clearly that some sort of regulation is needed if avoidable suffering and exploitation is to be minimised both in the short and the long run.

As mentioned earlier, Popper believes that unfettered market economies have in the past, for instance in the epoch of ‘classical liberalism’ in the first half of the nineteenth century, led to suffering as a side-effect of public policy, and one must assume for the most part avoidable. It is no wonder, therefore, that this period was marked by quite visible inequality and widespread poverty, at a time when the state did virtually nothing to alleviate poverty and the immediate effects of poverty and inequality. This means that neoliberals who want to argue for their preferred package of policies in a consequentialist fashion has, to say the least, a didactic challenge ahead of them, if they are to convince anyone that laissez-faire style economic policies will work better than they have done in the past. The idea that some sort of economic regulation is needed to minimise avoidable human suffering is, on the other hand, built into Popper’s ‘protectionist view of the state’, under which it is thought that the state ought to protect its citizens from unnecessary suffering and infliction.

Other attempts to use a single organisational principle on the entire economic life of a country have however frequently failed as well. Attempts to for instance construct a centralised, planned economy have an even worse ‘track record’. Instead, we see that almost all economies above a certain level of technological sophistication tend to mix both economic planning and market-based principles of organisation. It is, seemingly, the ‘mixed economy’ – an eclectic mix of different economic policies and organisational principles – which is most able to provide both the stability and the flexibility which advanced industrial and post-industrial economies need in order to function properly, or in a way which will minimise avoidable human suffering (Popper [1945] 1966a, chapter 17).

Both too much and too little regulation will in all likelihood lead to economic inefficiency and to side-effects in the form of frustration and suffering among large groups of people. What is needed is a willingness and abundant opportunities for individuals to try out new ideas which may reduce such frustration and suffering. At the same time, one should build on past experience, and try to construct an economic system which is less likely to ‘spin out of control’ (cf. Obama 2009). Sharp economic fluctuations may perhaps seem like dry numbers on the balance sheets of macroeconomists and policy-makers, but they represent real trouble for those who are hit by unemployment and poverty. From a Popperian, negative-utilitarian point of view, the preferred economic system will be of a type which not only guarantees everyone the very basics needed for a fairly decent sort of existence, but which also tries to combine the stability of a regulated economy with the flexibility of a market-based economic system. The conspicuously moderate cry for individual freedom within limits is everywhere to be found in Popper’s political thought dealing with economic matters, a cry which has hitherto only been approximately answered in liberal democracies with a mixed economy.

7.4 The politics of fallibility

7.4.1 Fallibilism

Fallibilism, or the quite commonsensical idea that human beings sometimes make mistakes and that all our claims of knowledge should be met with a measure of scepticism, is an idea shared by Popper and Berlin. Turned on its head, the immediate upshot of this thought is that we ever so often get things just about right, and end up knowing more than we did at the outset (cf. especially Popper 1979). In philosophy, however, fallibilism is not an entirely uncontroversial piece of theory. Instead, there are many people, and among them several philosophers, who believe that unshakable truth is out there for anyone – or alternatively just a select few – who wants to see it. We also find people who believe that human beings are

incapable of knowing the truth, or all but incapable of doing so, scattered throughout the history of philosophy.

Fallibilism is an integral part, even a corner-stone, in Popper's epistemology and philosophy of science, and in his political thought as well. Everywhere in his writings, one can find reminders of this for him fundamental idea. Sometimes we humans make mistakes, even very great mistakes, and we should accept this as a point of departure in our struggle to create better societies and a better future for ourselves. We should be wary of all kinds of claims of knowledge, even our own, because they occasionally turn out to be false. We need, therefore, to structure our political systems in such a way that false beliefs and wrong ideas do the least amount of damage.

Berlin is also a fallibilist of sorts, and mirrors in many ways Popper's cautious epistemological optimism (cf. especially Berlin 1978; 2000). The often dire political consequences of what Berlin perceives of as false beliefs, especially the Utopian idea that it is possible to create perfect societies and the monistic belief that it is possible weigh all our values on one scale, are central themes in Berlin's political thought. Value pluralism might in this be thought of as an idea borne out of the conviction that we sometimes make mistakes about the validity of normative claims. This is so because moral evaluation is not thought of as a matter of slavishly applying a single principle, but rather as an activity which tries to forge a precarious balance between several different principles, values, or goals. Since we occasionally make mistakes when we try to answer questions about what we really ought to do, we need a strategy for reducing the harmful effects of such mistakes. In practical terms, this means that we need political institutions which will reduce the harmful effects of our occasional mistakes (Berlin 1990:1-19).

