POLITICS, THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION, AND THE MODERN WEST:
ENVISIONING POLITICAL LIBERALISM THROUGH AN ARENDTIAN LENS

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Political Science
2014
This thesis entitled:  
Politics, the Judeo-Christian Tradition and the Modern West: Envisioning Political Liberalism  
through an Arendtian Lens  
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
What role should religion play in the political deliberations and decisions of liberal democratic citizens? In light of recent political phenomena such as Quebec’s proposed ban on the wearing of religious symbols in 2013, the constant theocratic threat posed by the religious right as perceived by the secular left and libertarian right in the United States, or the 2009 banning of minarets in Switzerland, this is a pressing question for modern democracy. In this dissertation I argue that religious citizens should be allowed to make recourse to comprehensive accounts of their positions in political debates and decisions, but that these accounts should not dominate these debates and decisions in accordance with the principle of respect for persons. The Judeo-Christian tradition was its source in the West, but respect for persons took political shape following the Wars of Religion that plagued Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries CE. Through the gradual political affirmation of the principle of respect liberal democracies emerging out of these wars experienced the proliferation and multiplication of fundamentally opposed worldviews. What these worldviews shared was and continues to be the affirmation of this principle, and recognition of this fact creates the possibility of liberal democratic political respect, or concord, across fundamental difference. In the liberal democratic world citizens are equalized by their shared affirmation of the principle of respect for persons. My claim is that the principle of political respect allows for expression of the fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews that overlap in affirming the principle of respect in political debates and decisions and that the principle of respect depends on their continually being freely expressed in order to retain its normative force in politics. Drawing heavily on Arendt’s writings on religion and morality, I conclude that, despite the supposedly “secular” character of liberal democratic politics, the principle of respect for persons must be rooted in exemplary embodiments of
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I don’t feel any loyalty to Christ. I may feel a loyalty to Jesus, because that is indeed an example, what Jesus did, and his whole life, the logoi, and all the stories, this can indeed become an example.

-Hannah Arendt (Bernauer 1987, 15)

[The Church] must not underestimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul’s teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1967, 211)

In the following dissertation I explore an important, but relatively neglected, aspect of Arendt’s work and its relation to the later work of John Rawls, combining them with an historical account of the relationship between the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions to answer the question of what kind of role religion should play in the political deliberations and decisions of liberal democratic citizens. I come to the conclusion that, although not central to their work, certain aspects of religion potentially play a far greater positive role than is generally assumed in the literature on their political thought. In light of recent political phenomena such as Quebec’s proposed ban on the wearing of religious symbols (echoing laïcité in France) in 2013, the constant theocratic threat posed by the religious right as perceived by the secular left and libertarian right in the United States, or the 2009 banning of minarets in Switzerland, this is a pressing concern for modern democracy.
The thesis of this dissertation is that religious citizens should be allowed to make recourse to comprehensive accounts of their positions in political debates and decisions, but that these accounts should not *dominate* these debates and decisions in accordance with the principle of respect for persons. The Judeo-Christian tradition was its source in the West, but respect for persons took political shape following the Wars of Religion that plagued Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries CE. Through the gradual political affirmation of the principle of respect, at first reluctantly in the attenuated form of the principle of toleration, liberal democracies emerging out of these wars experienced the proliferation and multiplication of fundamentally opposed worldviews. What these worldviews shared was and continues to be the affirmation of this principle, and recognition of this fact creates the possibility of liberal democratic concord across fundamental difference. Throughout the dissertation, when I refer to political respect, equal respect, or mutual respect, as opposed to respect for persons, I mean concord. Thus, while many principles may equalize citizens, signifying civic friends, in accordance with the character of the world within which these citizens find themselves, in the liberal democratic world citizens are equalized by their shared affirmation of the values of freedom and equality, and, most importantly, the principle of respect for persons both of these values reflect in their modern form. My claim is that the principle of political respect *allows for* expression of the fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews that overlap in affirming the principle of respect in political debates and decisions and that the principle of respect *depends on* their continually being freely expressed in order to retain its normative force in politics. Drawing heavily on Arendt’s writings on religion and morality, I (no doubt controversially) conclude that, despite the supposedly “secular” character of liberal democratic politics, the principle of respect for persons must be
rooted in exemplary embodiments of morality, which I claim are “religious” insofar as they transcend the limits of politics. Jesus of Nazareth is the example to whom Arendt points, but his need not be the only one.

It should be clear that the vision of liberal democratic politics I am putting forth in the following pages is not one characterized by citizens exclusively relying on wholly “secular,” “neutral,” or “postmetaphysical” language in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns, but neither is it characterized by exclusive reliance on language that is wholly comprehensive. Instead, the language used in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns may be comprehensive so long as it affirms the exemplary told and enacted stories constitutive of a political tradition guided by the principle of respect for persons. Reasonable comprehensive doctrines, in light of this vision, are fundamentally irreconcilable attempts to affirmatively get the stories of these examples straight. They are attempts to give an account of that which moves us to care for the other (sentience, reason, reflecting God, etc.) in ways that may require denial of the primacy of one’s self.

The liberal democratic world, so conceived, is both culturally and politically characterized by what Rawls calls the “fact of reasonable pluralism.” This is the fact that liberal democracies are characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. (2005, xvi)
In later work Rawls acknowledges the importance of articulating comprehensive doctrines in public debates and decisions over political concerns with his “proviso.” The proviso states that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussions at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support. (2005, 462)

Both definitions need some serious conceptual unpacking, especially concerning the term “reasonable,” and a good portion of Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to my unorthodox interpretation of this term. All I need note at this point is that a comprehensive doctrine can be understood as an account of what it is good to be, no single reasonable comprehensive doctrine is definitively correct, and all reasonable comprehensive doctrines can have political import so long as the proviso is met. What all of this means is that immanent or postmetaphysical accounts of what it is good to be do not exhaust all possible options.¹ For example, every public attempt to interpret the story of an event without reference to God is immediately confronted with other attempts to interpret the same event with reference to God and vice versa. Neither a wholly immanent, nor a wholly transcendent, account can signal the last word in the world as it is at present. Rawls is theorizing politics for this world, the liberal democratic world, which is a world caught in this precarious point between these various accounts. He calls it an “overlapping consensus”: the precarious point where liberal political conceptions of justice derived from the principle of respect for persons, including justice as fairness, reside.

¹ Cf. “The decisive element is not the waning of metaphysical and religious worldviews (though that has occurred). It is instead the recognition that such worldviews, as well as the recurrent postmetaphysical efforts to do without them, are an enduring object of reasonable disagreement” (Larmore 1999, 615).
This account of the liberal democratic world as teetering between immanence and transcendence is not only found in my peculiar reading of Rawls. We might say this is a variant of what Steven K. White calls a “weak ontology,” wherein comprehensive doctrines must be articulated but are always also contestable (2000, 8). Indeed, I think Charles Taylor’s – himself advancing a weak ontology according to White (ibid, Chapter 3) – depiction of the “crosspressures” we experience as liberal democratic citizens offers a similar account of the character of our world I see put forth by Rawls.

What we share is what I have been calling ‘the immanent frame’; the different structures we live in: scientific, social, technological, and so on, constitute such a frame in that they are part of a ‘natural’, or ‘this-worldly’ order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the ‘supernatural’ or ‘transcendent’. But this order of itself leaves the issue open whether, for purposes of ultimate explanation, or spiritual transformation, or final sense-making, we might have to invoke something transcendent. (2007, 595)

The key words in the last sentence are “open” and “might.” The transcendence that “might” account for ultimate explanation or whatever is not final, incontestable, or unreasonable, but one that leaves the issue “open.” Taylor resists finality, closure, or sovereignty when offering the “best account” of what it is good to be because it is always provisional.2 Indeed, he is quite open to the possibility that the transcendence that might account for ultimate explanation also might not (1989, 74). In its provisional status between immanence and transcendence, the liberal democratic world is “anatheistic.” The term, coined by Richard Kearney, is a combination of the

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2 For a depiction of Taylor’s work as unreasonable see Skinner (1991, 147-9). For a depiction of Taylor’s work as a pursuit of sovereignty see Markell (2003, Chapter 2).
Greek *ana*, which Kearney translates as “return,” and *theos* (God). Anatheism is the condition of possibility for returning to God after God. He describes it thus,

> anatheism differs from dogmatic atheism in that it resists absolutist positions against the divine, just as it differs from absolutist positions of dogmatic theism for the divine. It is a movement – not a state – that refuses all absolute talk about the absolute, negative or positive; for it acknowledges that the absolute can never be understood *absolutely* by any single person or religion. (2010, 16)

It leaves open the possibility “of divine kenosis, the appreciation of the mystical moment of nothingness that precedes the breakthrough to a mystical epiphany of renewal” (137). There is always a risk involved in opening one’s self to renewal as well as closing one’s self off to it. There is no certainty in anatheism, only faith in, hope for, and love of the impossible possibility of renewal in the midst of despair. What best accounts for these epiphanies, especially when they accompany moral action? Any answer to this question will always fall short of epistemic certainty.

Before providing a map for the road ahead, I want to briefly defend my choice to rely primarily on the work of Rawls and Arendt. As a political liberal, Rawls is not willing to completely sever politics from morality, as evidenced by his continued preoccupation with justice and its political realization. Caring about political moralism is what distinguishes political liberals from more atomistic or libertarian liberals. Indeed, it could be argued that the latter is a perversion of the former, taking the sense that the other has an inalienable claim on me and turning it into me having an inalienable claim on the other. The stance of welcoming hospitality becomes the stance of oppositional antagonism. Further, what distinguishes Rawls from other political liberals is a vision of politics, following the addition of the *proviso*, which is
far more receptive to deep pluralism than other political liberals like Charles Larmore would be willing to allow. I rely on the work of Arendt, on the other hand, because I believe it ends precisely where Rawls’ begins. That is, whereas Rawls begins with the world as a given and theorizes what is necessary to ensure stability for the right reasons, Arendt begins with worldlessness as a given and theorizes what is necessary to create a space where stability *simpliciter* might be achieved. Arendt is a theorist of political respect and Rawls is a theorist of the right kind of political respect. It is their shared concern for the stability of the world that relates and equalizes citizens, and the political role narrative plays in stability’s achievement for both, that allows Arendt and Rawls to speak to each other.

