I. TWO TYPES OF LIBERALISM

The views of Isaiah Berlin are an influential example, in the philosophical literature, of what we might call perfectionist liberalism, a type of liberal political view that spells out a set of controversial metaphysical and ethical doctrines concerning the nature of value and the good life, and then goes on to recommend political principles built upon these values. Berlin’s formulations, though influential, are characteristically compressed and allusive, but Joseph Raz has developed a closely related set of ideas with great explicitness and clarity. For Raz, the key personal and political value is autonomy, a power of self-direction and self-government. To this (and here is the connection to Berlin) he links the acceptance of moral pluralism: to see why only a relatively extensive range of options adequately supports autonomy, one must grasp the fact that there are many incompatible ways of living, all of which are morally good and valuable. Thus Raz’s doctrine of autonomy—as he states—requires the acceptance of moral pluralism and uses that idea to support its account of adequate options. Religious and secular toleration, he argues, should be based on an acceptance of the ideal of autonomy and
the truth of moral pluralism. Thus Raz espouses a two-part ideal: the central value is autonomy, but, as he understands that idea, it requires the acceptance of another controversial doctrine about value, namely pluralism.

The major liberal alternative to Berlin’s and Raz’s perfectionist liberalism, in the recent Anglo-American philosophical literature, is the view called “political liberalism.” This view was developed first by Charles Larmore in *Patterns of Moral Complexity* and *The Morals of Modernity*, with explicit reference to Berlin, but in most detail by John Rawls in his great book *Political Liberalism*. I too hold a view of this type, having been convinced by the arguments of Larmore and Rawls. It seems worth exploring the reasons that led the three of us to prefer political liberalism to a view of Raz’s type.

I begin by outlining the views of Berlin and Raz. I then turn to Larmore’s critique and Rawls’s restatement of that critique, which I accept in most respects. I then discuss a crucial ambiguity in the formulation of a key notion in political liberalism: that of “reasonable disagreement” (in the case of Larmore), or “reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (in the case of Rawls). Having resolved that ambiguity in favor of the version of the view that I find most appealing, I then argue that political liberalism is superior to perfectionist liberalism as a basis for political principles in a pluralistic society. In a concluding section, I address the issue of stability.

1. One could reasonably think of this debate as extending to continental Europe, since Rawls’s work is widely discussed throughout Europe, and since Larmore writes in French, publishes in France before publishing in other countries, and has had a major influence on the French debate.


Let us begin with a working definition of perfectionist liberalism: what political liberalism is and requires will emerge in the course of confronting its opposite number. Perfectionist liberalism is defined by Larmore, who initiated this debate, as a family of views that base political principles on “ideals claiming to shape our overall conception of the good life, and not just our role as citizens”; elsewhere he says that these views involve controversial ideals of the good life, or views about “the ultimate nature of the human good.” As I define perfectionist liberalism, following Larmore, it is a species of a genus of liberal views that might be called “comprehensive liberalisms,” liberalisms that base political principles on some comprehensive doctrine about human life that covers not only the political domain but also the domain of human conduct generally.

Most forms of comprehensive liberalism are perfectionist, involving a doctrine about the good life and the nature of value. But a doctrine can be comprehensive without being perfectionist. Some comprehensive doctrines that have had great influence in the past have been deterministic or fatalistic, thus closing off the space for striving toward a specific ideal of the good life: thus astrology, which controlled policy in some times and places, could hardly be described as perfectionism, since it held that our fates are all fixed by our stars and that it makes no sense to think of ourselves as pursuing a good life. More pertinently for contemporary thought, the type of comprehensive liberalism advocated by Ronald Dworkin may be nonperfectionistic, in that its ideal of state neutrality, though explicitly defended as a comprehensive and not a political form of liberalism, deliberately refrains from advocating any specific doctrine of the good life. From now on, I leave those comprehensive but nonperfectionistic doctrines to one side to focus on perfectionism. Perfectionistic forms of comprehensive liberalism (whether utilitarian or

7. See Ronald Dworkin, Sovereign Virtue (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 154–55: however, one could also argue that by emphasizing a continuity between valuable lives and liberal political institutions (a theme clearly emphasized in Dworkin’s Justice for Hedgehogs [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011], but already present in the earlier work), the view moves toward perfectionism.
Hegelian, or based on a picture of neo-Aristotelian virtue, or on Christian doctrines, or on one of many other possible views) have been immensely influential historically and remain so today. The Raz/Berlin position, avowedly perfectionist in Larmore’s sense, remains a particularly interesting and attractive liberal view, which deserves continued scrutiny (along with its various relatives). The subtle relationship between political liberalism and Dworkin’s comprehensive view must remain a topic for another occasion.8

Why go over this ground again? Rawls and Larmore have both said quite a lot in favor of the form of liberalism they support, and it might seem otiose to revisit the issue. Reconsideration is needed, however, for two reasons. First, the views of Rawls and Larmore contain crucial but insufficiently noticed ambiguities; sorting them out will prove illuminating.

Second, although Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* is widely known, and frequently discussed in the literature on welfarism and utilitarianism, such is not the case with his great later book. The concept of political liberalism is simply ignored in a large proportion of discussions of welfare and social policy, as are the challenges Rawls poses to thinkers who would base politics on a single comprehensive normative view.9 Many theorists

8. Another important distinction is the distinction between perfectionism with respect to content and perfectionism with respect to grounds, or modes of justification: see the important discussion of different types of neutrality in Peter DeMarneffe, “Liberalism, Liberty, and Neutrality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19 (1990): 253–74. Rawls and Larmore do not invoke this distinction, which would have been helpful to their arguments. As I discuss their views below, I shall attempt to introduce it.

9. This is true to some extent even in philosophical utilitarianism: Peter Singer, for example, has never, to my knowledge, addressed the challenge that political liberalism raises for his comprehensive view. It is ubiquitously true in philosophically informed areas of welfarist economics. Thus, in the special issue of *Feminist Economics* devoted to the work of Amartya Sen (9, no. 2–3 [2003]), Sen is specifically asked whether he accepts the idea of political liberalism (see Nussbaum, “Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice,” pp. 33–50, at pp. 49–50), but he does not address this question in his reply. (These issues of the journal have been reprinted as *Amartya Sen’s Work and Ideas: A Gender Perspective*, ed. Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, and Ingrid Robeyns [New York: Routledge, 2005].) Nor does the idea of political liberalism play any role in Sen’s extensive treatment of Rawls in *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). Similarly, Sen’s *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton, 2006) fails to ask what respect for persons requires when people have deep attachments to their ethnic or religious identities, suggesting that there is a correct, plural view of identity that politics can legitimately endorse. Influential philosophically concerned economists in
influenced by various forms of normative utilitarianism have simply not attended to the issues of respect raised by their commitment to a comprehensive normative ethical doctrine as the basis for political principles and policy choices. It is certainly possible for consequentialist and welfarist views to be reformulated as forms of political liberalism. It also might be possible for them to defend their perfectionist doctrines against Rawlsian challenges. But the failure of their proponents to confront the issue head-on means that this work has not yet been done. It is my hope that the challenge contained in this article may stimulate this further work.

II. BERLIN’S PLURALISM, RAZ’S PLURALISM

Berlin’s pluralism is the target of Larmore’s critique and Rawls’s reformulation of that critique, so we must attempt to characterize it, despite...
the allusive and cryptic nature of Berlin’s discussion.10 For Berlin, pluralism is the denial of monism about the ultimate sources of value.11 Observing that many political doctrines have been monistic about value, he tells us that we should not accept monism, for reasons both practical and theoretical. In practical terms, suggests Berlin, monism has been a source of tyranny and bigotry: it is no accident that “The Pursuit of the Ideal” opens with a catalogue of atrocities perpetrated during the twentieth century in the name of some monistic ideal. But the more important argument made by Berlin is that monism is false, and pluralism is true. Monism is the doctrine that there is just “one true answer and one only” to questions about the ultimate sources of value (PI, p. 5).12 Pluralism, by contrast, is the view “that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other” (PI, p. 9). In a later essay collected in The Crooked Timber of Humanity, he elaborates. Pluralism asks us:

To look upon life as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective; incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard.13

Pluralism, then, is a thesis about values and their objective status, and a thesis that is supposed to be true.

How are the practical and the theoretical theses connected? Clearly the truth of the thesis of pluralism is understood to give support to political principles based on it, but exactly how does its truth figure in the argument for liberal political principles? Berlin does not make this clear, but it appears that the truth of the theoretical thesis is a necessary prop for the liberal doctrine of toleration and noninterference. If only one

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10. In order to move on to the primary issue, the critique of Berlin by Larmore and Rawls, I focus on the texts that Larmore relies on to characterize the position he criticizes. I do not purport to offer a comprehensive exegesis of Berlin’s views on liberalism.
view were true, it is not clear whether any independent reasons would lead Berlin to favor liberal noninterference with the views that have been found to be false.\textsuperscript{14}

From now on, like Raz,\textsuperscript{15} I distinguish pluralism of the sort relevant to Berlin and Raz from what I shall call \textit{internal pluralism}, a view that both Berlin and Larmore do not clearly distinguish from pluralism of the sort on which they focus.\textsuperscript{16} Because the distinction is philosophically important and largely ignored in this debate, apart from a brief remark by Raz, we must pause briefly to discuss it. Internal pluralism tells us that there are several distinct, intrinsically valuable elements that can be combined in a single, reasonably unified picture of a good human life. The internal

\textsuperscript{14} Thus at PI, p. 15, Berlin favors putting some views off-limits, on the grounds that they conflict with “common” values that are accepted by all the diverse forms of life that pluralism supports; those views (including Nazism and views that advocate torture for pleasure) are not to be tolerated.

\textsuperscript{15} See Raz, “Autonomy, Toleration, and the Harm Principle,” p. 316, where Raz defines the type of pluralism that interests him as “the view that there are various forms and styles of life which exemplify different virtues and which are incompatible,” and then observes that “[t]here is nothing to stop a person from being both an ideal teacher and an ideal family person,” thus distinguishing pluralism of his sort from what I call “internal pluralism.” Raz, of course, does not assert, implausibly, that there would never be difficult conflicts in the life of someone who is both a teacher and a family person; the point is that the life is one that can be lived, because the two ideals do not make demands that are in principle incompatible.