Fallibilism is, basically, the view that we can all make mistakes which lead us to entertain false beliefs from time to time. From this belief, which (to use one of Berlin's

expressions) must seem almost self-evident to ‘practical men’, they both draw the idea that society ought to be structured in a way which minimise the harmful effects of the mistakes we occasionally, and over time inevitably will make. One must especially be on the lookout for theories which in some way or another reject the idea that some of the products of the human mind are inherently fallible, and that some has a privileged access to eternal and unshakable truth. From this belief, it is only a short distance to the belief that a received political ideology ought not to be doubted, and that it ought to serve as a permanent foundation for our choices between different courses of action.

Fallibilism does not, however, entail that everything is to be doubted at once, or that everything could be doubted in one go, but merely that everything we believe could potentially be doubted, and subjected to revision in the future. Some of our beliefs are in addition quite irrational to doubt in everyday life, although they could in principle be doubted and held up to closer scrutiny by philosophers and others with a fondness for splitting hairs. In practice, however, we must quite often act on beliefs which may on closer inspection turn out to be inaccurate or quite plainly wrong – and we must be able to correct our mistakes whenever we discover them. Mistakes will crop up from time to time, and we must continually strive to discover and correct them.

Fallibilism has some very tangible consequences for politics. If one believes that all humans are fallible, then one needs institutions which will ensure that mistakes, mistakes which even the most talented person will make from time to time, will do the least possible amount of damage. One particularly promising way of ensuring this goal of reducing the damage of wrong ideas is the kind of representative democracy seen in all consolidated and well-functioning democracies found around the world today. That way, there is at least the possibility that people might discover mistakes made by elected government officials and in due course replace those officials if they refuse to correct their fraudulent policies.

Such representative democracies are based around the rule of law and the sovereignty of popularly elected institutions and in the last instance the people itself, rather than individual persons who just seize political power for themselves. Another important ingredient is the separation of political power into different institutions, most commonly a horizontal separation between legislative and executive power, and a vertical separation between national, local, and in some cases international and supranational institutions. This kind of arrangement is properly called a *liberal democracy*, quite simply because the central level of the state does not try to seize total control of political processes, even if it is elected in free and fair elections, and in fact does the opposite because it devolves much power to other institutions and to individuals on a routine basis.

7.4.2 Liberal democracy

The epistemological and ethical theories which Berlin and Popper developed and defended had quite tangible political consequences, at least if we take their own interpretations of these theories at face value. Berlin thought, in short, that there are many different goals and ideals between which we must strike some sort of ‘uneasy equilibrium’ or fragile compromise. Popper believed, on the other hand, that we sometimes make mistakes, even great mistakes, but that we nevertheless need to try to solve the most pressing problems we are faced with at any given point in time, in order to alleviate avoidable human suffering. We must therefore accommodate our different values and beliefs within a common political framework which allow for some degree of experimentation without putting the basic structure of the democratic society in jeopardy, or in a constant state of flux.

Instead of allowing for an authoritarian implementation of one particular political theory or ideology which might turn out to be deceptive and harmful, we should try to build political structures in which different political ideas are put to the test, and moulded together to form a compromise which will satisfy most people, as well as their most immediate

interests. The result may not be a particularly thought-out or even a very logical set of political institutions. But it will be a political system which seriously tries to accommodate and realise different demands and ideas which different people believe will contribute to the building of a better society.