The dissertation progresses as follows: Chapter 2 presents a challenge to the narrative pervading political liberalism, deliberative democratic theory, and agonal democratic theory that construes religion – explicitly or implicitly the Judeo-Christian variant – as politically problematic. Political liberals contend that politicized religion causes cruelty, deliberative democrats contend that politicized religion creates a barrier to the rationalization of discourses necessary for democratic legitimation, and agonal democrats contend politicized religion creates a barrier to the immanent possibilities of political contestation. Using an alternative historical narrative, I argue that all three theories miss the mark in their criticisms. Political liberals miss the mark in construing the Judeo-Christian tradition in wholly negative terms, when the historical evidence clearly indicates a nuanced role in bringing about liberal democracy. Deliberative democrats and agonal democrats miss the mark because they work within a faulty conception of the liberal democratic world as fundamentally without any reference to transcendence. The liberal democratic world is not one where all such references are summarily privatized or
depoliticized, but one where no single comprehensive doctrine, religious or non-religious, *dominates*. As such, the fact of reasonable pluralism grounding political liberalism seems to best reflect the character of the liberal democratic world.

Chapters 3 and 4 are explorations of the development of Rawls’ thought in the face of the fact of reasonable pluralism. Chapter 3 explores how the Kantian metaphysical presuppositions of *A Theory of Justice (TJ)* reflect an avoidance, rather than a love, of the world. This avoidance creates three problems for *TJ*: the problem of nihilism, the problem of reflective equilibrium, and the problem of stability. The problem of nihilism is the problem of seeing considered convictions, which are the building blocks of Rawls’ theory, as lacking a worldly ground. The problem of reflective equilibrium is the problem of being unable, once the problem of nihilism is overcome, to reach reflective equilibrium because the values of freedom and equality that considered convictions affirm are essentially contested concepts. The problem of stability is the problem of being unable, once the problem of reflective equilibrium is overcome, to ensure that citizens will prioritize justice over other goods in their public deliberations and decisions concerning politics given the varying comprehensive doctrines they affirm.

Chapter 4 argues that Rawls’ later turn toward a world fundamentally characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism resolves all but the problem of stability. Rawls claims that considered convictions are rooted in certain fundamental ideas self-evident to the common sense of liberal democratic citizens. The liberal democratic world is constituted by enacted and told stories of exemplary manifestations of the values affirmed by its citizens: freedom is made manifest in the practices of toleration that slowly followed the peace treaties signed across 17th century Western Europe, equality is made manifest in the practices of public deliberation and
decision-making about political concerns seen in the Athenian *polis* and the Roman Republic, and the fact that both values reflect the principle of respect for persons in liberal democracies is made politically manifest in exemplary debates and decisions inspired by the Declaration of Independence. Continued enactment and telling of the stories of these examples cultivates and preserves common sense among liberal democratic citizens, and a political conception of justice is grounded in the fundamental ideas self-evident to this common sense. Because a political conception of justice is at root grounded in the narratively constituted world, rather than some point without the world, the problem of nihilism is resolved. The problem of reflective equilibrium is resolved by shifting the focus from correct definitions of the values of freedom, equality, and the principle of respect for persons reflected in liberal democratic considered convictions to correct identification of the exemplary stories that cultivate and preserve liberal democratic common sense through being continually told and enacted. While the *proviso* to translate comprehensive reasons for prioritizing these examples into public ones almost overcomes the problem of stability, it cannot be derived from the story Rawls tells of comprehensive pluralism as, primarily, a political problem, rather than the condition of possibility for the stability of the liberal democratic world.

Chapters 5 and 6 look to Hannah Arendt’s work on politics and religion to amend political liberalism’s shortcomings. Chapter 5 is an exploration of Arendt’s conception of politics as it relates to political liberalism, arguing that Rawls can overcome the problems confronting the *proviso* in Chapter 4 by acknowledging that the exemplary practices constitutive of the liberal democratic world will endure if explicitly affirmed by a plurality of worldviews. Pluralism is not a threat to liberal democratic stability on this account, requiring the discipline of
an authoritative and static conception of public reason, but a condition of stability’s possibility. Modern politics is the activity of preserving a public space where cultured human relations may appear to a plurality of interpretive perspectives. By moving multiple generations of citizens affirming fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews to interpret them, these cultured human relations become stable, constitutive, and, most importantly, exemplary parts of the liberal democratic world. These worldviews may be fundamentally irreconcilable, but they overlap in their affirmation of the common world’s exemplary constitutive parts.

Chapter 6 begins by noting that the Arendtian solution to the problem of stability seems to take the moral dimension out of political liberalism. Her exclusive concern is stability simpliciter rather than stability for the right reasons, and a condition of stability’s possibility is pluralism rather than reasonable pluralism. At best her account of politics avoids the senseless cruelty and domination of totalitarianism, but it does not necessarily stand in opposition to cruelty and domination as such. This opposition rests, I argue, on the principle of respect for persons reflected in the liberal democratic conviction that those subject to cruelty or domination should be defended regardless of their willingness or ability to be fellow citizens. In order for this kind of respect to be politically possible within Arendt’s theoretical framework it must be embodied in an example that is both great because it lastingly appears through its story being continually told and enacted, and good because inspired by a love of goodness. Because an actor can never lastingly appear good within Arendt’s framework, this kind of example ought to be politically impossible. Yet, Arendt sees this possibility in the “profoundly paradoxical” example of Jesus of Nazareth. I conclude suggesting that reasonable comprehensive doctrines are
fundamentally irreconcilable attempts to interpret, or straighten out, the enacted and told stories of exemplary manifestations of moral action, like Jesus’ life, that transcend political possibility.

To be clear, I am not claiming Arendt is a political liberal, but that, at most, she is able to fill a few holes over which political liberalism still trips. Her work clarifies the conditions of political stability as resting in the constitution and preservation of a public space where political freedom may become a worldly reality through telling and enacting life stories guided by the ever-accruing traditional stock of exemplary stories. Further, she points to a possible way of realizing political stability, so construed, for the right reasons in her writings on the exemplary goodness of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus’s story is the exemplary ground of the principle of respect for persons that pervades liberal democratic common sense, and reasonable comprehensive doctrines are attempts to offer an account of the sensed goodness that moved Jesus, and move those actors who continually re-enact Jesus’ story, to care for things regardless of how they appeared. The criteria of goodness these comprehensive doctrines identify are many and fundamentally irreconcilable, but what they share in common is a source that falls outside of the scope of politics. Their continued articulation in public debates and decisions over political concerns in liberal democracies signals the stable affirmation, or overlapping consensus around, the principle of respect for persons. As long as this is the case, stability for the right reasons, and therefore the realization of liberal political conceptions of justice like justice as fairness, is a real political possibility.
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Introduction

Simply said, all of our modern fables of liberation, in all their often contradictory diversity, have sprung up in the shadow of the very particular Western history of the Gospel’s proclamation. Resistance to or flight from the authority of the law – or, rather, a sense of the law’s ultimate inadequacy, or even nullity against us – has from the first been a vital part of the moral sensibility of the Gospel. And in every modern demand for social and personal recognition as inherent rights, there is at least a distant echo of Paul’s proclamation of the unanticipated “free gift” found in Christ.

-David Bentley Hart (2013)

“How does it feel to be a problem?” With these words W.E.B. Du Bois sets the tone of *The Souls of Black Folk* (951). It was the question implied by every inquiry into the experiences of emancipated black men and women in America at the turn of the 20th century. To be a “problem” was partly to be both an outsider or a stranger and an insider or a citizen in the world. Black men and women were in a position of perpetual transience, lacking a place in the world because a part of them never quite fit. As a consequence, this lack of fit was internalized. It was not just that white citizens saw black citizens as both different in their blackness and same in their citizenship, but black citizens saw themselves as both stranger and citizen, Black and American.
The sense of wrongness that accompanies the realization that one does not quite fit in the world reflected for Du Bois, and continues to reflect, a human predisposition. Most of us are predisposed to love the world, we are born to be citizens, and when the world fails to reciprocate this love by refusing to fully incorporate us we experience this refusal as a real tragedy. This experience is not necessarily limited to racial stranger-citizens. It extends to the strangeness of ethnic, religious, gender, class, etc. social differences as well. Calls for worldly justice and/or public recognition (the two are not wholly separable) from these stranger-citizens are always, in part, calls to change the world such that it can be more receptive to their love.

The problem with which I am presently concerned is not race, but religion. In liberal democracies religion is a political problem. At least, many of the most visible contributors to the public debates and philosophies of these political systems claim it is. We know religion is a problem because the atrocities of September 11th, 2001 were committed by religious individuals, because religious codes create a barrier to public recognition of non-dominant genders, identities, and practices, because the sources of religious authority have been scientifically disproven, because religious authority itself stands in the way of human autonomy, etc. In other words, religion is a political problem because it threatens our way of life as citizens who value a modern set of basic liberties and their fruits. Our liberal democratic world, insofar as it always reflects this valuation, cannot quite incorporate religious citizens.

A counterargument to this claim becomes immediately evident. Are not many active citizens, in the United States and elsewhere, devout believers who also value these things? These citizens see no need for worldly recognition qua religious because the religious aspects of their identity are either wholly private or politically inconsequential. That is, these citizens do
not pose a political problem because they do not insist that the world incorporate them *qua* religious, or when they are inspired by their religion to act they do so in a manner that translates this inspiration into a language other citizens who do not share their inspirational source could accept before acting. Religion is politically irrelevant in either case. In the former, it is just one politically inconsequential preference among many: she likes to go to church, he likes to eat anchovies on his pizza, and so long as preferences for church and anchovies do not directly translate into law and public policy there is no serious political threat. In the latter, while religion inspires the act in question, a reason other citizens could accept for the action can serve the same function. On this account the religious source is not politically inconsequential, but it is politically unnecessary.