\textsuperscript{16} Nor does Larmore make this distinction, when he states, in \textit{The Morals of Modernity}, that pluralism is a characteristically modern position. Internal pluralism is ubiquitous in the ancient Greek and Roman world, the Indian world, and no doubt in many other ancient cultures. The form of pluralism with which Larmore is most concerned—the idea that there are several “reasonable” comprehensive views of how to live—appears to be older in India than in the West: an edict of the emperor Ashoka (around the third and second centuries BCE) says that “the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another.” But a similar idea is on the scene at least in the Roman world, and Cicero’s correspondence with his Epicurean friend Atticus shows us an interesting version of it. Cicero, who certainly does not like Epicureanism, and who has a very different comprehensive doctrine, says, in a letter of 61 BCE, that he and Atticus are so close that nothing separates them “apart from our choices of an overall mode of life” (\textit{praeter voluntatem institutae vitae}). He then says that his friend was led to his choice by a \textit{haud reprehendenda ratio} (a hardly exceptional course of reasoning). See \textit{Letters to Atticus}, Loeb Classical Library edition by David Shackleton Bailey, vol. I. (This is my own translation: Shackleton Bailey overtranslates, I think, when he writes an “entirely justifiable way of thinking,” something Cicero would never say about the Epicurean doctrine.) The larger context makes his meaning clear: in these perilous times, we can understand why an honorable man would seek retirement from public life (\textit{honestum otium}), and then Cicero admits that his own choice to serve the Republic is motivated by “what one might call ambition.”
pluralist undertakes to organize these plural sources of value as best she can. Most cultures are internal-pluralist: that is, they recommend a range of interrelated goods, holding that several of these have intrinsic value; they propose some way of organizing them all. Ancient Greek culture did this through the polytheism of Greek religion: the sources of value (worship) are plural, and each member of the culture is supposed to honor them all, although this can at times be rather difficult. Loyalty to the gods of the family and loyalty to the state can clash in extreme circumstances, as they do in Sophocles’s *Antigone*. The duty to honor Demeter (goddess of marital fertility) and the duty to honor Aphrodite (goddess of erotic love) are likely to clash at some point in many lives. The overall picture, though, is of a single religion with multiple domains, not of divergent and incompatible overall forms of life. Similarly, ancient Hindu culture recognized plural sources and, like Greek culture, tried to organize them into a more or less cohesive cultural whole. But pluralism is not confined to polytheism. Most religious and cultural views, for example, have held that love of one’s children and friends has intrinsic value, while also recognizing that the loyalties involved may at times be quite difficult to render harmonious. Internal pluralism is just a feature of any reasonably sane cultural view. It is difficult indeed to think of a morality that is genuinely monistic, reducing all the values to one, unless it be Benthamite Utilitarianism, and we know how quickly the plausible arguments of John Stuart Mill transformed that view into a cohesive internal-pluralist doctrine.

What concerns Berlin—and, as we shall see, Raz—however, is not internal pluralism, even with profound tensions. It is incompatibility among overall doctrines of life, the impossibility of living as, say, both an ancient Greek and a utilitarian, or a Nietzschean and a Christian: the impossibility of living with utterly incompatible leading values and

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17. There are limiting cases: for example, the requirements of Dionysian religion involve such a degree of tension with the standard requirements of the civic religion that it is unclear whether a coherent unitary life can be made out of the two; this case bleeds into pluralism of Berlin’s type. For a revealing discussion of different types of conflict, see Henry S. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 144–51.

outlooks. Berlin’s pluralism, then, is the doctrine that there exists a plurality of overall accounts of how one should live, all of which are valid or objectively correct.

In *The Morality of Freedom* and in his important paper “Autonomy, Toleration, and the Harm Principle,” Joseph Raz argues in favor of a version of liberalism that is perfectionistic in two ways. First, and most centrally, Raz defends a controversial doctrine of autonomy as the key to what makes lives valuable in general, and he urges that this value ought to be the core value in a liberal society. Raz’s autonomy is a controversial perfectionist norm that would be rejected, for example, by believers in authoritarian religions. Second, Raz makes a further perfectionist move when he argues that liberal societies, in order to support autonomy, must accept a doctrine of pluralism that is closely related to Berlin’s pluralism. Let us now examine this connection.

Raz’s argument in “Autonomy” has a different starting point from Berlin’s: the central moral ideal is autonomy, and pluralism enters the picture in explaining what autonomy requires: it is only in the light of autonomy that we comprehend why an adequate range of options means a plural and, indeed, an extensive range. Why does autonomy require a belief in pluralism? Autonomy, for Raz, is not good independently of the choices it makes possible; its goodness is conditional on the worth of those choices. “Autonomous life is valuable only if it is spent in the pursuit of acceptable and valuable projects and relationships. The autonomy principle permits and even requires governments to create morally valuable opportunities and to eliminate repugnant ones.”

This understanding of autonomy means that if only one form of life had been morally valuable, government would not have needed to create plural options, all the others being objectionable. So it is only because Raz believes pluralism to be true that he can conclude that autonomy requires government to create plural options and, indeed, an extensive menu of options (though, he emphasizes, no particular option need be on the list).

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20. Raz, “Autonomy,” p. 173; see also p. 168: government is not required to create repugnant or evil options so that people may freely avoid them.
In *The Morality of Freedom*, Raz makes this same argument at greater length. He uses the effective example of “The Hounded Woman” to show that government undermines well-being if almost all the choices it offers require a person to sacrifice her goal.\textsuperscript{21} Government, then, must offer people an “adequate range of options” if it is to foster autonomy. These options must, however, be genuinely valuable: autonomy has no value qua autonomy when it is used in the pursuit of evil or worthless ends, and the availability of such options is “not a requirement of respect for autonomy.”\textsuperscript{22}

Because Raz holds that not all goals are valuable, and that the autonomy principle does not require government to protect the non-valuable goals as options, he then must offer an account of why it is, after all, so bad to offer only a single option. “Autonomy requires that many morally acceptable options be available to a person” (*MF*, p. 378). But to see why these options must be “many,” we must appreciate the fact that the genuinely valuable forms of life are, in fact, plural. The autonomy-based principle of toleration is the view that pluralism about value is true, and that people should believe in the truth of pluralism so that they happily extend autonomy to others, even though they pursue ends that the person herself does not value. Raz thinks that it is not only permissible but also urgently required for governments to promote toleration by building political principles based on the truth of pluralism.\textsuperscript{23} Thus government will be in the business of ranking and ordering comprehensive doctrines, both by saying that these are genuinely valuable and those are not, and also by asserting that a plurality of doctrines has moral worth.

Why do Berlin and Raz think that belief in the truth of pluralism is necessary for toleration? Berlin appears to be motivated by the following thought: if people don’t think that their neighbor’s view of life is objectively true, they will always want to interfere with them and bring them

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} *MF*, pp. 373–76.
\item \textsuperscript{22} *MF*, pp. 380–81.
\item \textsuperscript{23} A key element of such a politics will, he argues, be endorsement of Mill’s “harm principle”; here he and the political liberal can agree. But Raz’s reasons for endorsing the harm principle will be different from those that Rawls would favor: for Raz, the truth of plural valuable options; for Rawls (who, however, does not discuss this example), the idea that respect for persons requires government not to take a stand on the truth of people’s comprehensive doctrines one way or the other.
\end{itemize}
around to their own view, and they won’t support policies that extend to people a wide range of opportunities for choice. Raz argues somewhat differently: autonomy requires toleration because it requires the state to provide an adequate range of options, and an adequate range is an extensive range (requiring toleration of mutually repugnant lifestyles) only because pluralism is true. If it had not been true, then nothing, including autonomy, would require us to tolerate what we don’t like in the lifestyle of others: the autonomous murderer is, if anything, worse than the nonautonomous murderer (MF, p. 380). Closing off bad options is just fine, so if a society is to be tolerant, protecting a plurality of options, even though many citizens do not like many of them, that practice must be undergirded by a public recognition that there are plural genuinely good options. For neither Berlin nor Raz is the principle of pluralism merely strategic: both give it strong endorsement as true in its own right.

An important historical antecedent for Raz and Berlin is Rousseau, who insisted that the good society must teach a principle of theological toleration that at least prevented people from believing that their neighbors (holding different religions) were damned. “It is impossible to live in peace with those one believes to be damned,” Rousseau concludes.24 Berlin, looking at the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, suggests, similarly, that we have reason to believe that Rousseau’s claim is true: so long as people think their neighbors are fundamentally in error, there will be no end to their attempts at repression and coercion.25 For Rousseau, the importance of a widespread acceptance of pluralism about value is primarily psychological and motivational: people will not cease to persecute others unless they believe the truth of pluralism. Berlin appears to be moved by similar psychological considerations, although not by these alone.26 Where Raz is concerned, it is abundantly clear that pluralism is not merely a psychological thesis about how to motivate people toward

25. See PI, pp. 12–14: monism is “dangerous,” because it teaches that there is an “ultimate solution to the problems of society” (the comparison to Hitler is explicit in the text), and “the millions slaughtered in wars or revolutions—gas chambers, gulag, genocide, all the monstrosities for which our century will be remembered—are the price men must pay for the felicity of future generations.”
26. He describes his own route to the realization of this “truth” in PI, pp. 6–10.
toleration: the objective truth of plural options is necessary both to the justification of state policies making an extensive range of options available and to the justification of toleration as an appropriate attitude to foster toward the things we dislike in the lives of our fellows.