For both Berlin and Popper, being a liberal was first and foremost a matter of adhering to a set of political ideas centred around a particular view of how the democratic state ought to be structured and what goals such a state should pursue. What made them liberals, at least in their own eyes, was that they wanted both individual liberty and democracy, and some sort of balance between these two ends whenever they come into conflict with each other. Built into their understanding of what liberalism should mean is a pronounced egalitarianism. Everyone deserves a measure of liberty and adequate protection from threats to that liberty, and everyone deserves to be heard and to take part in the process of making the political decisions which affect and define their own lives. What they wanted, in short, was liberal democracy, understood as a state or political system in which each individual citizen has real and potentially equal access to influence over political processes, and where people to some degree and in some areas are left alone to govern their own lives. They both remind us, however, that freedom is not the same thing as democracy, and frequently the two basic goals of come into conflict with each other and other values of roughly equal importance.

Both Berlin and Popper acknowledge the fact that any thriving liberal democracy needs to redistribute resources in order to function properly. Economic policy, the great dividing issue between liberals, was however clearly not particularly interesting for either of them, at least not interesting enough to spell out a sufficiently clear or comprehensive set of guidelines for policy-making. Their concerns and interests lie elsewhere, in the hammering out of general principles for politics, and not in the nitty-gritty world of economic policy.

The two political theorists may nevertheless be placed at the left side of the liberal tradition to which they claimed to belong, if they are to have a place within it at all (cf. chapters 3 and 5 above). We may at least see that the kind of liberalism put forward by Berlin and Popper is quite moderate or centrist when it comes to economic policy issues, and closely related to their idea of what it takes to organise a modern democratic society with an advanced economy well. At any rate, this is the case if one compares the political thoughts and theories of Berlin and Popper with the views and policies put forward by the leading members of the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ (cf. section 6.4 above).

If liberal democracy is meant to be a reality for everyone, and not merely a ceremonial front for what is in reality an economically defined oligarchy, one needs a state willing to put into place institutions which will ensure both personal freedom and involvement in the democratic process for all and not just the privileged few (cf. Tawney [1931] 1964; Wolin 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010). At least, this is the case if democracy is understood as a state of affairs in which everyone have the means necessary for understanding the political processes in a democracy in a fairly enlightened way, and that they are able to effectively participate in them (cf. Dahl 1989). If democracy is to be a meaningful undertaking, it entails that the state must go beyond the kind of minimal or nearly minimal state envisioned by the most central neoliberal theorists.

This is what the two thinkers try to capture with some crucial political ideas of theirs. For Popper it is the afore mentioned protectionist view of the state which completes his preference for democracy, in that he wants not only the outward vestiges of representative government, but a state which protects the personal freedom and integrity of each individual citizen, including protection from avoidable harm and suffering. These two views are, at least in practice, mutually reinforcing; one needs a ‘protectionist’ state in order to make sure that everyone is truly able to participate in democratic processes, and democracy is a

precondition for a protectionist state in which the state is actually concerned about the welfare and freedom of every citizen – rather than just the political and economic elite.

For Berlin, on the other hand, the defence of liberal democracy is more indirect. When he identifies himself as a liberal, it is negative liberty which lies at the heart of his political convictions. And liberty is clearly not the same thing as democracy, as it is quite possible to conceive of a political system which is not a democracy, but in which a ‘liberal-minded despot’ respects personal freedom but keeps power over political processes for himself (Berlin 2002:166-217). But such liberal-minded despots are a very rare breed indeed, at least if we take historical experience at face value. In practice, therefore, the egalitarian ‘liberal morality’ of which he speaks has the best chance of becoming the ethos of a society if the state is governed by democratically elected institutions:

[Western liberals] believe, with good reason, that individual liberty is an ultimate end for human beings; none should be deprived of it by others; least of all that some should enjoy it at the expense of others. Equality of liberty; not to treat others as I should not wish them to treat me, repayment of my debt to those who alone have made possible my liberty or prosperity or enlightenment; justice, in its simplest and most universal sense – these are the foundations of liberal morality. Liberty is not the only goal of men. I can, like the Russian critic Belinsky, say that if others are to be deprived of it – if my brothers are to remain in poverty, squalor and chains – then I do not want it for myself, I reject it with both hands and infinitely prefer to share their fate. But nothing is gained by a confusion of terms. To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely; but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. (Berlin 2002:172)

Constructing a thriving democracy is no easy task, and definitely easier said than done. It is a fragile construction under constant threat and in constant need of repair. These threats come not only from those who believe that democracy ought to be replaced by more autocratic forms of government, but from many other sources. Two such threats are, to use Berlin’s phrases, glaring inequality and widespread misery. Inequality is a threat because poverty is in itself a threat to the reality of personal freedom and representative government. Misery is

however also a threat, because pervasive hopelessness leads people affected by it away from participation in democratic processes. So a thriving democracy is not only dependent on the existence of formal rights and liberties, but on an equitable distribution of welfare and resources as well – and in the last instance on a sufficient number of people wanting democracy to work.