But what is it, exactly, about politically relevant and consequential religion that threatens modern basic liberties and their fruits? In Section I, I explore three interpretations of this threat as presented by three schools of contemporary democratic theory: political liberalism, deliberative democratic theory, and agonal democratic theory. In each interpretation, the Judeo-Christian tradition is either implicitly or explicitly understood as the problematic religion in question. In Section II, I present an alternative story to the one grounding these interpretations in order to bring their depictions of the problem into question. While recognizing the problematic consequences of combining the Judeo-Christian tradition’s universally applied ethic with the Greco-Roman tradition’s universally oriented ethic, the alternative story shows how the Judeo-Christian tradition can also be seen as a vital and constitutive part of the liberal democratic political tradition. In Section III, the three interpretations of the political problem of religion are reassessed in light of the alternative story. The story confirms and denies aspects of each
interpretation. I conclude suggesting that the Judeo-Christian tradition, and religion more
generally, poses a good problem in that it refuses to submit certain good commitments – in the
case of Judeo-Christian theism, love and justice as responses to God’s call – to political
contestation or universal agreement. Rawlsian political liberalism, with the assistance of the
alternative narrative presented, is the only school of contemporary democratic theory willing and
able to acknowledge such commitments. The promise of Rawls’ approach, amended with an
alternative narrative, warrants further exploration of the role religion plays in his work.

Section I: Three Interpretations of the Problem

In this section I explore three different interpretations of the political problem of religion
as put forth by political liberals, deliberative democrats, and agonal democrats. Religion,
explicitly or implicitly understood as the Judeo-Christian tradition in the canon of Western
political theory, poses a political problem for political liberals because it perpetuates cruelty,
deliberative democrats because it threatens democratic legitimacy, and agonal democrats because
it closes citizens off to the immanent possibilities inherent in political contestation for the sake of
a monotheistic transcendence. I explore each variant of the problem below, focusing on the
work of John Rawls and Mark Lilla for political liberalism, Jürgen Habermas for deliberative
democratic theory, and William Connolly for agonal democratic theory, using the work of other
theorists I place in each camp for purposes of clarification.

a. Political Liberalism
I assume political liberalism (the kind of liberalism that is the focus of this essay) is primarily concerned, out of respect for the human person, with the avoidance of domination. As a form of domination, cruelty is, as Judith Shklar (2004, 156) puts it, the *summum malum* – the greatest evil – of this political liberalism. It consists of the arbitrary, and therefore dominating, imposition of physical and emotional pain. Liberal and democratic values, on Shklar’s account, are either constitutive of non-cruelty, useful for the avoidance of cruelty, or both. The work of John Locke, especially his “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” could be considered an early, albeit explicitly religious, variant of this view. In any case, it is this focus on avoiding cruelty that distinguishes political liberals like Shklar, the John Rawls of *Political Liberalism* (*PL*), Charles Larmore (1996; 1999), and Mark Lilla (2008) from perfectionist liberals such as the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (*TJ*), Joseph Raz (1988), and Ronald Dworkin (2013) who offer variants of a *summum bonum* – the greatest good – that complements and, at times, trumps the *summum malum* depending on what each conceives cruelty to entail.\(^3\) In addition to avoiding cruelty, many political liberals take it as a fact that active religious involvement in politics is a cause of cruel laws and policies.\(^4\) Consequently, their theories seek to “domesticate or neutralize the impact upon political life of religious commitment” (Beiner 2011, 3). They level religion to the status of, at best, one politically inconsequential or unnecessary preference among others in the hopes of avoiding the *summum malum* of cruelty.

Still, it is not clear that political liberalism’s fear of politicized religion is anything other than an ungrounded prejudice. What evidence is there that religious political involvement tends

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\(^3\) See Nussbaum (2011) for an assessment of the merits of political liberalism over perfectionist liberalism.

\(^4\) Larmore is, I think, somewhat of an exception.
toward the creation of cruel laws and policies, and how do we explain this relationship? Citing the cruelties we typically associate with the Middle Ages (the Inquisition), the Wars of Religion (peasant rebellions, mass celebrations of public torture and execution, systematic destruction of cultural artifacts), or the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center, many political liberals claim that these events are linked to the authoritative texts and leading figures in every religion that prescribe unreasonable suffering, or suffering beyond what reason would ever allow. In the hopes of squashing jihads, crusades, or traditional moral codes they advocate the political privatization and/or depolitization of religion. For example, Mark Lilla (2008) notes the relationship between religion and “pointless confessional hostilities” (297) like the Wars of Religion. A messianic impulse latent in the Abrahamic religious tradition pervading the West explains the relationship, and this impulse is kept at bay only through continual critical engagement by citizens trained to solely rely upon their self-disciplined reason (307). John Rawls also cites the Wars of Religion as evidence of the relationship between religion and cruelty. These wars were the result of modern (post-Reformation) Christianity’s introduction “into people’s conceptions of their good a transcendental element not admitting of compromise” (PL xxvi), an element we still see in liberal democracies today. In order to avoid the future onset of the kinds of conflicts caused by the persistence of plural religious and non-religious conceptions of the good, he contends that citizens must exercise their political power in accordance with the “reasonable.”

While there are important differences between them, political theorists like Lilla and Rawls overlap on their explanations of, and solutions to, the political problem of religion. They begin their explanation of the problem by recounting the birth pangs of political liberalism: the
cruelties committed during the European Wars of Religion. These wars – especially the Thirty Years War – were caused by hostilities between Protestants and Catholics, each trying to establish their own confession as the one true faith. This pursuit of confessional sameness led to seemingly endless and humanly unbearable suffering. Out of a shared recognition that religious pluralism was the cause of their woes, and that each confession was unwilling to revise its doctrines in light of the others, various treaties sprung among European peoples to tolerate religious differences. The principle of toleration retained its normative force because of the fact of religious pluralism that constituted the world. This principle, over time, moved from its initially attenuated form the more other-regarding form of the principle of respect for persons that continues to be affirmed today, which, beyond cruelty, seeks to avoid domination as being subject to the arbitrary rule of others in all its forms. As such, whenever liberal democratic citizens exercise political power for the sake of religious purposes that could not be accepted by all other citizens they violate the political manifestation of this principle: the principle of political respect. If the violation of the principle of political respect is not good enough reason to translate one’s language, the wars that sprung from the fact of religious pluralism can be cited as evidence that the inevitable cruelty resulting from this exercise will be intolerable for anyone who takes the principle of respect for persons seriously.5 The evidence supplied by the Wars of Religion

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5 The first instance of the Supreme Court of the United States making reference to the Wars of Religion to justify rejection of religious reasons in public discourse can be found in Justice Felix Frankfurter’s majority opinion in Minersville School District v. Gobitis (1940), which upheld the constitutionality of forcing children to recite the pledge of allegiance even if it violated their religious convictions. Frankfurter writes that the First and Fourteenth Amendments function to “guard against repetition of those bitter religious struggles” (Cavanaugh 2009, 184). Thankfully, the decision was reversed in West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette (1943). However, similar uses of the Wars of Religion to justify limiting religious involvement in politics can be found in, for instance, Justice Hugo Black’s majority opinions in Everson v. Board of Education (1947) and Engel v. Vitale (1962) as well as many others (ibid. 185-94).
acts as a good reason to morally condemn and possibly legally prohibit politicized religion. Citizens who deny that this evidence provides good reason to tolerate religious difference and exercise political power for the sake of religious purposes are unreasonable. To be reasonable, then, is to affirm the principle of political respect, itself rooted in the principle of respect for persons, in light of the story of its historical origins. For political liberals, the political problem of religion can be solved through publicly deliberative, legislative, and administrative acts of reasonable discipline. This solution, if it is to work in a liberal democracy, presupposes that either a majority, or an influential minority, of citizens are already reasonable. Once either condition is met, the political problem of religion may be kept at bay.

b. Deliberative Democrats

According to deliberative democrats there is ample evidence that our liberal democratic world has, with increased exposure to rational criticism over time, become increasingly reasonable. What they mean by reasonable, however, differs from the definition provided by political liberals. To be reasonable is not to be guided by the principle of respect and the story of its origins, but to engage in critical public debates that presuppose an orientation toward mutual agreement. Citizens who engage in these kinds of debates exercise communicative power. For deliberative democrats, principle does not precede practice. Instead, principle and practice co-originate. Further, while a reasonable majority or politically influential minority proves sufficient for avoiding cruelty for political liberals, deliberative democrats are not primarily concerned with avoidance of this summum malum. Instead, priority is given to the legitimation of administrative power – the state – through citizen exercises of communicative power mediated
by constitutional law. Whereas “A Letter Concerning Toleration” can be read as a precursor of political liberalism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract* plays the part for deliberative democrats. According to Rousseau, and deliberative democrats generally, a state is only legitimate when it acts in accordance with the will and opinion of the people over which its laws are administered. For deliberative democrats such as Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, and Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson (1997; 2004) the will and opinion of the people is made manifest through reasonable public deliberation. The orientation toward agreement this kind of public deliberation presupposes constitutes the first principle of public morality for these theorists, albeit one that is internally derived rather than externally imposed (Habermas 1998, 104-131). On these accounts, the basic liberties and their fruits valued by liberal democratic citizens are useful for deliberative legitimation, constitutive of deliberative legitimation, or both.

The problem of religion as originally conceived by deliberative democrats has, in recent years, undergone a seemingly drastic shift. Originally, these theorists argued that citizens who use religious reasons and rhetoric in public deliberation were neither reasonably engaged in these deliberations nor oriented toward mutual agreement (Habermas 1998, 17-27). Recently, however, deliberative democrats have made what, at first glance, seem to be concessions to religious citizens. Seyla Benhabib, in light of religious challenges to the secular state’s regulation of headscarves, among other things, posed by Muslim women in France, Germany, and Turkey, concedes in a 2010 article that political theory needs to begin taking political theology seriously, at least when it comes to Islam. Habermas has similarly revised his position in recent years, suggesting a “translation proviso” wherein all citizens are permitted to make recourse to religion in public political debates so long as they “accept that the potential truth
contents of religious utterances must be translated into generally accessible languages” before entering the legislative agenda (2011, 25-6).