How demanding is Raz’s principle of pluralism? Very demanding, it turns out. Moral pluralism, as Raz defines it in *The Morality of Freedom*, involves two claims, both of which Berlin also endorses: first, “that incompatible forms of life are morally acceptable,” and, second, “that they display distinct virtues, each capable of being pursued for its own sake” (p. 396). Whatever form of life one is pursuing, “[t]here are virtues which elude one because they are available only to people pursuing alternative and incompatible forms of life” (p. 396). Raz then distinguishes “weak” from “strong” pluralism: to the criteria given above, which define “weak” pluralism, we may add “one or more” of the following three, to make the form of pluralism “strong”: First, “the incompatible virtues are not completely ranked relative to each individual.” Second, “the incompatible virtues are not completely ranked by some impersonal criteria of moral worth.” Third, “the incompatible virtues exemplify diverse fundamental concerns” (pp. 396–97). Raz believes that he has proven that valuing autonomy requires us to endorse the strong form of pluralism (p. 398), but he relies only on the weaker form in running his argument (p. 398). The weak form, however, still requires the view that a plurality of incompatible forms of life is to be endorsed as morally acceptable. By requiring this endorsement, valuing autonomy “establishes the necessity for toleration” (pp. 406–7). Weak pluralism is a doctrine that the major religious and secular comprehensive doctrines in most modern societies will refuse to endorse; “strong” pluralism is even more clearly incompatible with all but a small number of such doctrines.

Thus Raz espouses perfectionism in a double sense. Like Berlin, he endorses a principle of pluralism that is unacceptable to many citizens; unlike Berlin, he deploys this principle in the service of an equally controversial comprehensive ideal of autonomy.

III. LARMORE, RAWLS: REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT, POLITICAL LIBERALISM

In “Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement,” Charles Larmore begins by pointing out, correctly, that the principle of pluralism is controversial.
Many if not most religious believers do not believe that there are many objectively correct routes to salvation, or, more generally, many objectively correct ways of leading a good life. Pluralist religious views have become somewhat more common today than they were formerly, but even the most tolerant religions typically exclude atheists and agnostics from the group of the “saved”; many include only other monotheists and exclude polytheists and members of nontheistic religions, as well as atheists and agnostics. And while many agnostics and atheists are happy to accept the validity of at least some forms of theism, there are many who think that all religion is just a large error, and certainly not objectively true. To base liberalism on pluralism, then, is to base it on a principle that most religious believers, and many other people, cannot accept without converting to a different doctrine.

Very different is the view that Larmore now defends. Disagreements about value under conditions of freedom, he argues, persist and do not appear to resolve themselves, unlike most scientific disagreements. Like Rawls in the important section of *Political Liberalism* entitled “The Burdens of Judgment” (pp. 54–58), Larmore tentatively suggests some reasons why this may be true of value: difficulties of weighting and ordering, differences of life experience, and so on. But this is tangential: the main thing we should understand, says Larmore, is that people do tend to disagree on these matters, and their disagreements are not caused by anything so obvious that we could easily remove it (a mistake of fact, for example). Moreover, people who think that their view is right and that other views are wrong can still accept this fact of “reasonable disagreement.”

If they do accept it, then, says Larmore, they will see that they cannot base political principles on their own view (which they think true) without doing violence to the convictions of others; they will therefore seek to found political morality on “a core morality that reasonable people can accept despite their natural tendency to disagree about comprehensive visions of the nature of value and so in particular about the merits of pluralism and monism.”

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27. In October 1995, Pope John Paul II endorsed a limited form of pluralism, granting that there were plural routes to salvation. Particularly striking was his inclusion of polytheistic Hinduism among those routes.

morality and to ground political principles in it (the view that Larmore dubs “political liberalism”) can be shared by monists and pluralists alike, so long as they admit the existence of reasonable disagreement. Larmore insists that the view does have definite moral content and is justified by some definite moral values; nonetheless, it is sufficiently abstemious, both in content and in grounding, to avoid controversial ideas of the type that divide citizens who reasonably disagree.

Rawls develops this idea much more fully. Like Larmore, he insists that the persistence of disagreements about value under conditions of political freedom should be taken as evidence that these disagreements are not based on anything like an easily identifiable mistake. He may initially seem to be accepting something like the Raz/Berlin position, but that is not so: his view is that, without taking any stand one way or another on questions of truth or adequacy, we can see that the factors that lead people to differ are complicated, difficult, and deeply rooted in their search for the meaning of life, in such a way that they are unlikely to go away without government coercion. Many different comprehensive doctrines that citizens hold are in that sense reasonable. (We shall analyze that important and slippery notion in the next section, and we shall see that, understood in one way, it does come uncomfortably close to the Raz/Berlin position; there is, however, another way of interpreting it that does not have this problem.) If we accept the burdens of judgment, then we have reason to try to ground our political principles in a set of “freestanding” moral ideas that can be accepted by citizens with a wide range of different views concerning the ultimate sources of value. Principles will be acceptable in this way only if their framers practice a “method of avoidance,” refusing to ground them in controversial metaphysical, religious, or epistemological doctrines, and not even in comprehensive ethical doctrines. Instead, they will seek a freestanding ethical justification for the principles that will ultimately form one part of the comprehensive doctrines of all of them, like a “module” (PL, p. 12), says Rawls, that attaches to doctrines of many different kinds.30 Thus

29. Here I am invoking DeMarneffe’s distinction (see note 8) to flesh out what Larmore’s discussion clearly suggests.

30. This is how doctrines would ultimately need to be defended. Rawls’s later discussions of civility add the “proviso” that one may, without violating the ethical duty of civility, invoke one’s comprehensive doctrine to defend political principles, “provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient
Rawls, like Larmore, thinks of political liberalism in terms of both limited content (it is a “module” rather than a comprehensive ideal) and limited types of grounding (it is justified in a “freestanding” way, without invoking controversial metaphysical or epistemological doctrines).31

Rawls suggests a deeper reason why citizens will endorse political liberalism and its method of avoidance, even though they may believe their own doctrine to be correct and the others incorrect. The reason is that they respect their fellow citizens, and respect them as equals.32 Their reasonableness is an ethical reasonableness: respecting their fellow citizens, they want to give them plenty of space to search in their own way, even though they may believe that the conclusions most people come to are wrong. Respect is for persons, not directly for the doctrines they hold, and yet respect for persons leads to the conclusion that they ought to have liberty to pursue commitments that lie at the core of their identity, provided that they do not violate the rights of others and that no other compelling state interest intervenes.33 Larmore does not explicitly ground political liberalism in exactly this way in his earlier work, but in interpreting Rawls he has characteristically drawn attention to the
centrality of the idea of respect in Rawls’s theory, and he has recently emphasized the centrality of respect in his own political views. It seems to me that reference to respect is necessary at this point: for why otherwise would the confident monist not be ready to go ahead and coerce fellow citizens into salvation? Just noticing that people don’t agree about such matters without coercion does not, all by itself, supply a reason against forcing them to agree.

As I (along with both Rawls and Larmore) use the idea of respect, respect for persons is not a subjective emotional state, such as a feeling of admiration. It is a way of regarding and treating persons, closely related to the Kantian idea of treating humanity as an end and never as a mere means. Respect is thus closely linked to the idea of dignity, to the idea that humanity has worth and not merely a price. Equal respect would then be respect that appropriately acknowledges the equal dignity and worth that persons have as ends. Although this idea has a definite ethical content, it has long been recognized (for example, in the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) that one may endorse it for political purposes without thereby endorsing a comprehensive Kantian doctrine or any other specific comprehensive doctrine: thus one may endorse it while believing a form of religious doctrine that Kant would not accept, or while holding a view about freedom of the will that is not Kant’s. Equal respect is a political, not a comprehensive, value; thus one might in principle accept it while continuing to believe that

35. See Larmore, “Respect for Persons”: respect is incompatible with conduct that treats “persons merely as means, as objects of coercion, and not also as ends, engaging directly their distinctive capacity as persons.”
37. See Maritain, note 39. Rawls, too, insists on the distinction between an appropriation of Kantian ethical notions for political purposes and the use of a controversial comprehensive Kantian doctrine, and he insisted on the importance of not using or even suggesting that one was using a comprehensive Kantian doctrine. Thus, in a 1998 letter about planned revisions to PL on file with the author and with Columbia University Press, he announced his intention to change the terms “practical reason” and “principles of practical reason,” because they suggest a Kantian doctrine of reason, which he calls “a serious mistake.”
persons do not deserve equal respect in religious or metaphysical respects, although such a view will contain tensions that may be difficult to negotiate.\footnote{See discussion below in note 61 and text at that point.}

Notice that this is a rather different grounding for political liberalism than the grounding supplied by alluding to the special difficulty of getting to an adequate view on matters of value. For one might think it as easy as pie to get the correct view in religious matters and yet believe that every citizen ought to have plenty of space to figure this out on his or her own. Indeed, I can’t see why someone with an authoritarian religion would think that it is terribly difficult to get the truth: all you need to do is to listen to the right authority. So it is not very surprising that some formulations of political liberalism have preferred a grounding in respect, rather than in difficulty. Jacques Maritain, for example (one might call him the first political liberal, for his work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), writes:

There is real and genuine tolerance only when a man is firmly and absolutely convinced of a truth, or of what he holds to be a truth, and when he at the same time recognizes the right of those who deny this truth to exist, and to contradict him, and to speak their own mind, not because they are free from truth but because they seek truth in their own way, and because he respects in them human nature and human dignity and those very resources and living springs of the intellect and of conscience which make them potentially capable of attaining the truth he loves.\footnote{Jacques Maritain, “Truth and Human Fellowship,” in \textit{On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961). Maritain’s own views anticipate Rawls’s in many respects. Describing the practical political agreement that produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the drafting of which Maritain worked on with thinkers from Egypt, China, and so on, he makes it evident that he thinks the agreement prescinds from sectarian metaphysical commitments precisely in order to arrive at a mutually respectful agreement among people who differ in their comprehensive doctrines. See \textit{Man and the State} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chaps. 4 and 5, especially 4.1, entitled “Men Mutually Opposed in Their Theoretical Conceptions Can Come to a Merely Practical Agreement Regarding a List of Human Rights,” p. 76. For a fine account of the work that led to the framing of the Universal Declaration, see Mary Ann Glendon, \textit{A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights} (New York: Random House, 2002).}
I am not denying that a Catholic might also accept the burdens of judgment, if he or she thought that authority pronounced only some matters, that is, that the scope of papal infallibility is narrow enough that it doesn’t answer many of life’s questions. What I want to emphasize is that one can get to political liberalism through respect alone, without alluding to the special difficulties of judgment. Of course one will then require some account of why respect for persons leads us to give people lots of space in matters of value, but not in mathematical or scientific matters. But we can develop, I believe, an account of the human centrality of searching for ultimate meaning that would deal with that question, namely, why it is especially violative of persons to impose a scheme of value upon them, but not violative to impose upon them the truth of $2 + 2 = 4$. I do not propose to attempt that here. But in my own appropriation of the Rawlsian idea of political liberalism, I focus on the core idea of respect for persons, rather than on the burdens of judgment.40