7.4.3 Compromise and gradualism

In the thought of Berlin and Popper we see quite clearly the wish to carve out a middle ground in politics. A middle ground, that is, between the revolutionary belief that we should try to construct a perfect society at any cost on one hand, and the conservative idea that we should be satisfied with the status quo, because attempts to improve the way human societies are structured will inevitably end in disappointment, on the other. Their practical policy recommendations are quite moderate, almost mundane, in that they recommend – in most cases at least – limited reforms rather than revolutionary upheavals, and some degree of regulation of the economy, instead of either an all-out *dirigisme* or for that matter the opposite idea of absolute *laissez-faire*. The spirit of compromise between opposing ideals lies at the heart of the political thought of both, because they believe that the single-minded pursuit of a single political ideal or value almost certainly will lead to adverse and unintended consequences, if that pursuit is carried through to its ultimate conclusion (cf. Lamprecht 1921).

This willingness to compromise is the core of a well-functioning liberal democracy. Such a democracy, no matter how well-designed its institutions are, will in the longer run fail if too many people are unwilling to compromise, participate, and defend the institutions in which broad compromises are forged and implemented. If a majority of the people in addition actually wants to replace democracy with some sort of dictatorship, democrats have an uphill struggle, to say the least, even if democratic institutions are relatively well

entrenched. This was for instance the case in Germany's Weimar republic (1918-1933), where liberal democracy was quickly eroded because a clear majority of the people voted for and actively supported politicians and political parties which wanted to abolish democracy (cf. Bracher 1955; Möller 2004).

The continuation of a liberal democracy is dependent on the active assent of a sufficient proportion of its citizens. The people need to know what democracy is, and it is necessary that they support and want to participate in the democratic process, if democracy is to thrive and ultimately survive. That means, of course, that they have real opportunities to do so. The continued survival and improvement of democracy is in any case not something which should be taken for granted. Instead, it is something one must constantly fight for against those who want to seize power for themselves, either for personal gain or in order to implement some sort of far-reaching ideology. And one must be willing to compromise with people which one disagrees with on many issues.

Gradualism is a key theme in both Berlin's and Popper's defence of liberal and representative democracy. Popper's idea of 'piecemeal social engineering' and Berlin's many vehement rejections of Utopianism capture this gradualist attitude quite well. As the name suggests, gradualism is in politics the idea that political reform should, at least under favourable circumstances, come as gradual or incremental change to the status quo. In many ways, gradualism emerges from the fallibilist attitude described above. If we sometimes make great mistakes and unwittingly come to entertain wrong ideas, it would be prudent not to put all one's eggs in one basket by forcing through a thoroughgoing implementation of a pet theory or package of policies. Instead, a more sensible course of action would be to try out new ideas on a limited scale, and only gradually implement them on a larger scale if they turn out to make a positive contribution to society at large (cf. James 1998).

We should however not be too contented with our present lot, and try to improve it when we have the opportunity to do so. But that does not mean that all change is for the good, or that revolutionary upheaval is a probable way of achieving the improvements we through discussions and cooperation find out that we want to see realised. This in turn does not mean, moreover, that incremental improvements are always preferable to more sweeping change. From time to time, mankind has found itself living with an intolerable political system and situation, and in such cases a more drastic approach to political change may be warranted. Once a satisfactory democratic system has been established and consolidated, however, gradualism should be the general norm for political action and reform. Constant upheaval will quite simply not contribute to the happiness and welfare of the population in most cases, but will instead lead to insecurity and much avoidable suffering.