Both concessions turn out to be veiled, however. According to Benhabib, Muslim women engaging in public battles undergo a transformation from Muslim “docile subjects” to democratic “public selves” who will then be able to advance the cause of women’s rights “within the Muslim tradition” (2011, 209-10). The assumption underlying this claim is that Muslims, and all other persons adhering to uncritically appropriated traditional worldviews, suffer a “rationality deficit”; a kind of pathological condition which can only be cured through a public process of “radically question[ing] all procedures of justification, including [the public process’] own” (1992, 43). Once a traditional worldview undergoes the process of critical appropriation, it will come to see the superiority of the public morality advanced by the liberal democratic state vis-à-vis the traditional ethos. There is no acknowledgement that something vital or essential is lost in the process of critical appropriation, possibly those aspects of the traditional worldview that inspire its adherents to act admirably. This is perhaps most evident in Habermas’ belief that whatever good a traditional worldview embodies can be critically appropriated and translated into a universally accessible language. Religion continues to have no place in politics proper, and at best proves useful in revealing visions of goodness politics could have, given enough time, discerned on its own.

In any case, we must once again ask what evidence these theorists provide for religious reasons and rhetoric not being oriented toward mutual agreement and what explains this relationship. Two distinctions between political liberalism and deliberative democratic theory can help us answer these questions. First, whereas the relevant fact that renders politicized
religion problematic for political liberals is religious pluralism and the cruelty it engenders, the relevant fact that renders politicized religion problematic for deliberative democrats is disenchantment. Put simply, disenchantment entails the widespread sense that nothing is sacred and beyond rational critique (Habermas 1989, Part V). As history advances in liberal democracies that protect modern basic liberties and their fruits, sacred discourses are invalidated through public critique. In a space where nothing is sacred, any principle that guides discourse must be derived from the practice of rational criticism itself.

This brings us to the second distinction: whereas political liberals begin with the historically rooted first principle of respect for persons and from this prescribe the principle of political respect in the form of offering reasons for political action all other citizens could accept, deliberative democrats give pride of place to political autonomy. According to political liberals, to be reasonable is to both engage in political actions the reasons for which all persons affected by these actions could accept and discipline political actions that could not foreseeably be justified in a similar manner. In the context of religious pluralism, to use exclusively religious or secular reasons for political action is to clear the path for sectarian strife and political cruelty. The principle of respect morally prohibits this consequence, and so its political counterpart prescribes the use of reasons all could accept when justifying political actions. Deliberative democrats similarly prescribe the use of reasons all could accept, or some variant thereof, but do not ground this prescription in the principle of respect for persons. Instead, it is immanently grounded in the presuppositions of rationalized, disenchanted, deliberations of liberal democratic citizens when forming the public opinion and will necessary for the legitimation of administrative power. Deliberative democrats contend that the positing of a first principle like
respect as a constraint on political action independent of rational public discourse is a holdover from an enchanted past pervaded with uncritically appropriated worldviews. The principle of respect takes on a sacred status for political liberals, constraining public debate even when it is not commonly accepted by participants in the debate (1998, 296-302). So long as this is the case, any reliance on first principles in public debate – much like any reliance on religious beliefs – precludes the possibility of deliberative legitimation.

c. Agonal Democrats

AGONAL DEMOCRATS ARE A HARD BUNCH TO PEG AND, IN A SENSE, BEING HARD TO PEG IS THE VIRTUE OF THEIR THEORETICAL ENTERPRISE. THEORISTS LIKE WILLIAM CONNOLLY, BONNIE HONIG, AND PATCHEN MARKELL ADVOCATE A POLITICS OF IMMANENT POSSIBILITY.6 THEIR MODERN PREDECESSOR IS FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE WHO, IN THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS AMONG OTHER TEXTS, REJECTS THE NAY-SAYING TO LIFE THAT THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION EMBODIES – THIS ACCUSATION PROBABLY EXTENDS TO ALL WORLDVIEWS ORIENTED TOWARD MONOTHEISTIC TRANSCENDENCE – IN ORDER TO ADVOCATE A KIND OF PAGANISM WITHOUT GODS THAT AFFIRMS THIS LIFE. AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO LIFE-NEGATING MONOTHEISM, NIETZSCHE AND AGONAL DEMOCRATS TAKE JOY IN THE SURPRISES (HONIG 1993, 80; MARKELL 2003, 15) THE WORLD WITHOUT GODS (MODES OF BEING) OR GOD (THE TRANSCENDENT SOURCE OF BEING), “A WORLD OF BECOMING” (CONNOLLY 2011), HAS TO OFFER. THAT IS, THEY TAKE JOY IN THE FACT THAT PERSONS AND THINGS UNIQUELY BECOME,

6 Typically, this section in a theory essay includes the obligatory analysis of Chantal Mouffe’s Democratic Paradox (2000) as the exemplary agonal text. I believe Connolly’s work, along with the others listed, gives a much more accurate depiction of the agonal position, even though it’s a position that by definition (for lack of a better word) evades accuracy. Perhaps the problem with Mouffe is that she is not evasive enough.
against all odds, in a world fundamentally in ontological flux. To love the world is to love this flux.

Like deliberative democrats, agonal democrats find the project of political liberalism suspect insofar as it imposes a principle that transcends the world of becoming. Any such principle seems to be a holdover of a naysaying monotheism, but agonal democrats do not wholly reject the possibility of monotheism. As Connolly notes, a monotheistic God can make sense in this world so long as it is a God who “is itself transcended by a world of becoming” (2011, 75); a God who is ontologically subsequent to the world. Yet, agonal democrats disagree with deliberative democrats that our world is fundamentally characterized by rationalized discourses necessarily oriented toward mutual agreement. They note that this is an empirically dubious claim, and that a more accurate picture of the public sphere is one characterized by countless forms of political contestation, some rational and some not. To limit the kinds of contestation permissible in the public sphere is to create an unwarranted constraint on the world, and shows a serious lack of love for the world as it is in the midst of ever-increasing flux.

According to agonal democrats, to love the world is to encourage and engage in, as much as possible, unfettered political contestation through which surprises may emerge. Connolly describes this kind of contestation as “a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity\difference” (1991, x). Political contestation always creates by virtue of its indispensable tie to identity, and leaves space for by virtue of its disturbance of dogmatized identity, what Honig calls “remainders”: those persons and/or things who are punished, ostracized, and concealed by identity in the form of first principles or
dominant discourses. Remainders are the “potential sites of politics,” the persons and things that become out of the nothing to which they were relegated by previous acts of domination and oppression (1993, 10). In other words, the remainder is the “stranger” identified by Du Bois; the part of every stranger-citizen that cannot quite be incorporated into the world.

Remainders are important for agonal democrats not just because they offer opportunities to take joy in surprise *simpliciter*, but because they hold the potential for a kind of surprise. Every remainder potentially is a “weak messiah,” to borrow Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited concept (1968, 255-6), who momentarily redeems the world of becoming through her appearance in it. The world of becoming, according to this account, would be humanly unbearable without these messianic moments, but to attempt to describe this weak messiah other than as a unique surprise, to articulate or seek out signs for discerning messianic from non-messianic remainders, is to close one’s self off to the novelty of uniqueness that is definitively messianic, intolerably promoting identity over difference. It is only in the fully hospitable disposition of one who welcomes the remainder without discernment that the remainder’s uniqueness may be made manifest. Therefore, citizens must also be open to the possibility that every remainder is potentially an “antichrist” of sorts, threatening the very world out of which he arose. Borrowing from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the agonal democrat acts in faith, hope, and love, but she places her bets with a paganism without divinity by refusing to have faith in, hope for, or love of anything other than the unique surprise, be it good or evil, that arises out of worldly flux.

Citizens who attempt to practice political contestation conceived in this way do not escape the dilemmas of dominating and oppressing others, but at best acknowledge their complicity in acts of domination and oppression by repeatedly opening themselves up to the
remainders they inevitably create. Thus, the stranger-citizen’s longing for full worldly incorporation is both natural and futile (Markell 2003, 177-8). Over time repetition of political contestation as action inspired by the natural yet futile longing for worldly incorporation cultivates what Connolly calls an “ethos of engagement.” This ethos is a kind of “self-artistry” wherein one works “demurely on a relational self that has already been formed, recrafting vengeful, anxious, or stingy contingencies that have become entrenched and forging them into a distinctive form that you can admire without having to treat it as a true copy of a universal model” (1999, 143-4). This ambivalence toward, and perhaps even fear of, a universal model stems from the fact that such a model fails to recognize the impossibility of universal incorporation, that full-on incorporation of one’s self into the world without closing off strange parts of one’s self and others is a dangerous fiction. It is dangerous because to hope for any sort of final reconciliation of remainders or strange parts, for a future wholeness, and to act in accordance with this hope, is to close one’s self off to the messianic uniqueness of remainders who become through political contestation in the present. In light of this, religion is not only problematic when it orients itself in accordance with a God who transcends the world of becoming, but also insofar as it hopes for a future reconciliation of remainders and orients itself in accordance with this hope. These, it should be noted, are constitutive hopes of the Judeo-Christian tradition, hopes that seemingly ignore the fact of remainders. They are hopes that close citizens who happen to be Judeo-Christian theists off from weak messianic potential of remainders and signal that Judeo-Christian theists cannot love the world as it fundamentally is, as the flux of becoming.
Section II: A Politics and a Religion

With these brief synopses of the political problem of religion, as well as the standard story of modernity’s overcoming of religion that they rely on, in mind, I now wish to outline an alternative narrative account of the relationship between religion and politics. This alternative account is a story of the relationship between the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions, and it is meant to bring the problem of religion as diagnosed by all three schools of democratic theory into question. By a tradition I mean a shared set of beliefs and corresponding habits, or a practice, oriented toward a telos, which continues over time through the medium of intergenerational storytelling. Each element of this definition will be made clear through the aid of examples. After offering accounts of the key elements of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, I will briefly present the modern era as a combination of both.

a. The Greco-Roman Tradition

To begin, the Greco-Roman tradition finds its historical origin, in part, in the ancient Greek polis, which was a community first arising at the end of the 9th century BCE “whose members structured their common life in terms of a form of activity whose specific goal was to integrate within itself, so far as possible, all those other forms of activity practiced by its members” (MacIntyre 1988, 33-4). The goal of integration, the “universal” (Pocock 1975, 67), was the telos of the polis. By telos I mean the reason that best articulates why a practice is good and, by virtue of this goodness, ought to continue. The telos is the good toward which a practice is oriented. Insofar as the polis’ general practices – the practices of citizens in a ruling capacity –
sought to integrate all of the particular practices of its members they were oriented toward the universal.