Why, one might ask, should we suppose that respect for persons supports political principles that do not endorse the truth of any particular comprehensive doctrine of the good? Don’t we take people seriously and treat them as ends in themselves when, in conversation, we do insist on the truth of views that we believe we can defend? Sometimes, indeed, it may be more respectful to lay our cards on the table rather than avoiding confrontation. Here we may give two responses, both pointing to features of political life. First, in the case of personal friendship, it will always be a delicate contextual matter when, and to what extent, and how to insist on the truth of one’s own comprehensive doctrine. Some ways of doing this are compatible with respecting that person as an equal, some are not. But it seems likely that the boundaries of acceptability cannot be given in advance: perceiving them requires a delicate sense of context and relationship. In the political domain, of course, this nuanced appreciation of particular relationships is not available when government sends a message. Second, and more importantly, when it is government that sends the message, that changes the message, because government defines one’s life-opportunities in a pervasive and fundamental way. So if government endorses the view that Christianity (say) is best, that sends a message that the framework of liberties and

40. In *Women and Human Development*, *Frontiers of Justice*, and *Creating Capabilities* (see note 4); see also *Liberty of Conscience*.  

opportunities shaping all citizens’ lives will have the superiority of Christianity woven through them, in a way that marginalizes or demotes other views. This, of course, would not usually be the case when a Christian attempts to convince a friend of the superiority of the Christian way of life. Thus the argument for political liberalism depends, in part, on an appreciation of the deep and pervasive role of the political in all citizens’ lives.

At this point we can conclude that there is a route to liberal ideas of toleration and religious freedom that does not require the acceptance of a controversial and religiously divisive principle of pluralism. Whether that route takes the form of accepting “burdens of judgment” or the form of developing a doctrine of respect for conscience, or whether it combines the two ideas in some way, the conclusion can plainly be reached without accepting anything like the Berlin/Raz principle of pluralism.

Traditional historical forms of liberalism have not seen the problem involved in perfectionist liberalism. Neither utilitarianism nor the Hegelian/Aristotelian perfectionist liberalism of T. H. Green makes any gesture in the direction of respect for diverse comprehensive doctrines. In large part, this has happened because liberal thinkers have been strongly opposed to traditional religion, and have seen their own liberal doctrine as a replacement for religion. Bentham and Mill were atheists who would have viewed the demise of organized religion with no regret at all, and who thought it was perfectly proper for the state to encourage its demise by favoring a secular alternative, though not by interfering with individual freedom of choice.41 Green’s perfectionist neo-Aristotelian doctrine was intended, similarly, as a replacement for doctrines that, in his view, were less adequate. I think we see more clearly

41. Mill repeatedly expresses enthusiasm for Auguste Comte’s idea that an atheistic doctrine of extensive sympathy (given extensive state sponsorship, although not coercively enforced) would come to replace existing religions: see in particular Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1891; reprinted from original of 1861); “The Utility of Religion,” in *Mill, Three Essays on Religion* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998); Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 3, in John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York and London: Penguin, 1987). Mill criticizes many specifics of the Comtean program, but he considers Positivism (whose central tenet is that humanity has reached a postreligious age) a philosophical achievement on a par with the work of Descartes and Leibniz (see *Auguste Comte*, p. 200). One might argue that in other writings Mill expresses ideas that are more compatible with political liberalism; that exegetical issue will not occupy me here. Both Rawls and Larmore treat Kant as the holder of a comprehensive perfectionist doctrine, but, once again, that is a controversial exegetical claim that is irrelevant to the argument of this article.
today, and we understand that respect for one’s fellow citizens as equals requires not building the state on the ascendancy of any one particular comprehensive doctrine of the purpose and meaning of life, however excellent. Of course it remains the case that respect is for persons, not for their doctrines. But these doctrines are so deeply a part of people’s search for the meaning of life that public governmental denigration of those doctrines puts those people at a disadvantage, suggesting that they are less worthy than other citizens, and, in effect, not treating them as fully equal ends in themselves. Liberals do not need to make such denigrating statements.

IV. RAWLS: REASONABLE CITIZENS, REASONABLE COMPREHENSIVE DOCTRINES

At this point, we have a highly abstract idea, but we do not yet know how to formulate political principles embodying it for societies in which many different comprehensive doctrines exist. Both Rawls and Larmore insist that political principles for such a society are not neutral, inasmuch as they have a definite moral content (given in large part by the central commitment to equal respect as a political value). The “overlapping consensus” that Rawls hopes may ultimately be achieved is thus a substantive moral consensus, not just any chance kind of overlap. Indeed, he argues plausibly that no consensus would be stable if it did not rest on substantive moral notions in this way. But this moral ideal means that not every comprehensive doctrine anyone might happen to hold will participate in the overlapping consensus. At this point, both Rawls and Larmore introduce a notion of the “reasonable” to divide comprehensive doctrines into two groups, those that will and those that will not become participants in the hoped-for consensus, affirming the society’s basic political principles.

We must now pause to explore what “reasonable” means, as applied to comprehensive doctrines, since much hangs on this, and it is here, as we shall see, that a difficulty lurks. For Larmore, the distinction between “reasonable” disagreements and other disagreements has considerable importance in motivating the structure of the view. Similarly, an important feature of Rawls’s analysis in *PL* is his distinction between “reasonable” and “unreasonable” comprehensive doctrines. In both cases, there is a hidden difficulty that we must confront. I begin with Rawls, since it is
no easy matter to clarify his view. I shall later turn more briefly to Larmore. In each case I shall recommend a preferred alternative of my own that is one possible reading of Rawls’s text, though probably not of Larmore’s.

Rawls’s account of the “burdens of judgment” emphasizes the fact that people disagree about matters of ultimate value and adhere to different comprehensive doctrines not simply on account of irrationality or sloppy thinking, but on account of factors that make the disputes between them cases of “reasonable disagreement.” To say this is to recognize “the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life” (PL, p. 56). The sources of reasonable disagreement mentioned by Rawls (pp. 56–57) include: the complexity and difficulty of the relevant evidence; the fact that the evidence by itself does not tell us how to assign weight to different considerations; the indeterminacy of central concepts in hard cases; the fact that assessment and weighting of evidence is shaped by different life experiences; the existence of normative considerations on both sides of an issue; and the need for any social system to select from the full range of human values that might be realized. People who differ on account of these factors differ reasonably; or, to put it another way, reasonable citizens can, and do, disagree for such reasons. “This pluralism is not seen as disaster but rather as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions. To see reasonable pluralism as a disaster is to see the exercise of reason under the conditions of freedom itself as a disaster” (pp. xxvi–xxvii). Many comprehensive doctrines can be reasonable in this sense (p. 129).

Rawls recognizes that there are also unreasonable comprehensive doctrines and unreasonable disagreements, doctrines that cannot form part of the “overlapping consensus” because they do not accept some of its central ideas (such as the equality of persons). Some unreasonable doctrines may be silly and innocuous. But Rawls recognizes that there are doctrines that are “not only irrational but mad and aggressive” (p. 144). Among them are doctrines that “reject one or more democratic freedoms” (p. 64, n. 19). Such doctrines do not form part of the overlapping consensus. Rawls’s highly protective doctrine of free political speech suggests that their speech may be limited only in the sort of emergency that amounts to a constitutional crisis. Nonetheless, the
constitutional order will have entrenched the major liberties, and thus doctrines that propose the elimination of one or more of these liberties cannot come up as simple legislative proposals. In general, the job of a liberal society must be one “of containing [such doctrines]—like war and disease—so that they do not overturn political justice” (p. 64, n. 19).

It is clear enough, then, that the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines is central to Rawls. But the reader is left with several difficult questions. The first pertains to Rawls’s way of articulating the distinction. Throughout the book, including the section on “the burdens of judgment,” the term “reasonable” is used in an ethical sense: “reasonable” persons are those who are willing “to propose fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them provided others do”; a second aspect is a willingness to recognize the burdens of judgment and “to accept their consequences for the use of public reason in directing the legitimate course of political power in a constitutional regime” (p. 54). (Rawls appears to assume that these two descriptions do not come apart: people who are willing to propose fair terms of cooperation are also ready to accept the burdens of judgment.) This second aspect is also ethical: the reasonable citizen does not try to enforce her own comprehensive doctrine through law, out of a recognition of the burdens of judgment and a related respect for her fellow citizens. Both aspects of the reasonable appear to be closely connected with the idea of respect, whose centrality in Rawls’s whole enterprise is clear. More generally, throughout the text, in contrasting the “reasonable” with the “rational,” Rawls clearly uses “reasonable” in this ethical sense; although, as Samuel Freeman has convincingly argued, there are “epistemic elements” in this usage, and Rawls relies on these “to some degree.” But that does not yet settle the issue of how Rawls uses “reasonable” as applied to comprehensive doctrines, and here I agree, once again, with Freeman, who concludes that “Rawls defines ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines’ epistemically, as doctrines that are responsive to evidence and possess certain other theoretical features.” Let us investigate this textual issue more closely: it is very complex.