As Popper reminds us in several of his works, practical politics is a form of problem-solving, and politicians as well as ordinary citizens should try to solve the most pressing political problems put before them. Democracy is not a complete ideology or blueprint for an ideal society, but a process for how to solve such problems through dialogue and compromise. This means that one should not try to solve all our problems at once with the help some grand scheme for how the best society imaginable should look like. Such schemes may nevertheless have a role to play, as a yardstick for how far we have come in solving general problems identified as an obstruction on the way to creating a better society.

The kind of gradualism recommended by Popper and Berlin may sound rather conservative, and clearly ill-suited for impatient souls who desperately want to see real and sweeping political change happen, preferably right now. Most revolutionaries have however yet to prove that their preferred method of political change will lead to lasting change for the better. Democracy, compromise, and gradualism are all principles that are clearly better suited for 'low sensation-seekers' who want democratic politics to be an unexciting and

everyday activity. Such everyday politics may not satisfy some people's need for excitement and 'something different', but it clearly has the potential for bringing about real and lasting improvements instead. And that may be just what we ought to look for in politics (cf. especially Berlin 1990:1-19).

7.5 Instead of a conclusion

Neoliberalism is a set of political ideas which, in spite of the nominal similarity, appear to be very different from anything Berlin or Popper ever recommended, whenever they spoke of themselves as liberals. Their kind of liberalism comes across as more moderate and egalitarian compared to the 'economic liberalism' of prominent members of the neoliberal thought collective like Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick. Berlin and Popper were, in essence, liberals at a time when liberal thought was dominated by what was then called 'the new liberalism', and from which much of the intellectual heritage of contemporary welfare states was born (cf. especially Beveridge 1945).

Compromise between different goals and ideals such as freedom and equality lie at the heart of this kind of liberalism, which Berlin and Popper ultimately recommended. It is a type of 'organised liberalism' with a complex idea of personal freedom. Freedom is, under this understanding, not merely thought of as the absence of government intervention in the economy and the everyday life of ordinary citizens. This kind of freedom may be very important, but it is not everything that matters for Berlin and Popper. Instead, freedom is in addition freedom from 'want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness', as well as the freedom to participate in the making of political decisions which affect one's own life in a meaningful way (cf. Brandal et al. 2011, chapter 1). This, as explained above, is quite visibly different from the neoliberal demand for less government and more unfettered markets, even at the expense of almost everything else.

Liberal democracy is the political system preferred by both Popper and Berlin, because it has the potential of realising some of the goals they view as particularly important, such as the free exchange of both political and scientific ideas, and a measure of personal freedom for everyone. It is also a political system which goes well with a gradualist approach to politics and policy-making – an approach we should adopt because we humans are fallible and occasionally make mistakes about what we ought to do. Democracy is however something which must be fought for, not only against would-be dictators, but also against those who are perfectly happy to weaken democracy by doing what the leading members of the neoliberal thought collective recommend we should do. The immediate upshot of neoliberal ideology is after all that we should remove many important political decisions from agenda of popularly elected legislatures, and instead effectively transfer many decisions we have hitherto thought of as political decisions to the market-place (cf. especially Nozick 1974:276-294; Hayek [1944] 2001:59-74; Friedman [1962] 2002:7-21).

This neoliberal state has little room for a thriving democracy, or the right to a decent existence and a degree of personal freedom for those who are unfortunate enough to not be able to come out on top in the unfettered market economy. But the existence of neoliberal ideology may however be important and useful for a surprising reason. It shows that it is possible to organise human societies differently than we for the most part tend to do today, and should be part of a continuing discussion about how we should organise our existence, and what we should do next in order to solve the most pressing problems put before us.

Even if one manages to build a more energetic liberal democracy characterised by real political equality, there are many problems that still need to be solved, and many rival values and ends which need to be balanced against each other (cf. Dahl [1970] 1990; 2006). The debate of what democracy could and should be will therefore continue for the foreseeable future. This is so in part because different people will always have different

ideas about what the most important qualities of a good democracy actually is and should be, and in part because a critical and constant self-inspection is an integral part of any living and thriving liberal democracy.

Among the most important dilemmas facing democracies today is the question of how to deal with uncertainty and deep disagreements, and the question of how to find and implement satisfactory solutions to problems wrought with ambiguities. How can we realise Berlin's ideal of building an uneasy equilibrium between many competing values and ultimate ends, values and ends that are, roughly speaking, equally important and admirable? And how can we at the same time move closer to Popper's vision of a society in which everyone is protected from exploitation, exclusion, and arbitrariness? These questions are parts of an on-going and recurring set of issues for democratic polities – the uneasy equilibrium is in constant need of repair.