However, the universal was always only partially realized because constrained by the limits of worldly possibility. Political practices were always to some extent particular because performed in a particular community. These practices were considered the hierarchically highest (Aristotle 1999, 1094a.27) within this community because they preserved a space without which the lower, particular, practices of members could not flourish through public recognition. As such, it was in the general interest of citizens and the particular interests of members to exclude any lower practices threatening the highest practices that constituted the *polis*. Even though the *polis* was oriented toward the universal, the complete integration of all lower practices was widely acknowledged as unrealistic, unimaginable, or ontologically impossible. The being of the world of the *polis*, while revealed through general practices oriented toward the universal, always precluded the inclusion of all particular practices. Given the fact of human plurality, exclusion of criminals, foreigners, lesser persons, etc. who threatened to dissolve the *polis* through their subversive practices was seen as necessary. Socrates’ trial and execution at the hands of the Athenian *polis* in 399 BC provides an exemplary case of political exclusion of the subversive.

In addition to being oriented toward the universal within the limits of worldly possibility and constituted by the highest practices of citizens, the *polis* was able to last across time through

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7 Evidence of the Greek awareness of the innate antagonism of the *polis* is found in Plato’s analysis of political transition in Book VIII of *Republic* where each constitution (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny) is brought about, at least in part, through the violent imposition of a faction arising within the previous constitution. A time-bound world is a world imbued with violence.
the medium of storytelling. The stories of citizens performing practices oriented toward the universal, and doing so well, were cited as examples of what it was good for all citizens to be. Indeed, these citizens were widely conceived as exemplary embodiments of human perfection or flourishing. Stories of these exemplars were not told and enacted for the sake of entertainment and passive consumption, but in order to reveal the living purpose and coherence of the polis. Indeed, not until new citizens told and enacted these stories (Arendt 1998, 187-8) was it clear that the purpose and coherence of the polis – its tradition – was valid and alive. Only when citizens ceased understanding their political practices as enacted and told continuations of an inherited political story could the political tradition be considered invalid and dead.

The Greek conception of politics was significantly augmented when combined with the Roman conception of a republic. For the most part, nothing about the Greek polis was formally institutionalized. What defined a polis was not its physical location or a set of written rules, but how its citizens related to each other. That is, what defined a polis was its highest practices. So long as citizens continued to relate to each other in these manners, no matter where they happened to be, they constituted a polis (Thucydides 1993, 146-7; Arendt 1998, 198-9). In order to maintain these practices, the polis required suppression of lower practices that posed a subversive threat. The Roman Republic, which lasted from the late 6th – late 1st centuries BCE, encouraged the civic participation of fundamentally opposed practices corresponding to different religions, classes, etc. so long as they were politically expressed and enacted through “the distorting medium of institutions” (Wolin 2004, 76). The focal point of Roman politics was not the organic practices of a small community, but practices developed through the imposition of laws and the conferral of rights to vote, run for office, or own property. Many of these rights
were rendered solely *de jure* after the republic’s dissolution. In any case, these “distorting”
media “educated” diametrically opposed groups in such a way as to eventually “accept the same
set of values” (80) without wholly giving up their organic practices. This was especially evident
in Rome’s ability to both incorporate the local gods of conquered territories and maintain power
without enforcing Latin as a lingua franca. Because practices developed after the imposition of
law, and never required giving up organic practices in their entirety, Rome was able to last and
expand even after the end of its republican era. What Rome shared with Greece throughout all
of this was an orientation toward the universal, albeit an orientation that resisted worldly limits
through violent expansion and incorporation of new communities. The repeated acts of violence
and incorporation were, in their own ways, practices imitative of the very violence done by
Romulus in killing his brother Remus and founding Rome (Arendt 2006, 10).8 Whereas the
political violence of the Greeks was tied to domestic antagonism, the political violence of the
Romans was tied to imperial expansion, and both arose from an orientation toward the universal.

ii. The Judeo-Christian Tradition

Religion, being a kind of tradition, also has a *telos*, highest practices, and
intergenerational stories, but these differ from, and potentially conflict with, those of the
particular political tradition discussed above. Whereas the particular political tradition with
which I am concerned finds its historic origins in the combination of ancient Greece and Rome,
the particular religious tradition with which I am concerned finds its historic origin in the

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8 Arendt mentions the violence done by Cain to Abel as a beginning as well, but this is an odd assertion for at least
two reasons. First, the slaying of Abel by Cain carries a negative connotation in Genesis. The violence of the
founding act displeases God. Second, the civilization founded by Cain is, arguably, abolished in the great flood.
Abrahamic variant of the Axial Age. According to Karl Jaspers, the Axial Age was a historical period spanning from 800-200 BCE within which major shifts in various traditions that still shape our global culture including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Platonic philosophy, came into being. These changes entailed several key similarities: a recognition of immanent human limitation, a rejection of largely pagan myths as reflecting and re-enforcing these human limits (both ancient Greece and Rome were primarily pagan civilizations), and a replacement of these myths with a revealed transcendent reality able to overcome these limits (2-3). According to Robert Bellah, what all of this reflected was the emergence of a new critical sense that “there [were] alternatives that [had] to be argued for” (2011, 275), which created the possibility of radical breaks from past practices for which good arguments could not be provided.⁹

Over the course of this period, typically moved by visions of cosmological harmony and order that any person inspired by a love of the world as it was would have deemed dangerous fictions at best, humans became aware of new possibilities. Critical practices oriented toward these new cosmological teloi generally required looking to a reality beyond, or transcending, the world in order to overcome its limitations. We see the rise of, for instance, monks rejecting established conceptions of community, meaning, and flourishing through the development of new ascetic and contemplative practices in this period (Taylor 2011, 373). These practitioners were not primarily concerned with preserving a space within which lower practices could flourish, but with cultivating a space where the transcendent telos could manifest itself, where the telos could “happen” rather than be “achieved” (Bellah 2011, 9), and these tended to translate

⁹ While Judaism does not fit into Jaspers categorization of axial teloi as rationally revealed (Bellah, 282-3), it did introduce a telos that posed a very serious challenge to the world.
into radical changes in long-established worldly practices. Stories of radical figures such as Confucius, Gautama Buddha, and Socrates first discovering new practices that could prepare one for the happening of these teloi, and the subsequent augmentation and/or creation of spaces in the world like the Temple, monastery, and academy where these figures could be imitated by new practitioners seeking the teloi, kept these traditions alive. Finally, these traditions were not rendered valid through their temporal continuation alone, at least from the perspective of their practitioners. Indeed, most of the pivotal figures first introducing them “were seldom successful” (ibid., 282). Instead, validity was achieved through their orientation toward their respective transcendent teloi.

The Hebrew variant of the Axial Age had its own transcendent telos, practices oriented toward this telos, and pivotal figures whose stories kept the tradition alive through telling and enactment. The telos of the Hebrew variant was God or Yahweh. Yahweh was not a god, but God understood as the source of all that is; the creator of creation (Genesis 1-2) who also made a covenant with a particular people beginning with Abraham and, by extension, his progeny. The covenant was God’s promise to bless and favor his chosen people (Jews), culminating in the founding of the eternal nation of Israel, if they obeyed his commands (Genesis 17). Originally, the covenant took on the form of circumcision and faithful performance of God’s commandments as revealed to particular prophets who acted as mediators between God and the Jews. Perhaps the most influential of these commandments, as seen in the Books of Deuteronomy, Amos and Isaiah, was the commandment to advance justice understood as universal care for the poor and the stranger, those persons categorically excluded from positions
of power. The covenant continued with the addition of the performance of priestly guidance and sacrifices in the First and Second Temples as well as rabbinic studies of holy texts.

Eventually, with the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, authority for upholding the covenant shifted primarily to rabbis. Sacrifice ceased and, while circumcision remained an essential component, the covenant was increasingly seen as the holy texts themselves. These texts dealt with laws, prophecies, and narrative accounts of the history of the Jewish people’s struggle to uphold the covenant. Judaism became more and more exclusively a “religion of the Book,” and the blessings and favors conferred by God in return for upholding the covenant were increasingly held to be realizable, not through the human effort to uphold the covenant alone in the present, but “through divine action in the messianic future” (Bellah 2011, 319). Abiding by God’s laws and taking to heart the words of God’s prophets became acts of faith inspired by the messianic hope that God would fulfill his covenant with the Jews at a future time. The interpretive and pedagogical practices of the rabbis kept the memory of the covenant, faithful abidance, and hope in the covenant’s fulfillment alive (314). The divine text, by being tied to no particular place in the present, reflecting a transcendent source, and orienting its adherents toward its future fulfillment, offered a constant challenge to the ways of the present world within which Jews found themselves.

Christianity was a continuation and alteration of the Hebrew variant of the Axial Age, which is why I will refer to it more broadly as Judeo-Christian theism or the Judeo-Christian tradition. It began as a sect of Judaism claiming that the messiah had arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. Over the course of the first century CE, accounts and interpretations of the life of Jesus formed a New Testament to supplement the Old Testament of Judaism; a new covenant to
supplement the old. For the next two centuries, various sects of Judeo-Christian theists spread, largely through grassroots evangelization and conversion. Up until the First Council of Nicaea organized by Roman Emperor Constantine in 325 CE, there was no publicly sanctioned orthodox statement of Judeo-Christian belief, with different sects disagreeing on many aspects of the faith, most notably Christology, or the nature of Jesus Christ. I take an orthodox conception of the Judeo-Christian theism to be rooted in several mysteries of its faith as presented in the Bible as well as widely affirmed statements of belief such as the Nicene Creed, which arose out of the deliberations of the First Council of Nicaea.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am not providing an exhaustive list of orthodox beliefs. Instead, I am focusing on four that are particularly important for understanding the sources of tension between the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions. The first orthodox belief deals with Christology. The orthodox Christological account asserts that the human (immanence) and God/Yahweh (transcendence) were combined in the messianic person of Jesus Christ. He was the paradoxically incarnate Son of God the Father; the covenantal Word (Logos) or Spirit made flesh (John 1:14). Jesus was the wholly human and wholly divine part of the trinitarian God. He was neither seen as a prophetic interlocutor and servant of God in the world as Abraham, Moses, and other Jewish patriarchs, nor a demigod like Hercules. He was God in the world (John 8:58).