42. On the importance of the notion of “fair terms of cooperation” for Rawls, see Larmore, “Public Reason,” p. 391.
44. Ibid. Freeman does not, however, discuss the difficulties to which this shift gives rise.
At times, Rawls connects the idea of a reasonable comprehensive doctrine very closely to the idea of the reasonable citizen: reasonable comprehensive doctrines are “the doctrines that reasonable citizens affirm” (p. 36). But Rawls later suggests that he does not intend this characterization as a definition, or at least not as a complete definition, of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. On page 59, having already assumed that “reasonable persons affirm only reasonable comprehensive doctrines,” he then states, “Now we need a definition of such doctrines.” His definition includes three features, all of them theoretical rather than ethical. First, a reasonable doctrine is “an exercise of theoretical reason” that “covers the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner. It organizes and characterizes recognized values so that they are compatible with one another and express an intelligible view of the world.” Second, the doctrine is also an “exercise of practical reason” that gives instruction on how to weigh values and what to do when they conflict. Third, such a doctrine, while not necessarily fixed and unchanging, “normally belongs to, or draws upon, a tradition of thought and doctrine” and therefore tends to evolve “slowly in the light of what from its point of view . . . it sees [as] good and sufficient reasons” (p. 59). Rawls explicitly distinguishes these sources of disagreement from a variety of sources of “unreasonable disagreement” (p. 58).

This “definition” may be intended by Rawls as a way of elaborating the second aspect of the “reasonable” in the ethical sense, namely, “the willingness to recognize the burdens of judgment and to accept their consequences for the use of public reason.” Nonetheless, it incorporates some fairly strong theoretical criteria, however vaguely stated, that are not obviously entailed by this second very general idea as originally stated. The theoretical criteria raise some troublesome questions. As we shall see, they carry Rawls uncomfortably close to the Raz/Berlin position, adding an unnecessary element, or at least risk, of perfectionism to Rawls’s view.

The problem with Rawls’s formulation is that there would appear to be many doctrines affirmed by reasonable citizens (in the ethical sense, respectful of one another) that do not meet these rather exacting theoretical standards. Worldviews based on astrology, New Age religion, and many other pictures of the world that many Americans affirm probably fail to satisfy all three criteria: some may lack coherence and
comprehensiveness, some may be impervious to evidence (as many ancient thinkers held concerning astrology), some may be too fanciful or piecemeal to contain what we could call an “intelligible” view of the world. (Much, clearly, depends on how we further interpret Rawls’s criteria.) Many Americans hold even weirder doctrines: a large proportion believe that aliens have invaded, and this somehow forms part of their view of life. Rawls might well be willing to call all such antiscientific doctrines unreasonable, given his view that the major conclusions of science form part of public reason. That would already raise difficult questions, since citizens who affirm an antiscientific doctrine can still be reasonable in the ethical sense.

But if we look closely at some key doctrines of many of the major religions, they too generate problems, which we may fail to notice only because the doctrines look so familiar. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity seems straightforward enough; and yet, as numerous Christian philosophers emphasize, it asks the believing Christian to believe a contradiction. Dante, in \textit{Paradiso}, vividly depicts this doctrine as a way of humbling the arrogant aspirations of the intellect. As Dante contemplates the Trinity and tries to hold this idea in his mind, he compares himself to a geometrician who tries to square the circle, and finds that he cannot. The human intellect simply cannot encompass the mystery.\footnote{\textit{Paradiso}, canto 23; compare \textit{Purgatorio} canto 31, lines 13–21, where Dante compares himself to a bow drawn too tight and therefore broken, using Aristotle’s metaphor for intellectual aspiration to show that this aspiration to understanding must be humbled before Christian love.} The doctrine of the Trinity may be interpreted in ways that soften this problem, but central strands of Christianity, at any rate, emphasize the importance of departing from the most fundamental axiom of reason. Nor is this a case that one might easily isolate from the rest of Christian doctrine: it is a premise in most concrete arguments that the believer will make or learn. It would be implausible, then, to describe this doctrine as “more or less consistent and coherent.” Indeed, its whole purpose is to violate consistency and coherence in order to humble reason. In other words, it is not just from the point of view of a nonbeliever that a key doctrine of Christianity looks irrational: its irrationality is absolutely key to its theological meaning and purpose. Modern Christians often forget how radical a doctrine this humbling of the intellect is, because they are
used to the idea of the Trinity and find it easy to pay lip service to it without trying to grasp something that the human mind is not equipped to grasp.

Another locus of irrationality in traditional Christianity is the doctrine of grace: for on at least some standard accounts (for example, Augustine’s), God’s grace is not based upon any reasons at all, and yet must be acknowledged to be just. Once again, it would be difficult to shoehorn this Augustinian view into the theoretical account of the reasonable, as Rawls articulates it. It appears to violate both the first and the second criteria of (theoretical) reasonableness, on any plausible interpretation. If these problems exist in fitting Rawls’s criteria to the scholastic strand in Roman Catholicism, which is the most rationalistic strand of traditional Christianity, they exist all the more when we contemplate Christianity in its Protestant and evangelical forms, especially those that ask the believer to defer to the biblical text, which it would be most implausible to describe as a coherent and consistent whole; moreover, fundamentalist Christians (unlike believers in other eras) do not propose strategies of nonliteral interpretation that soften or remove inconsistencies.

Traditional Judaism, while to some extent more rationalistic than Christianity, similarly contains the demand to accept a mystery that is in principle not graspmable by reason. The end of the book of Job, for example, contains a vivid repudiation of the aspirations of Hellenic rationalism, which has given rise to a prominent mystical strand in Judaism, exemplified by Gershom Scholem and the Hasidic rabbis. Moreover, many forms of Judaism contain a principle of autonomy that causes it to run afoul of Rawls’s second doctrine: there are no in-advance instructions for hard cases, precisely because each person must figure out what to do for him- or herself: the law is not in heaven, but on earth (Deut. 30:12–14). Reform Judaism has augmented the scope of that principle, so that autonomy altogether trumps dogma, and we might say that in the end Reform Judaism has no doctrines (perhaps not even theism, although this is disputed), only the core idea of the moral law, which each believer must interpret and apply to the world in his or her own

way. For religious doctrine to provide any theoretical structure seems to Reform Jews to violate autonomy.\footnote{For discussion of some key historical texts, see Martha Nussbaum, “Judaism and the Love of Reason,” in Philosophy, Feminism, Faith, ed. Marya Bower and Ruth Groenhout (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 9–39.} This still looks like a comprehensive doctrine, but it does not count as a reasonable one, according to Rawls’s definition. It does not even instruct believers to develop consistent and coherent solutions of their own that satisfy Rawls’s first and second criteria; and it actively repudiates the third (tradition-based) criterion, assigning to tradition no moral weight at all.

One could multiply examples. What is clear, then, is that Rawls has introduced a massive difficulty by defining reasonable doctrines in terms of these theoretical criteria, a difficulty that pertains not only to doctrines that he might be willing to disparage as unreasonable (although I think he shouldn’t), but also to doctrines that are central to his whole motivation and purpose. Moreover, his definition seems to run afoul of one of the core ideas of the text, the idea of respect for reasonable citizens. So long as people are reasonable in the ethical sense, why should the political conception denigrate them because they believe in astrology, or crystals, or the Trinity? Why not let them, and their beliefs, alone? Indeed, the theoretical interpretation of the reasonable, while not equivalent to the Raz/Berlin position, moves too close to it for comfort, allowing public denigration of a group of comprehensive doctrines that, from the point of view of the ethical aims of the political conception, are unproblematic.

It is revealing, and a sign of the depth of the problem, that an interpreter who worked especially closely with Rawls, in a lecture whose aim was to describe clearly the key ideas of \textit{PL}, ascribes to Rawls the doctrine that I have just suggested he ought to hold:

\begin{quote}
A reasonable comprehensive doctrine can be irrational—you can be like Tertullian and say, “I believe because it is absurd.” All a comprehensive doctrine has to do to be reasonable is to endorse a liberal political conception. But outside of that it can hold anything it wants.\footnote{Burton Dreben, “On Rawls and Political Liberalism,” in The Cambridge Companion to Rawls, ed. Samuel Freeman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 326.}
\end{quote}

Burton Dreben, who gets Rawls right on every other issue, so far as I can see, plainly is at odds with some key portions of the text on this one (and
Freeman’s close study of the text concurs). But he is not at odds, I suggest, with the deeper spirit of Rawls’s project and the centrality of the notion of respect in it. Perhaps Rawls really should have used the notion of the reasonable citizen to *define* reasonable comprehensive doctrines: reasonable doctrines are just those doctrines (however piecemeal or ridden with inconsistency) that reasonable citizens affirm. The burdens of judgment might then still enter into the thinking of such citizens when they think about why they should not insist on the truth of their doctrine in the public realm. But that is enough use for them: reasonable citizens should not be in the business of looking over the shoulders of their fellow citizens to ask whether their doctrines contain an acceptably comprehensive and coherent exercise of theoretical reason. Such scrutiny, besides inviting the *tu quoque* that the New Ager or the friend of astrology might rightly give to a mainstream Christian, is a kind of invidious interference that has no place in respectful political liberalism.

Of course, it is perfectly clear that citizens in Rawls’s Well-Ordered Society will be welcome to criticize other people’s comprehensive doctrines, religious or secular, in the many discussions that take place within the “background culture” (civil society and informal personal interactions). They do not even have a political duty to be civil when they do so; Rawls’s “duty of civility” pertains only to discussions of “constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice” that take place within the framework of certain key political roles (e.g., those of judge, legislator, and voter). Thus citizens have a moral duty not to vote against someone because they don’t like that person’s religion, but even that is a nonenforceable moral duty. What Rawls wishes to rule out is that the state would make statements (or incorporate principles) denigrating one religion or doctrine and preferring another, so long as the doctrine in question is “reasonable.” “Unreasonable” doctrines may be denigrated, and the state is permitted, perhaps required, to incorporate principles that denigrate it. What I am saying here is that this is fine, so long as the definition of the reasonable is the ethical one, thus licensing the state to criticize, for example, doctrines that believe in slavery or the political subordination of women. What seems very problematic, however, is to license the state to criticize doctrines that are “unreasonable” in the theoretical sense. If I want to believe something silly, or to subordinate my judgment to that of some irrational authority, it is not the business of a pluralistic society to state that I am in any sense inferior for so doing.
Why did Rawls include the theoretical criteria in his definition of the notion of reasonableness? Like every point in Rawls concerning which one might think him mistaken, this one has deep roots in his thought and good arguments in its favor. Rawls plainly thinks that the kind of respect on which liberal democracy depends requires, or is at least greatly aided by, distinguishing between doctrines that are just silly or in some obvious way irrational and doctrines that are not; holders of doctrines in the latter group do not agree because of the burdens of judgment, problems of reason common to all human beings under conditions of freedom, and thus problems that do not compromise mutual respect.\(^{49}\)

Holders of doctrines in the latter group will feel differently, he suggests, about holders of doctrines in the first group: they will think that if these people had corrected the errors in their reasoning, they would be maintaining the same thing that we maintain. (And then what: would they become inclined not to treat them with equal respect?) He does not devote much discussion to the large number of real people, reasonable in the ethical sense, who hold doctrines that he himself would probably rank in this category, such as New Ageism or astrology. Perhaps if he did discuss these cases he would be willing to maintain that citizens who affirm them are unreasonable, thus sticking to the theoretical criteria he has advanced; but one might well feel that such a judgment shows too little respect for reasonable citizens (in the ethical sense). What dooms the whole project of offering theoretical criteria for reasonableness, however, so far as I can see, is the fact that the major religions, his central cases, and the ones whose adherents he most wants to persuade, fail to meet them, and fail for reasons that, in the case of Christianity, go deep: a repudiation of theoretical reason that lies at the heart of that religion’s account of faith, in at least some central instances.