What we do know, however, is that we do need equality, not only political equality but economic equality as well, if effective citizenship in a liberal democracy is to become a reality for everyone who is fortunate enough to live under such a system of government (cf. Marshall 1964; Dahl 2006). A generous measure of personal freedom is of course integral to any sort of liberal democracy, but political and economic equality is needed as well if such a system of government is to function optimally, as a reality and not merely as a set of stage props for what is in effect very different form of government (Wolin 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010). In short, both freedom *and* equality is needed, and the two values must be balanced against each other. Negative liberty is certainly not enough if one wants a healthy democracy. What we get, however, when the neoliberal idea of negative liberty is advanced, under which the ideal is understood rather reductively as freedom from government and little else, is what Tawney ([1931] 1964) aptly described as a 'religion of inequality'. Inequality will then be viewed as a natural outcome – and even as a desirable state of affairs.

That is why the political and economic thought of the leading members of the neoliberal thought collective indirectly serves as an important reminder. It reminds us that there are alternative ways of thinking about how society ought to be organised, and indirectly that the basic institutions or constitutional structures which characterise liberal democracy are constantly in need of improvement. It may also serve as a reminder that a thriving democracy should therefore always be open to and welcome debates about whether or not its institutions should be reformed, so that they may better live up to the ideal of a ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’. Like in Otto Neurath’s famous boat analogy, we must constantly repair our beliefs and ideas as we move forward at the same time, not only in science, but in democratic politics and everyday life as well:

Es gibt keine Tabula rasa. Wie Schiffer sind wir, die ihr Schiff auf offener See umbauen müssen, ohne es jemals in einem Dock zerlegen und aus besten Bestandteilen neu errichten zu können. Nur die Metaphysik kann restlos verschwinden. Die unpräzisen „Ballungen“ sind immer irgendwie Bestandteil des Schiffes. Wird die Unpräzision an einer Stelle verringert, kann sie wohl gar an anderer Stelle verstärkt wieder auftreten. (Neurath 1932:206)

There are two central lessons to be learnt from all this. The first lesson is that democracy will never become a perfect or even a finished political system, and it must constantly be fought for, built, and rebuilt in order to meet new problems. The second lesson is that conflict is inevitable in any recognisably human society. It seems that mankind have an ingrained disposition for dividing itself into groups who may come into conflict with each other. In addition, it seems that conflict between different groups of people which occupy different roles in the economic system is a built-in feature of any market economy. This is also the case in a mixed economy in which markets and individual corporations are routinely overseen by democratically elected authorities. We must nevertheless move forward as best we can, and solve new problems as we go along, always on the lookout for something better.

Summary

Through seven chapters, I have discussed and sought to answer three basic questions, as well as three follow-up questions to each of the basic questions. These questions, presented at the end of the introduction, are as follows:

- Is Berlin's ethical theory of value pluralism capable of providing us with a basis for a recognisably liberal political theory? What are the most central characteristics of the political theory Berlin ultimately recommends?
- Is Popper's epistemological theory of critical rationalism capable of providing us with a basis for a recognisably liberal political theory? What are the most central characteristics of the political theory Popper ultimately recommends?
- What are the central features of the body of political and economic thought commonly called neoliberalism? How does it compare to the kinds of liberalism recommended by Berlin and Popper?

In the second and third chapter, I examined the political thought of Isaiah Berlin, in an attempt to give an answer to the first group of questions. The second chapter was an attempt to describe and give a preliminary interpretation of his political thought. In it, I first described and explained Berlin's ethical theories, commonly called value pluralism, and their relationship with related perspectives with similar names. I also discussed Berlin's conceptual divide between positive and negative liberty, as well as his idea that successful political action is dependent upon sound political judgment and 'a sense of reality'. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of his idea that we need to maintain an uneasy equilibrium between different values and goals.