Second, because Jesus was God in the world, his speeches and deeds were God speaking and acting in the world. Jesus introduced the act of emptying one’s self (kenosis) out of an unconditional love (agape) of the weak, impoverished, and strange beloved other (Philippians 2:1-8). The event of Jesus’ birth, life, and death was agape (1 John 4:8), and this divine love
frequently entailed, as evidenced in Paul’s epistles, violations of the laws, habits, and customs of the world for the sake of the beloved, as well as forgiving rather than punishing (necessarily excluding) offenses committed by the beloved. He acted in these ways because he sensed the goodness, or the reflection of God, in the beloved regardless of how the beloved appeared. Like other axial practices, kenosis was rendered valid by being grounded in a telos transcending the limits of worldly possibility. But, unlike many other Axial practices, kenosis was its own telos and manifested itself within the world.

Third, God as the self-emptying lover paradoxically left himself open to the possibility of worldly annihilation. The God of Abraham was conceived by most, if not all, Jews up until this point as the Father who worked through the Holy Spirit to offer the gift of the covenant and the law. God the Father was all-powerful Creator; the superabundant wellspring of Being. Yet, once God the Father emptied his Spirit into the incarnate Son, and the Son emptied his Spirit into the world through his loving practice, God was placed at the mercy of the world. Love was perfected in kenotic submission, but because it frequently entailed violating the law and forgiving violations of the law (Luke 23:34), the practice was deemed a subversive danger to the world, resulting in the public humiliation and execution of Jesus in the supreme kenotic act of crucifixion.¹⁰ Not only did the Son die at the hands of the Father’s creation for the sake of that

¹⁰ This interpretation seems to go against Jesus’ proclamation in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” I claim that to fulfill the law is to act in the spirit in which the law was given, which is unconditional love. In Matthew 5:48 we see Jesus calling on his disciples to “[b]e perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect,” and we witness Jesus’ description of this perfection not in the fulfillment of the law, but in loving those who commit wrongs (Matthew 5:44). St. Paul makes this clear in Chapter 2:13-16 of his letter to the Ephesians, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”
very creation, but at the moment immediately preceding his death he experienced self-doubt and despair (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). As G.K. Chesterton notes in Orthodoxy, with Jesus’ cry of *Eli Eli lama sabachthani?* (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?), “God seemed for an instant to be an atheist” (1986, 343). The seemingly impossible overcoming of the worldly limitations that necessitated violence was not to be found through the acquisition of worldly power in the name of the transcendent *telos*, nor through a passive turning away from the world toward the transcendent *telos*, but through the active embodiment of the *telos* in kenotic suffering and weakness, exemplified in the act Jesus dying on the cross, for the sake of that which the *telos* created. In other words, Christian perfection was found in worldly imperfection.

Fourth, the physical and existential annihilation of God-made-man at the hands of his creation was not permanent, but overcome in the act of resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus the darkness of the existential and physical *nihil* of his humiliating execution proved itself incapable of finally putting out the light of a God who voluntarily became weak, suffering and loving. A vision of *creatio ex nihilo* began to take shape, testifying that all that is is best conceived as the kenotic gift of the Creator out of nothing. Whereas the orthodox position would agree with Nietzsche’s proclamations in section 125 of *The Gay Science* that God is dead and that we have killed him, it disagrees that “God remains dead.” Orthodoxy testifies, instead, to God’s kenotic gift through the practices of the church understood as the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27).11 The church, when engaged in these practices, heard the call of a resurrected God through the lowliest elements of creation, the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40)

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11 Cf. Hauerwas (2004, 103): “The ongoing performance of the church *is* God’s life in the world, exactly to the extent that the church’s own performance is of one piece with the trinitarian grammar that bespeaks a life of ‘mutual inclusion.’”
in the forms of strangers and the weak, and it was in response to this call that the church, through telling and imperfectly enacting the story of the example of the incarnate God, faithfully responded in love and justice, in “pardon and hospitality” (Kearney 2003, 221), to these elements. The church testified to moments of renewal and reconciliation in responding to the call, but being composed of humans who lacked the capacity to act in pure love and justice these enactments of Jesus’ example always missed the mark. In the face of this reality, the reality of sin, evidenced in the all-too-human missing of the mark of pure kenosis, the church hoped for a future time wherein the reality of sin would be overcome, and love, justice, renewal, and reconciliation realized.

c. Mixed Results of the Fusion of Traditions

Over the next millennium, the fusion of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions created the basis for the government and culture of Latin Christendom. Oddly enough, the same man who helped organize the council that made orthodox the fairly anarchic narrative of Judeo-Christian theism’s beginnings also politicized Judeo-Christian theism. Emperor Constantine believed the God of this tradition was behind his prosperity and military success, and so in displays of Roman impiety – refusals to sacrifice after battle and refusals to attribute success to a parochial god – he publicly proved himself to be a Christian. What Constantine did with the Council of Nicaea was, in a way, a continuation of a trend of centralization of the Roman state begun by his devoutly pagan predecessor, Diocletian. The uniformity of religious doctrine, made possible through reference to a God who transcended all of the lower gods of the predominantly polytheistic pagan Roman world, complemented the uniformity of the state nicely. In addition,
the church, as opposed to pagan institutions, sought to incorporate all activities traditionally delegated to different gods into a whole system reflecting the divine relational order. At first, the combination of monotheistic religion and the state led to the privatization of paganism, but over the course of the first millennium CE it eventually evolved into violent persecution of heretics and polytheists (Brown 2013, Chapter 2).

This all seems a far cry from the church depicted in the fourth tenet of orthodoxy above, and it clearly was, but this is not the whole story. First, and perhaps most obviously, the impetus for state expansion was not necessarily Christian. Recall that violence was a constitutive part of the Greco-Roman tradition, and expansionary imperial violence was specifically Roman. What changed was the mixture of this violence with a new unwillingness to recognize the validity of parochial beliefs and practices antithetical to Christianity. We might say that the novelty of politically dominant Christianity was the introduction of an unwillingness to tolerate religious differences into Roman politics.

Second, at the same time it was being politicized Christianity also introduced an unprecedented form of egalitarianism into Roman culture. As compared to other associations of the time, which tended to be “class- or gender-specific… The Christian church… was a variegated group… High and low, men and women met as equals because equally subject, now, to the overruling law of one God” (64). In addition, the “poor man [and] destitute stranger” – those who summarily would have been excluded by traditional pagan associations at the time – were, in line with Matthew 25:40, welcomed into the church even if it meant clergy had to sit on the floor during the liturgy (65). With the aid of food and clothing supplied by the Roman state, this care for the poor translated “into something like a public welfare system” (78). In addition
Finally, the forceful spread of monotheism and the dissolution of polytheism did not necessarily translate into an impersonal order of religious discipline devoid of any reference to subjective or intersubjective experience, although at times it veered dangerously close. “Holy fools” like St. Francis of Assisi and those who joined the monastic orders he founded in the 13th century, or mystics like St. Teresa of Avila in the 16th century, creatively combined a kind of pagan care for worldly things with Judeo-Christian theism. What is remarkable about these figures is that they stand in stark contrast to the instrumentally rational, legalistic, and disciplinary forms of ecclesiastical rule that spread through much of Christendom beginning in the 12th century (Milbank 2006, 441-2), all of which eventually translated into modes of civility pervading Europe throughout most of the modern era (Taylor 2007, Chapter 2). Fools and mystics took joy in worldly things in all their diversity precisely because they saw these things as *kenotic* gifts from God. It was similar to, yet importantly different from, the way Greeks perceived Apollo behind music. The important difference was that for Christian fools and mystics these things, rather than reflecting an irreducibly diverse group of beings qualitatively higher than humans (pagan gods), were perceived as qualitatively equal to, yet qualitatively distinct from, humans as inextricable and unique parts of a future wholeness within which all would be renewed and redeemed.

d. Modernity as Shift, Not Break
We return, now, to the time within which the typical narrative framing political liberalism, deliberative democratic theory, and agonal democratic theory begins. This account claims that the politicization of Christianity continued into the 17th century only to be brought into serious question and eventually dissolved with the Reformation, Wars of Religion, and the peace treaties signed in Westphalia in 1648. As a result of these treaties, among other things, a liberal democratic culture as distinct from Christian culture began to form in Western Europe and the North American continent. A public space where confessional difference was tolerated, which eventually with the aid of unprecedented economic and administrative changes created public spaces for reasonable debate about the respective merits of these and other differences, marked the beginnings of modern democracy (Habermas 1991, Chapter 1). Politically respectful practices of reasonableness and civility oriented toward mutual agreement through the use of public reason and public reasons arose. As Jeffrey Stout puts it,

in certain places, including England, the demand of Protestant radicals for egalitarian social and political relationships made significant headway. Increasingly, people started asking about the whole set-up. They began to think of the set-up itself as something for which a social group, and not just the divine source of all things, bore responsibility. So they began posing hard questions… these gradually shifted the burden of proof so that nowadays anybody who affirms or proposes a hierarchically defined role needs to bear the burden of proof in a debate where objections will be allowed from all sides. (2004, 204-5)

A presumption of equal status in terms of rights conferred to all adults who were willing and able to take equal responsibility for public affairs in a civilized (reasonable) manner developed over the course of the next several hundred years, gaining permanence in major political documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Practices of equal claim making among those who proved themselves willing and able to take equal
responsibility replaced those of begging and deference to established authorities (206). As a result, in the late 18th and 19th centuries the public sphere within which civil, secular, modes of public debate over political concerns constitutive of liberal democracies emerged. With this orientation toward the universal – civil and secular modes of offering reasons all members of a social group could accept – we see the return of a political entity resembling the ancient Greek *polis* and Roman republic.

There is no doubt that flourishing liberal democracies were, and continue to be, characterized by a public sphere where citizens with multiple conflicting worldviews critically debate and decide with each other over political concerns. However, they were not brought about through the depoliticization of Christianity, and the public debates and decisions about political concerns in which their citizens continue to engage are not exclusively civil and/or secular in form and/or content. The West did not experience a break from the Judeo-Christian tradition but, at most, a drastic shift within the tradition away from the insistence of religious political dominance and toward toleration of religious difference.