Were Rawls to adopt the suggestion I have made, he would probably need to articulate his account of the burdens of judgment as a series of historical or sociological observations about modernity, rather than as a basis for the normative distinction between reasonable and unreasonable doctrines.\(^{50}\) He could simply say, then, that we must all recognize

\(^{49}\) Similarly, the idea that it is very difficult to arrive at the correct view in such matters, even using one’s reason in the best possible way, is fundamental to at least one strand in Locke’s defense of toleration.

\(^{50}\) And so it is also not clear whether the account of “reasonable” persons would need to be correspondingly revised: it might be that only the condition having to do with fair
that disagreement is sometimes the result of free institutions, and that we should all recognize that we can engage in respectful social cooperation without reaching agreement on religious matters.\(^{51}\) That would be a high price for him to pay, in terms of the theoretical ambitions of the program he and Charles Larmore share, because it would drop the pivotal distinction between mere error and more respect-worthy sources of disagreement. I myself feel that it is not too high a price: for by paying that price we purchase a wider and more inclusive notion of respect. It just doesn’t seem right for citizens to be looking into other citizens’ religions and asking how reasonable they are, provided that the doctrines they hold are reasonable in the ethical sense that is involved in the public political conception.

Rawls appears to make a decisive move in the direction I favor in the section discussing overlapping consensus; for here he states that one way the movement from a mere *modus vivendi* to an overlapping consensus takes place is through the fact that citizens typically have “a certain looseness in [their] comprehensive views” (p. 159): “Most people’s religious, philosophical, and moral comprehensive doctrines are not seen by them as fully general and comprehensive” (p. 160), and this fact allows for “slippage,” as citizens come to endorse the political conception, often “without seeing any particular connection, one way or the other, between those principles and their other views” (p. 160). These important observations are not applied back to the account of the burdens of judgment or to the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines, but they do at least indicate that Rawls is prepared to interpret his theoretical criteria very loosely. At any rate, readers must sort this out for themselves.

Larmore’s text contains a similar problem, which I shall treat more briefly. Like Rawls, Larmore plainly thinks that it is important to distinguish reasonable disagreements from other sorts of cooperation would survive, and that having to do with the burdens of judgment would drop out. For illuminating discussion on this point, I am grateful to Erin Kelly.

\(^{51}\) Rawls appears to take this line in IPRR, his latest statement on this question: see pp. 573–74: a plurality of conflicting doctrines is “the normal result” of a culture of free institutions, and “[c]itizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines.”
of disagreements.52 He offers an account of the “burdens of reason” that is similar to Rawls’s, listing a variety of factors that may prevent people from arriving at agreement. He notes that we do not yet have an account of why disagreement in matters of value should be so pervasive, while scientific disagreement is less ubiquitous. He says that he does not have an explanation of this difference.53 But he insists that it is important to distinguish reasonable disagreement from skepticism: the parties to disagreement may be able to offer reasons for their views, and those reasons may satisfy a high standard. It is not because people don’t have good arguments for their views that they do not agree. In particular, Larmore is determined to reject the idea that people stick to their views in the face of disagreement because of “faith.” “Our allegiance [to our view] may be much more than a matter of faith.”54 Shortly thereafter, he says that we do not need to consider these allegiances “as but an article of faith.” So it would seem that a disagreement counts as reasonable for Larmore only if both parties base their allegiance on arguments, and not simply on faith.

I think that this demand for a particular sort of grounding for a view is disrespectful to religious citizens who think that faith is a very good basis for their views, in fact the best basis. While attempting to articulate a version of liberalism that does not rest on controversial metaphysical or epistemological doctrines, he imports just such a doctrine into the very statement of the view. Rawls is at least torn in this matter; Larmore seems not to be at all torn. He clearly thinks faith a lesser source for a view than reasoned argument, and he seems not to think this a problem for a political view that wishes to show equal respect for all people.

52. For Larmore, this is the pivotal distinction; unlike Rawls, he does not focus theoretical attention on the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines, although he would very likely consider this a closely related distinction.

53. Larmore, “Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement,” p. 171. In his 2005 article “Respect for Persons” (cited in note 34), Larmore explicitly states that for him “reasonable,” as applied to comprehensive doctrines, is not a notion that flows directly from the notion of equal respect; he casts aspersions on that sort of view, saying, “naturally little is accomplished by definitional maneuvers.” His own definition of “reasonable” there is “rather abstract,” involving “exercising the basic capacities of reason and conversing with others in good faith.” An earlier account is “thinking and conversing in good faith and applying, as best we can, the general capacities of reason that pertain to every domain of inquiry.” Thus he would seem to favor a definition that is at least partly theoretical, and only minimally ethical.

My solution to this problem is that we remember that respect in political liberalism is, first and foremost, respect for persons, not respect for the doctrines they hold, for the grounding of those doctrines, or for anything else about them. It is because we respect persons that we think that their comprehensive doctrines deserve space to unfold themselves, and deserve respectful, nonderogatory treatment from government (whatever treatment they receive from citizens in the “background culture”). For a public official in a leading role to say “X’s doctrine is not as well grounded as Y’s” is, inevitably, to denigrate X, and we want our political principles to show equal respect to X and Y. We must, then, avoid defining “reasonable” in a way that denigrates the grounds of some people’s doctrines: to do otherwise is to violate the very abstemiousness toward controversial epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that political liberalism rightly asks us to insist upon.

Therefore, let’s stick with the ethical definition of “reasonable.” A “reasonable” citizen is one who respects other citizens as equals. A “reasonable” comprehensive doctrine is one endorsed by such a reasonable citizen, that is, including a serious commitment to the value of equal respect for persons as a political value. Beyond that, it is just nosy and impertinent for the state or its agents to inquire into the basis of people’s religious adherence. Whether it be tradition-based, authority-based, argument-based, faith-based, or based in nothing but its allure, a religious doctrine deserves to be called “reasonable” if and only if it is the sort of doctrine that can be endorsed by a reasonable citizen. The object of respect is the person and the person’s faculties (conscience, for example). We need say nothing much about the differences among the comprehensive doctrines (apart from ruling out some as incompatible with equal respect), and we certainly should avoid a ranking of the type that Larmore, and at times Rawls, seem to suggest.

V. THE CASE FOR POLITICAL LIBERALISM

Consider the many religious and secular views of life that currently exist in modern societies. Many if not most of them cannot accept Raz’s idea that autonomy, understood as Raz understands it, ought to be a moral ideal. Some religions allow their adherents more autonomy and some less; but very few valorize it as Raz does. (Moreover, as we’ve said, few religions accept Berlin’s moral pluralism, a view that Raz thinks
presupposed by the morality of autonomy.) As for secular views of the good life, most of those are not terribly pluralistic either. Many Marxists do not think that non-Marxist views should even be tolerated, although this point is contested; certainly a serious Marxist cannot grant that the major religions and the comprehensive ethical doctrines of bourgeois morality are all objectively true.\textsuperscript{55} Utilitarians typically hold that Kantian and Aristotelian views are not even acceptable, and they certainly do not believe them objectively true. Many holders of secular views do not think of religious views as acceptable, and they certainly do not think them true. Ditto with the view religious believers take of secular doctrines.

Raz, then, and to all appearances Berlin want to build liberal society on a set of views that virtually none of its members actually holds. In Berlin’s case, one can see what he is reacting against: the danger to human liberty that comes from excessive dogmatism about one’s own ideal. But he does not appear to realize that his own pluralist alternative, espoused as a political principle, would have equally dangerous consequences. In the section of \textit{On the Social Contract} entitled “Of the Civil Religion,” Rousseau creates a state religion that contains something like Berlin’s pluralism, in the form of a doctrine of “theological toleration”: one cannot hold that one religion is correct and others incorrect. Rousseau believes that civil peace requires such a theological belief, and it may be that Berlin holds something like this. Both, in the service of toleration, as they understand toleration, require of all citizens something that virtually none of them can believe without abandoning their religion. Rousseau knows very well that his civil religion will prove unacceptable to Roman Catholics and to many if not most varieties of Protestantism. He is prepared to banish adherents to such views if they will not drop them in favor of the civil religion. Raz and Berlin make no such draconian proposal, but they do insist on building the state on principles that a large proportion of its citizens cannot accept.