In the third chapter, I emphasised that there are no strong arguments in favour of the view, defended by John Gray and others, namely that value pluralism actually leads away

from liberalism. Instead, Berlin's own view, that value pluralism entails a measure of negative liberty for everyone, is largely vindicated. Consequently, I found that his strong preference for liberal democracy is indeed compatible with value pluralism. I therefore indicated that value pluralism can indeed provide a basis for liberalism, at least if liberalism is understood very broadly, as a strong preference for liberal democracy. Value pluralism does not, however, lead its proponents directly to liberalism in a more restricted sense, and certainly not directly to conventionally liberal economic policies, which Berlin occasionally warned against. It is clear that the type of liberalism advocated by Berlin is more moderate and egalitarian compared to traditional economic liberalism or 'neoliberalism'. I concluded, therefore, that he was more like a political eclectic who combined elements of liberalism and democratic socialism in his political thought.

The second part of the thesis, consisting of chapters 4 and 5, was my attempt to analyse and interpret Karl Popper's political theories, and to give an answer to the second group of questions. In the fourth chapter, I set out to describe and interpret Popper's political thought, as well as some other parts of the epistemological theories he and others have given the name critical rationalism. I found that there are several links between his epistemology and his political theories, often originating in and running through a rather sketchily developed set of moral considerations. It is especially his view that one should minimise avoidable human suffering, an idea Popper called 'negative utilitarianism', which links his theories together so that they become parts of a philosophical system. Because ignorance, unfreedom, and economic exploitation in Popper's mind lead to much avoidable suffering, it was his view that the state should actively protect the freedom and integrity of all. I therefore described Popper's political thought, using a concept originally developed by the German political theorist and politician Eduard Bernstein to describe his own version of democratic socialism, as a form of 'organised liberalism'.

In the fifth chapter, I presented and discussed some of the remarkably different interpretations of Popper's political thought. In the ensuing discussion, I sided with those commentators who above all have described Popper as a political moderate who wanted human reason and knowledge to guide political action. There is however also a lively dispute between those who emphasise his war-time books, and who tend to think of Popper as a social democrat, and those who call attention to his later works, and who believes that Popper ought to be understood as a 'classical liberal' instead. In this dispute, I sided with the former group. To the latter group I conceded, however, that it is ultimately an empirical question whether or not Popper's 'protectionist view of the state', that political institutions should protect everyone from exploitation and minimise avoidable suffering, is compatible with traditional economic liberalism.

Traditional economic liberalism, which through some quite surprising twists and turns in our day has become better known as 'neoliberalism', was a central topic of the third part of this thesis. In these last two chapters, I tried to answer the third and last group of questions. In the sixth chapter, I examined the history of the term neoliberalism and the relationship between political theories commonly called neoliberalism and liberal political theories in general. In fact, the differences between the two theorists and the neoliberals, which I discussed in chapter seven, illustrate the many disagreements between different groups of people who have found it useful to describe themselves as liberals.

In my exposition in the sixth chapter, I have tried to highlight the differences between modern and classical liberalism on one hand, and libertarianism and liberal egalitarianism on the other. I found that political ideologies such as classical liberalism and libertarianism are not far removed from the political theories commonly called neoliberalism. This is the case at least if one primarily looks at the basic economic policies recommended by thinkers who have been described using one or more of these epithets, even if they to varying degrees

differ from each other on other scores. There is nevertheless so much agreement between proponents of neoliberal policies that it is clearly quite useful to describe neoliberalism as a loosely demarcated set of political and economic ideas. Therefore, despite certain theoretical differences between the political theorists described as leading members of a ‘neoliberal thought collective’, they advocate a thoroughgoing ‘rolling back of the frontiers of the state’, and for the establishment of ‘minimal and dispersed’ government institutions.

In the seventh and final chapter, I brought the political thought of both Berlin and Popper back into the discussion. In it, I described the relationship between key theories proposed by the two philosophers, most prominently value pluralism and political protectionism, and the moderate and above all democratic and egalitarian liberalism which they ultimately recommended. This kind of liberalism is clearly very different from the body of political and economic thought described in the preceding chapter under the heading of neoliberalism, and may serve as the beginnings of a critique of the economic policies associated with neoliberal political theories. The larger question of what to do next, how we ought to organise our common future, was however left open in this study.

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