Beginning with the absence of depoliticized Judeo-Christian theism, the Wars of Religion were not all fought across confessional lines. William Cavanaugh convincingly shows that many of the wars during this period were fought between members of the same confession or between cross-confessional coalitions. In light of this and other factors, he makes a compelling case that (1) religious difference not a sufficient cause of these wars, and (2) elite pursuit of state sovereignty – reflecting, in a sense, Diocletian’s move toward the centralization of Rome mixed with a transferal of the omnipotent will of a nominalist God to the sovereign state – offers what appears to be a necessary condition of these wars (2009, Chapter 3). In addition to the
questionable thesis that religious difference was a sufficient cause of the Wars of Religion, the treaties signed in 1648 were not without a common religious grounding. All parties involved understood themselves as part of a broader world called “Christendom.”

Second, there is clear evidence in the treaties themselves that more than a fear of death or unnecessary cruelty served as their inspiration. For example, in the preamble to the Treaty of Münster signed by Spanish Catholics and Dutch Protestants, both parties claimed to be “moved by Christian pity,” and called on others in Christendom to be so moved, “to avert the mishaps, destruction, and disorders which the heavy plague of war has made men suffer for so long and so heavily” (Rowen 1972, 179). The appeal was not to nature or to reason, but to a divinely inspired sentiment. As Charles Taylor notes, the New Testament word for “taking pity,” splangnizesthai, means the emotion from the gut associated with agape (2007, 741). Across confessional differences, the thought was that the emotion associated with the reconciliatory love of God could move members of Christendom to practice toleration, which eventually lead to institutional recognition of the rights to equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. The hope was to establish more loving and just, or respectful, relations among Judeo-Christian theists regardless of confession or nation. Practices of toleration signaled a step in this direction.

A philosophical version of this sentiment is found in John Locke’s “Letter.” Originally written in Latin 37 years after the peace treaties signed in Westphalia, Locke begins the letter with the following paragraph:

You ask me for my opinion of mutual toleration among Christians. I reply in a word that it seems to me to be the principal mark of the true church. Antiquity of titles and places of worship which some people boast of, the reformation of doctrine that others stress, the orthodoxy of one’s faith that everyone claims (for
everyone is orthodox in their own eyes) these things are likely to be signs of competition for power and dominion rather than marks of Christ’s church. A person may have all of them and still not be a Christian, if he lacks charity, gentleness, and goodwill toward all human beings and toward those who profess the Christian faith in particular. (2010, 3)

This is a far cry from a privatized or depoliticized religion! If anything, what the treaties and Locke’s “Letter” show is that Judeo-Christian theism retained political influence while symbolically severing its ties with the antagonistic violence, “the competition for power and dominion,” of Greece and the imperial violence of Rome. Further, Judeo-Christian theists referred to practices and sentiments internal to their tradition to ground this symbolic break.

Of course, the recognition of the rights of equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought via state enforcement and religiously inspired practices of toleration created a space for the public articulation of valid theistic and non-theistic alternatives to orthodox Judeo-Christian theism. Christendom ceased being Christendom, and was replaced with a liberal democratic culture produced and reproduced by liberal democratic citizens advancing a plurality of worldviews in public debates and decisions over political concerns. None of these worldviews replaced Judeo-Christian theism at a societal level, but, if anything, gained public voice alongside it. In a sense, if I am right that Judeo-Christian pity served as a widely acceptable ground for toleration, most of these alternatives also developed out of the Judeo-Christian

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12 It should be noted that Locke’s argument against orthodoxy, rendering it subjective, seems to run counter to the few tenets of orthodoxy I list above. Locke, however, is offering an orthodox account in prioritizing “charity, gentleness, and goodwill” above all else, and he obviously thinks this is more than his subjective preference insofar as it should have sway over all Christians. The tenets of orthodoxy I listed above are constitutive of what I take to be the “best account” (Taylor 1989, 53-62) of what a Judeo-Christian theist is doing when she prioritizes charity, gentleness, and goodwill over power and dominion. The account always begins with the prioritization, and not vice versa.

tradition, at least initially. Pity and the activity of agape became the sense of justice and respect for persons. Egalitarianism was spurred by Protestantism in England (evidence of this is present in the Locke excerpt cited above) which carried over into the founding of Puritan commonwealths in America, and both the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen made references to God, albeit a variant we often associate with an impersonal Deism.

What is clear after this brief overview of the modern history of liberal democracies is that their political cultures, while clearly resembling the Greco-Roman tradition, were, and continue to be, shot through with movements and moments arising out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Some are oppressive, some are liberating, and none have spelled the demise of liberal democracy. If anything, many have helped to improve liberal democracy, or at least hold it accountable, through public appeals to love and justice. Regarding good movements and moments, many Americans are and were influenced by the apocalyptic rhetoric of William Lloyd Garrison in advocating the abolition of slavery, Abraham Lincoln’s appeal to “charity” in his second inaugural speech (advancing a kind of vision of political reconciliation reminiscent of the treaties following the Wars of Religion), the intentional Catholic Worker communities founded by Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr.’s powerful use of biblical narrative in his most famous speeches, Christian pacifists and environmentalists peacefully bearing witness to God in creation in opposition to the War on Terror and environmental degradation, etc. Red Tories in Canada and the UK, and Blue Labour in the UK, have been increasingly influenced by the school of theology known as Radical Orthodoxy. In addition, the confessional parties that developed in many continental democracies over the 19th and 20th centuries did not bring about their
dissolution, but actually played a vital role in their consolidation (McGraw 2010). Only a kind of willful blindness could lead one to conclude, after being confronted with evidence like this, that religion is nothing more than a constant threat to liberal democracy.

I must emphasize that none of this is meant to discount the horrible things done in the name of or within the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. the Inquisition), or that an orthodox account of it should be given some sort of special political status vis-à-vis other worldviews because of the role it has played in our history, but only to show that elements of it persist and in incredibly positive and powerful ways. I think Andrew Murphy, discussing the widely held view that religion is inescapably violent, articulates my general point quite well,

The potential for liberation theology or religiously motivated peacemaking efforts to build bridges between peoples and cultures suggests that, often, those very traditions that have exacerbated violent discord in the past at the same time hold out the potential for overcoming such destructiveness in the future. Indeed, the very scriptures that have often urged individuals on to acts of violence contain equally poignant longings for a world free from such strife. And the history of American religion suggests a strong countertrend to the all-too-frequent association of religion with violence: a nonviolent tradition deeply grounded in the American experience. (2011, 3)

The Judeo-Christian tradition, and religion generally, is a constitutive, and has been/can be a vital, part of the liberal democratic world within which we are embedded.

Section III: Reassessing the Problem

Returning to the theories presented in Section I, what does the story tell us about the political problem of religion? Recall, religion is a political problem for political liberals because
it causes cruelty, deliberative democrats because it creates a barrier to the rationalization of discourse necessary for democratic legitimation, and agonal democrats because it creates a barrier to the immanent possibilities of political contestation. Recall, further, that the political influence of Judeo-Christian theism in the history of the West is either explicitly or implicitly driving these critiques. In light of the counter-narrative I offered in the previous section, there are aspects of each theory that are correct and incorrect.

With political liberalism the story is in much agreement. First, it confirms that the avoidance of cruelty largely inspired the peace treaties ending the Wars of Religion and the practices of toleration prescribed by them. Second, it confirms that the abhorrence of cruelty was grounded in a transcendent referent, a variant of the principle of respect, albeit one whose criterion was reflecting the image of God. Finally, it confirms that the Judeo-Christian theism, as a result of the practices of toleration that eventually evolved into practices of political respect rooted in the principle of respect for persons, eventually lost political dominance.

However, there are also points of disagreement. The story disconfirms, first, that religious difference was a sufficient cause of the Wars of Religion. At most it was a catalyst, but there is good reason to believe that consolidation of civil power into sovereign states played, at the very least, an equal role. This is not to say the sovereign state was, is, or will be all bad, but just that it, like the Judeo-Christian tradition, has a fairly mixed history. Second, the story disconfirms that that the practices of toleration that signaled an end to these wars involved a full-scale privatization or depoliticization of religion. At least in terms of the rhetoric of the Westphalian peace treaties and Locke’s “Letter,” it is clearly within the realm of possibility that appeal to Christian sentiment grounded these promises. That is, a good case can be made that
appeal to Judeo-Christian sentiment sufficiently explains the shift toward practices of toleration. Thus, the Judeo-Christian tradition cannot be construed in the solely negative terms of expansion, salvation, and authority that Rawls and other political liberals advance, but can also be conceived in terms of a divine reconciliatory love that trumps all three. In this alternative account, only after the politicization of this love and the corresponding loss of Christian political dominance did valid and publicly disseminated justifications of toleration and political respect in non-Judeo-Christian terms of reason, nature, or anything else, along with many other traditions, begin constituting an increasingly pluralistic civil society that remains indebted to the Judeo-Christian tradition in its continued affirmation of the principle of respect for persons as an extension of the sentiment that grounded the treaties ending the Wars of Religion.

The story confirms with deliberative democrats that practices of toleration eventually created new spaces for peaceful and politically respectful public deliberation and decisions about political concerns that were not exclusively characterized by appeals to Judeo-Christian theism. Further, it confirms that basic liberties of freedom of thought, liberty of conscience, and various political freedoms co-originated with the practices of toleration that created, and public deliberation about political concerns that occurred within, these public spaces. It disconfirms that these spaces were also wholly rationalized and/or oriented toward mutual agreement. What arose out of these practices was not a political culture exclusively composed of enlightened citizens attempting to speak in universally accessible terms, but a space where citizens with multiple conflicting worldviews were able to more or less peacefully contest each other while overlapping in valuing the principle of respect for persons and the basic liberties corresponding to the values of freedom and equality that reflected this principle.
Importantly, the plural worldviews characterizing liberal democracy validated these constitutive practices, and so, in a sense, transcended them. By affirming an orientation toward the universal without reference to the transcendent, while hoping that this does not result in cruelty or, more generally, domination by virtue of certain human rights co-originating with this orientation, deliberative democrats subsume any post-Axial inheritance, Judeo-Christian or otherwise, within the Greco-Roman tradition without explicit mention. It seems as though they believe the Greco-Roman tradition, given the material and ideological conditions of modernity, is self-sufficient. They need to be reminded that the Greco-Roman tradition, while exclusively oriented toward the universal, recognized that this orientation identified human perfection within the confines of worldly limitations, limitations which necessitated violence – cruelty and domination – toward any person threatening subversion. All citizens who threaten to subvert the universal orientation must, in the infamous words of Rousseau, “be forced to be free” (1988, 95). Deliberative democrats run the risk of settling for cruelty and domination.