That is a strategic problem clearly. It is difficult to see how a liberalism of that sort could remain stable, unless religious citizens really do something like what Rousseau wants, dropping their religion in favor of the

\textsuperscript{55} Is Marxism a reasonable comprehensive doctrine in Rawls’s sense? Not if it requires endorsing the legitimate use of violence and the suspension of political liberties; but there are versions of Marxism, both in philosophy (G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster) and in politics (the Marxist parties of India and some parts of Europe) that do seem to qualify as reasonable.
liberal state doctrine. It’s not surprising that Rousseau foresees a large role for banishment in his society. The problem, however, is graver yet: it is a problem of respect. When the institutions that pervasively govern your life are built on a view that in all conscience you cannot endorse, that means that you are, in effect, in a position of second-class citizenship. Even if you are tolerated (and it is not too clear from Raz’s paper to what extent the major religions would be tolerated), government will state, every day, that a different view, incompatible with yours, is the correct view, and that yours is wrong. Moreover, as Raz explicitly said in discussion of his paper,\textsuperscript{56} government will be licensed to try to convert you to the correct view. This is what I would call “expressive subordination,” subordination that consists in being publicly ranked beneath others.\textsuperscript{57}

Expressive subordination is a form of religious establishment. The fact that Raz’s view is secular makes no difference to that conclusion. And it is wrong for the reason that religious establishment is always wrong: it offends against the equality of citizens. It tells them, to quote James Madison, that they do not all enter the public square “on equal conditions.”\textsuperscript{58} This conclusion apparently does not trouble Raz: if they do not accept the fact of pluralism and the ideal of autonomy, it is fine to treat them unequally. But it troubles me, as it troubled Larmore and Rawls. It is because many people think that Raz’s sort of comprehensive liberalism is the only viable form of liberalism that they also think that liberalism is not neutral about the good life, but is a form of religion in its own right.

But Raz’s liberalism, as we’ve seen, is not the only form of liberalism. For one may develop a form of liberalism that begins from the idea of equal respect for persons. One then reasons that equal respect requires not setting up any one of the available forms of life as the ideal, but,

\textsuperscript{56} Law-Philosophy Workshop, The University of Chicago, 2008. Even though Raz does not state this in MF, it seems to be a natural consequence of the theoretical importance he gives to the broad acceptance of these views.

\textsuperscript{57} Of course, on the view I hold, individual citizens and groups of citizens in the “background culture” will be free to try to convert others to their view: the phobia about conversion that has led some Indian states to restrict proselytizing has no place in political liberalism. The point is rather that government cannot be the agent of this process without establishing a hierarchy.

instead, requires prescinding from any such ranking of lives. Seeing how, under conditions of freedom, people do not agree about values, we ought to show respect for those “reasonable disagreements” by basing our political principles on a thin and abstemious view, one that abstains from controversial metaphysical, epistemological, and comprehensive ethical claims. The view will have a moral content, clearly: but the hope is that its moral content will be acceptable to all the major comprehensive doctrines, a kind of “module,” as Rawls puts it, that they can all attach to their own views of life. It is thus the object of an “overlapping consensus” among all the major views. This hope can be realized only if we (when speaking in a political role) carefully avoid making perfectionist claims in the manner that Raz does, or even—I think—claims about reasons in the way that Larmore and, at times, Rawls do. We will not say that autonomy makes lives go better in general, and we will not endorse moral pluralism. We will also not say that it is better to offer arguments for your view than to hold it out of faith. But we will show respect for citizens by creating and protecting spaces in which they can live according to their own views.

Rawls and I would insist that there is a cousin of autonomy that must figure in such a view: for real freedom to live according to one’s own view also requires protecting the spaces in which people may leave one view and opt for another, and also the spaces in which children learn about options so that they can really live their own lives. That sort of thing Rawls calls “political autonomy.”\(^59\) It is not, however, the same thing as Raz’s autonomy, because no announcement is made by the state that lives lived under one’s own direction are better than lives lived in submission to some form of religious or cultural or military authority.\(^60\) Of course in Rawls’s state no cultural authority is allowed to coerce people, and they must always be free to enjoy their fully equal rights as citizens, including the free choice of occupation and freedom of religion. But the Roman Catholic, or the member of the Old Order Amish, can still feel that the political view, by protecting spaces within which they claim

59. \(PL\), pp. xlv–xlvi.

60. No state really says this, because every state needs military defense, and presumably Raz would not deny this. His state, then, would have to say, “It is fine to subordinate your autonomy to the service of your country, but not to religious authority,” a statement even more problematic than a blanket condemnation of all nonautonomous lives.
authority, respects them and does not denigrate them, as would not be the case with Raz’s comprehensive view of autonomy.

Political autonomy is not entirely neutral: it has a definite view about the ingredients of good political life, including a respect for argument and the public exchange of reasons. In that sense, it does not aim at the type of politics that some of the comprehensive doctrines might favor for themselves, were they to establish a theocracy with no internal pluralism. Such, however, is not the condition of modernity, and believers are aware of this. Given that they share a common political life with others who differ, they can see the requirements of political autonomy as respectful of them, understanding the political as a realm of difference governed by mutual respect, whereas they could not accept autonomy of Raz’s sort, prescribed as a comprehensive value. It might be that citizens who grow up with political autonomy might in time long for autonomy in the rest of their lives: thus, as Rawls mentions, it is possible that his ideal will put more strain on some doctrines than on others. But here we should agree with Rawls: showing that all doctrines will have an equally easy time gaining adherents over time is not required to show that the political view is one that respects citizens as equals.61 (Moreover, the sociological/psychological speculation may prove untrue: political autonomy might make at least some people long for control and intellectual security in other parts of their lives.)

It has become evident by now that the major religions can in fact accept Rawlsian political liberalism, though they cannot accept Raz’s perfectionist liberalism. Roman Catholics, for example, can agree with Rawls that we must ground toleration in a view of equal respect for persons. Such a person will still think that her religion is true and others false; but respect for persons requires protecting the space in which each lives by her own lights. So we get wide toleration, but without expressive subordination.

Political liberalism does not avoid stating that some ethical and religious doctrines are unacceptable, as we have seen. For its political principles do have a moral content, prominently including the equality of

61. See PL, p. 199: “Political liberalism is unjustly biased against certain comprehensive conceptions only if, say, individualistic ones alone can endure in a liberal society, or they so predominate that associations affirming values of religion or community cannot flourish, and moreover the conditions leading to this outcome are themselves unjust, in view of present and foreseeable circumstances.”
citizens and the importance of equal respect. Such ideas will be deeply entrenched in a society’s constitution. So the proponent of slavery, or gender hierarchy, will not get equal treatment in that society: the life he wants to lead offends fundamental constitutional norms, so he would have to amend the constitution to be able to live it. Nonetheless, Rawls holds that such a person will enjoy wide liberty to speak and act, so long as he is not violating the rights of others.62

Why might one prefer Raz’s view to Rawls’s? One reason, which seems to be that of both Berlin and Raz, is a deep conviction that their moral ideal is correct and important, and that any good society should recognize this fact. I have argued that they pay too high a price for what we might ironically call their “pursuit of the ideal”: the price of denigrating and expressively subordinating many citizens who are willing to live with others on terms of equality and reciprocity.

Another reason for preferring perfectionism (although it is not that of Berlin and Raz) might be a deep rationalism. To some people—and it appears that Kant and Mill were among them63—the main thing that has been wrong with most societies is that they have based their political principles on irrational deference to tradition or authority; the right thing to do, in order to correct this baneful tendency, is to ground political principles in a comprehensive rationalism. To such people it just seems unacceptable that the state should limit itself to saying that rational argument is central in political life: surely faith is always and everywhere worse than argument. Such people will acknowledge that Rawlsian politics puts evidence and rational argument in the driver’s seat in the political realm:64 but the failure to recommend reason over faith more globally seems like a large failure. Can it really be the case, for example, that teachers in public schools (who are therefore agents of government) can recommend argument over faith only for the purposes

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62. PL, pp. 340–56. In such a case, the person would be unreasonable in the ethical sense, as would her doctrine; but the state will take no action, provided that she is not violating the rights of others or causing a threat of upheaval.

63. Although, once again, exegetical controversies about the interpretation of Kant and Mill are irrelevant to my argument here.

64. On the delicate question of how the political conception will advance a norm of objectivity without becoming a comprehensive doctrine, see Nussbaum, “Political Objectivity, New Literary History 32 (2001): 883–906, interpreting and defending Rawls’s view.
of citizenship, and not as the best way to approach life’s problems in general? That seems to the rationalist intolerable.

I have been confronting this opponent throughout the article by pointing to the connection between equal respect for persons, on the part of the state, and a refusal to endorse any one comprehensive doctrine. And I think that the reply to the outraged question is “yes”: teachers in public schools should not say that argument is better than faith as a general way of solving all problems in life. To say that is to denigrate students who are members of nonrationalist religions. They may certainly say that in contexts where citizens of many different views debate about fundamental matters, rational argument is crucial. They may also commend it as part and parcel of a particular enterprise, such as scientific proof. But they should not say, “Live your life by reason and not by faith.” Secular rationalists would not agree, but I am not sure how to envisage the next stage of the argument here.

There is another argument that leads back to comprehensive liberalism, and I believe that it is stronger than the rationalist argument. One might reasonably believe, and argue, that most of the views around in most societies are racist or sexist, or hierarchical in some other way, and that only a comprehensive perfectionist view, accepted as the basis of the state, could really get rid of their baneful political influence. The objector would try to show that hierarchical views are typically irrational, based on stereotypes that cannot stand the light of rational argument. They flourish when deprived of that light, but wither when exposed to it. Thus in societies that promote tradition and authority over reason they are likely to prove strong, whereas a comprehensively rationalist society can effectively combat them.

This view, too, was apparently held by Mill. In *The Subjection of Women*, he argues that the stereotypes about gender difference that keep women subordinated just won’t stand up to the test of

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65. It is not clear whether Rawlsian duties of civility apply to such people: one could argue that they do; given the pervasive influence of public education on all of one’s life as a citizen, schools are part of the basic structure. But even if one should resist this idea, and thus hold that it is morally permissible for teachers to make statements defending comprehensive rationalism, one should certainly insist that the teacher point out that the nation in which pupils and teacher live is not built upon the truth of comprehensive rationalism, so that teacher is simply arguing from her own comprehensive doctrine, not from public values.
evidence and argument. Thus they will wither away when exposed to argument. Mill knows that it will be hard enough for argument to prevail against traditional opinion; but he then deplores the fact that his society is losing the confidence in reason that characterized eighteenth-century society. “For the apotheosis of Reason,” he writes, “we have substituted that of Instinct; and we call everything instinct which we find in ourselves and for which we cannot trace any rational foundation.” Thus, even if good arguments are made against stereotypes, they will fail to get a hearing in a culture that is generally dismissive of argument.

The late Susan Moller Okin, a distinguished feminist political theorist, and an editor of Mill’s *Subjection*, rejected Rawls’s political liberalism for such reasons: she thought most religions and traditional cultures were sexist to the core, so the only way to make progress was to do away with them, insofar as we could, by public persuasion. Since freedom of speech would not be suppressed, the only way to give public discouragement to religion would seem to be the endorsement of a comprehensive perfectionist doctrine including, prominently, women’s equality in every


67. Mill certainly wants both culture and law to change; how far he believes it right for government to promulgate a comprehensive doctrine of women’s equality—by contrast with specific political reforms that he evidently favors—remains unclear, and therefore I do not address it further here.

68. Susan Moller Okin, “Political Liberalism, Justice and Gender,” *Ethics* 105 (1994): 23–43; *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 9–24, and the longer version, “Feminism and Multiculturalism: Some Tensions,” *Ethics* 108 (1998): 661–84. Okin’s central discussion concerns the “founding myths” of ancient Greco-Roman religion, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but her theoretical claim is much more sweeping: “much of most cultures is about controlling women and maintaining gender roles” (“Feminism,” p. 667). A similar statement appears in the shorter version: “most cultures have as one of their principal aims the control of women by men” (*Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, p. 13). As the Ethics paper unfolds and she engages with theorists who discuss examples from other religions (e.g., Kymlicka’s discussions of the religious practices of indigenous minorities and Kukathas’s general reference to “immigrant cultures”), she similarly broadens the scope of her critique. (The book version, similarly, discusses native practices in Peru and in traditional African religion.) In “Feminism,” note 17, she explicitly endorses a claim by two feminist scholars that “[t]raditions have always been a double-edged sword for women. Subordinate economic and social status, and restrictions on women’s activity and mobility are embedded in most traditional cultures.” While Okin usually does not distinguish between religion and culture, her lengthy discussions of the four religious “founding myths” place an emphasis on religion as a medium of control.
sphere of life, not simply in the public culture. Okin thought that Rawls asked too little of the religions when he simply asked them to accept the full equality of women as citizens, but did not ask them, for example, to accept the theological or eschatological equality of women. I see her point. Although I do not accept her argument, and although I believe she misunderstands Rawls at some points, her argument seems to me the best one against Rawls’s form of liberalism. One should insist that the political realm (including the public schools) will itself be entitled to use rational argument to undermine demeaning stereotypes. But one should probably concede that in the absence of thoroughgoing culture reform, this intervention is likely to achieve its results more slowly and with greater difficulty. I think that the best line of defense for Raz would be to focus on such cases.

I do not think Okin is correct about religion: I think by now most of them have participated in debates about sex equality and movements toward sex equality on a par with the rest of their cultures, shifting their comprehensive doctrines in keeping with the shift in the views about public culture that they share with their fellow citizens. Few have shown more resistance to change than the cultures that surround them. (So too with most secular comprehensive doctrines, which have also been sexist.) Some have even been in advance of their surrounding cultures. More importantly, though, I also think that politics has no business talking about the afterlife or who should be a priest. (Political liberalism is closely related to Locke’s idea about the proper jurisdiction of the civil realm. The relationship between these two doctrines deserves further study.) However, I see enough force in the considerations raised by Okin (and Mill) that I think that the debate between political and comprehensive liberalism is a deep one, and it ought to continue until we understand all the options and issues as well as we can. We should therefore all

70. Even in those cases where a religious hierarchy still espouses overtly sexist doctrines—as, for example, with the refusal of the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women—the laity and large parts of the clergy, in the United States at any rate, favor change, so it should not even be said that the Roman Catholic religion is per se opposed to sex equality. Clearly, however, the centralized and international character of the Roman Catholic Church poses special difficulties for change, since the public cultures of the nations from which many of its members are drawn do not fully support the equality of women.
be immensely grateful to Raz and Berlin, for giving us a version of the perfectionist alternative that is as clear and thorough as any that we’re likely to see for some time.

VI. POLITICAL LIBERALISM: AN EXAMPLE

Berlin suggests that perfectionist liberalism is necessary because the comprehensive doctrines that do not accept liberal principles of toleration and autonomy will destabilize liberal society. Raz argues that perfectionism is necessary for toleration, which he describes as involving the curbing of hostile or negative tendencies: so he too raises questions of stability. I have suggested that perfectionist liberalism of the sort they advocate is disrespectful, and that political liberalism can prove stable, provided that the holders of the various comprehensive doctrines care sufficiently about respect for persons. It helps, then, to see that there are forms of political liberalism that exist and that hold viable democracies together. Of course none exists in a Rawlsian Well-Ordered Society where the two principles of justice are fully implemented; but both might be said to be at the stage of “constitutional consensus” that Rawls sees as a station on the road to overlapping consensus.

There are quite a few examples one might give. The constitutions of both India and South Africa provide very interesting examples of how a commitment to respect for persons can be translated into a constitutional scheme that is “freestanding” in Rawls’s sense, that is, grounded in no divisive religious or metaphysical doctrine, but only in a working practical commitment to human dignity and human rights. For the sake of illustration, however, let me focus on just one example, the treatment of religion under U.S. constitutional law.

The American colonists were all too familiar with the fact that differing ideals, and each group’s “pursuit of the ideal,” frequently led to the subordination of others: to banishment, to punishment, to exclusion from political office. They were therefore moved not only to defend religious liberty in the new nation, guaranteeing all citizens the “free exercise” of their religion, but also, as time went on, to oppose all religious establishments. Establishments were worst when they threatened

71. See MF, pp. 401–2.
72. See PL, pp. 158–63, for the idea of a “constitutional consensus.”
73. I have treated this example extensively in Liberty of Conscience.
liberty, penalizing people for nonorthodox worship, or forcing them to affirm orthodox sentiments that they might not believe, or attaching conditions of religious orthodoxy to a person’s civil rights or ability to hold office. It was quickly understood, however, that even an apparently benign establishment fosters inequality by making a statement that the government of the nation endorses a particular brand of religion. This endorsement is at the same time, inevitably, a disendorsement, creating an in-group and an out-group. Madison said, we recall, that “all men are to be considered as entering into Society on equal conditions,” and he believed that even a noncoercive establishment violates that equality. Madison was speaking, in 1785, in opposition to a proposal to tax all citizens of Virginia for the support of the established Anglican Church. According to the exceedingly mild proposal, citizens who were not Anglicans would be permitted to divert their tax payments to their own churches. Nonetheless, Madison thought that the bare announcement that the Anglican Church was the state church created ranks and orders of citizens. In 1984, discussing the U.S. Constitution’s ban on religious establishment, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor recapitulated the long Madisonian tradition:

The Establishment Clause prohibits government from making adherence to a religion relevant in any way to a person’s standing in the political community. . . . Endorsement sends a message to non-adherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community. Disapproval sends the opposite message. (Lynch v. Donnelly, 1984)

According to Justice O’Connor’s very helpful analysis, the right question to ask of any potentially problematic policy in the area of religious establishment is the following one: would an objective observer, acquainted with all the relevant historical and contextual facts, view the policy in question as one that makes a public statement of endorsement or disapproval, sending a message of inequality?

74. By “sends the . . . message,” O’Connor presumably means that the policy in question, by communicating government’s approval of a particular comprehensive doctrine selected among others, is reasonably understood to make a statement that this doctrine is preferred by government, and that its adherents, therefore, by living the life that government prefers, are a privileged in-group of citizens.
Although there are many accounts of the purpose and meaning of the Establishment Clause, I believe (and have argued) that the Madison/O’Connor formulation goes to the heart of the matter.75 Fundamentally, the clause is about equality, the equal standing of all persons in the political realm. It expresses equal respect. It says that no comprehensive doctrine gives one person claim to respect that another does not have. The Establishment Clause, then, sets up a form of political liberalism. Raz could not accept it, because he would like to establish controversial sectarian principles of a perfectionist nature, principles that would not be acceptable to believing members of most existing religions. The religious would exist in the very condition of expressive subordination described by Madison and O’Connor: they would be an out-group, told by the statements of their government and its leaders that theirs is a disfavored view.

Of course no such idea can develop utterly without political and interpretive controversy. But on the whole, this idea of nonsubordination, and the concomitant idea of nonendorsement, has exerted a powerful influence on both law and politics more generally, and has allowed the members of diverse doctrines to live together without having to think that the political principles of the nation in which they live either endorse or deny their religious doctrines. It gives those who pursue the ideal in their own different ways a meeting place that denigrates none of them; and it offers this same meeting place to the secular humanist who holds a comprehensive doctrine of autonomy, as does Raz. It does seem to give the people of an overwhelmingly religious nation such as the United States a basis for attachment to core political principles that would not have been provided by any form of perfectionism: for any perfectionism would either establish one religion at the expense of others or would establish a secular principle (such as Bentham’s utilitarianism or Raz’s autonomy) at the expense of the doctrines held by a vast majority of this nation’s people.

Berlin clearly felt the need for some meeting ground that could hold people of a diverse society together. Given his endorsement of the metaphysical, and controversial, principle of pluralism, however, he was able to give only a very thin account of this common ground, in the form of “a minimum without which societies could scarcely survive” (PI, p. 15). He

mentions only a few such propositions: the wrongfulness of slavery and ritual murder, of “the Nazi gas chambers or the torture of human beings for pleasure or profit or even political good—or the duty of children to denounce their parents . . . or mindless killing” (p. 15). I think this ground is so minimal that it is dubious that it can provide an account of stability for a liberal society. To my mind, political liberalism’s account of the common ground is superior, because it incorporates much more substantive and organizing ethical notions, such as that of equal respect, and the political principles that flow from that.

If political liberalism is superior to perfectionist liberalism on ethical grounds, as I have argued, and if it does better even on the issue of stability, we can have no reason not to prefer it overall.