This Rousseauian prescription is reflected in deliberative democrats’ treatment of citizens who will not and/or cannot recognize the independent validity of reasons expressed in language all could accept. The domination necessitated by an orientation toward the universal must be committed against any citizens making reference to transcendent grounds in public discourse in order to ensure that a proper orientation is maintained. I spent so much time discussing relevant aspects of the “orthodox” account of Judeo-Christian theism because its good aspects – the responses of love and justice to the call of God, moving Judeo-Christian theists to respect others – are inextricably tied to this particular narrative and set of practices for many Judeo-Christian theists who refuse to privatize or depoliticize their religious convictions. The dependence of
good practices on particular narratives and their correct interpretation is, I contend, a fact of every tradition, so non-theistic accounts of respect must be allowed to enact and tell their particular narratives as well. To assume that all good practices or corresponding rules or principles revealed through traditional narratives can be affirmed through a universally accessible language is to deprive these practices, rules, and principles of much, if not all, of the normative force they would otherwise have for citizens embedded within these traditions. This assumption tends to disrespect most citizens who do not exclusively affirm a Greco-Roman worldview; that is, it disrespects citizens who also, at least to some extent, affirm post-Axial worldviews like Judeo-Christian theism and its offshoots who are moved to act by, and understand their actions as being fundamentally grounded in, a transcendent reality.

The story confirms, with agonal democrats, that politics as the continuation of the Greco-Roman tradition always creates remainders (it is inescapably cruel and dominating) and that, by virtue of this, no single worldview has definitively characterized liberal democracies. It also, in agreement with the Judeo-Christian theological account offered, confirms that God has died at our hands, and that as a consequence of this death our hope for salvation resides in an openness to remainders as “the least of these.” Yet, the theological account resists the claim that openness to remainders must avoid qualification. The need to avoid qualification rests on two assumptions. First, it assumes that the world is fundamentally becoming or flux with nothing beyond it. Any conception of a transcendent reality, God or otherwise, denies this ontological characterization. Second, it assumes that any conception of transcendent reality creates a barrier to the messianic potential of the unique surprises that become in the world. Yet, these assumptions, if asserted in present public deliberations and decisions over political concerns in
liberal democracies, are immediately confronted with the testimony of Judeo-Christian theists, and others, claiming otherwise.

For theistic citizens the world is shot through with signs of a God who transcends it, bringing into question whether a chaotic flux is, in fact, the fundamental character of the liberal democratic world. God transcends the world in at least two ways in the eyes of Judeo-Christian theists. First, they conceive the call to respond to the remainder in love and justice as the call of God; the call that transcends the world of becoming insofar as it repeatedly returns to the world of becoming (Caputo 2006, 38). They act out of a faith in, hope for, and love of the possibility of the resurrected God behind the call, not an unqualified surprise, although they recognize the resurrected God will take on strange and unexpected forms. Second, to identify moments of love and justice as moments of response to God’s call is to note that these moments cannot politically be contested in their entirety without being perverted and, in turn, perverting those who contest them. These moments are transcendent – they are kairotic – insofar as they signal events in the world that are qualitatively higher than other surprising events that become out of political contestation. Put differently, kairotic moments are more than surprising assemblages of power. Of course, given the reality of sin, the Judeo-Christian theist recognizes that these qualitatively higher events will always fall short of the exemplary love and justice embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and political contestation is needed to keep us aware of this reality. But, the Judeo-Christian theist refuses to take this reality as a sign that moments of love and justice are at bottom no different from any other surprise, qualitatively speaking. To posit no qualitative difference is to close one’s self off to the sensed goodness of – the image of God reflected in –
these moments, a goodness which inspires one to open herself up, rather than close herself off, to the good difference of the strange and weak remainder.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages I presented an alternative to the typical story presupposed by what I take to be the three dominant schools of political theory at present: political liberalism, deliberative democratic theory, and agonal democratic theory. Religion – implicitly or explicitly Judeo-Christian theism in these theories – is a political problem because it perpetuates cruelty, threatens democratic legitimacy, and closes citizens off to the immanent possibility inherent in political contestation, respectively. Aspects of each theory were shown to be correct and incorrect in light of the alternative narrative.

The alternative narrative reveals two important facts about our world. First, the political influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West was both good and bad, at times evil. It was bad because, combined with the Greco-Roman tradition in the form of political domination, it perpetuated cruelty and domination by violently silencing certain forms of political contestation. It was good because it introduced an egalitarian vision of humanity embodied in the practices and eschatological vision of the church that brought into question the Greco-Roman acceptance of worldly perfection and violence. Indeed, it was through widespread appeal to the practices and vision of the church, as seen in the peace treaties of 1648 and Locke’s “Letter,” that the Judeo-Christian tradition was able to symbolically sever its ties with the Greco-Roman. Aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition remained politically relevant while shifting away from doctrinal political domination in favor of practices of toleration and the rights to liberty of
conscience and freedom of thought these practices presupposed. The practices of toleration and its corresponding rights laid down the foundation for the liberal democratic public sphere that emerged in the late-18th and 19th centuries, lasting into the present.

Second, the world that arose in the wake of Latin Christendom, the world that gained reality in the liberal democratic public sphere, was, and is, not entirely Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian. It was, and is, a reflection of a plurality of these and other traditions, none of which definitively grounds debates and decisions over political concerns in the public sphere, and most of which overlap in affirming the principle of respect that pervades these debates and decisions. This pervasiveness is evidenced by the enacted and told stories of reflections of the principle of respect for persons in practices affirming certain basic liberties like freedom of thought, liberty of conscience, and various political freedoms, all of which reflect the political manifestation of the principle of respect: the principle of political respect.

The world of liberal democracy is, in other words, a world of what John Rawls calls “reasonable pluralism.” It is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. (2005, xvi)

For the moment, comprehensive doctrines may be considered synonymous with traditions as I have been discussing them here. Traditions are reasonable not because they give pride of place to reason, but because they overlap in affirming the constitutive practices of liberal democracy, practices that politically reflect the principle of respect for persons.
It seems to me that political liberalism, grounded in the fact of reasonable pluralism and amended to accord with the narrative presented in this chapter, is a political theory better suited for the liberal democratic world we live in than deliberative democratic theory or agonal democratic theory. A “pre-political,” and therefore transcendent, principle of respect is evident in citizens enacting and telling stories of practices corresponding to the basic liberties constitutive of our world, but citizens affirm these practices and corresponding basic liberties out of a plurality of fundamentally opposed traditions, religious and non-religious. Yet, political liberalism can fully acknowledge this “overlapping consensus” of traditions in affirming the principle of respect for persons only if it stops construing religion as a political problem that must be silenced or rendered irrelevant, and starts construing it as a vital part of the overlapping consensus. Political liberalism must do this if it is to take the fact of reasonable pluralism seriously. If it does not, then the “fact” becomes nothing more than a rhetorical tool hiding a dominant view under the guise of pluralism.
CHAPTER 3: THREE PROBLEMS WITH RAWLS’ *A THEORY OF JUSTICE*

Introduction

*An ounce of the Bible is worth a pound (possibly a ton) of Aristotle.*

- John Rawls (2009a, 107)

The last sentence of Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (*TJ*) is one of the most powerful and revealing lines in the entire text. Concluding a brief investigation of the good of justice, and the “perspective of eternity” from which justice is theorized, he writes, “Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view” (514). Its power, for me at least, is a product of the fact that it can be read as a Biblical allusion. The verse that comes to mind is the sixth of the eight beatitudes offered by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). When juxtaposed with the last line of *TJ*, Rawls seems to be saying that if one acts in accordance with justice as fairness, one will be in the presence of God.

A close reader would retort that this conclusion is not warranted given Rawls’ description of the perspective of eternity two sentences prior to the concluding sentence.14 The perspective

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14 A close reader might also note that acting with “self-command” in order to be in the presence of God is a form of Pelagianism, and therefore heretical within an orthodox framework. I do not deny this, although it could be argued that the reality of God’s self-revelation when one acts in accordance with justice as fairness renders this sense of “self-command” illusory.
of eternity is neither a perspective from “beyond the world,” nor the perspective of “a transcendent being,” but the perspective of all persons across all times and social positions accessible to the rational imagination “within the world” (514). The perspective of eternity is both universal in origin in that it includes the perspectives of all persons across time and social position and universal in scope in that it prescribes principles of justice that apply to all persons across time and social position. Justice as fairness, understood in this way, could be seen as a kind of synthesis of the universal orientation of the Greco-Roman tradition and the universal application of the Judeo-Christian ethic as explored in Chapter 2, or more generally a synthesis of the pre-Axial political worldview oriented toward the universal and the post-Axial religious worldview that applies a certain ethic universally.

In response to this retort it seems to me that Rawls plays fast and loose with a few words in this sentence. He is obviously describing a kind of transcendence when writing on the perspective of eternity, albeit of the humanistic variety. If the perspective of eternity includes all perspectives past, present, and future it temporally transcends the world within which we actually find ourselves, which is experienced in present time. Further, one must stand outside of the world understood in this way in order to rationally imagine this perspective. While standing outside is not necessarily standing beyond, both locations are not within the world simpliciter. Each stance is at a distance from the world within which we are inescapably embedded.

Beyond the fact that the perspective of eternity described in this sentence is at least to some extent transcendent and without the world, it does not preclude the possibility of the theological interpretation of the perspective of eternity alluded to in the concluding sentence. This theological account, drawing on Matthew 5:8, claims that acting in accordance with the
conception justice prescribed by the perspective of eternity – justice as fairness – brings one into the presence of God.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, the prospect of God’s presence, according to this theological account, gives justice as fairness its normative force. We need only note two things for this theological account of justice as fairness to hold. First, God cannot be wholly beyond the world. Thus, the God revealed through acting in accordance with justice as fairness is not the God of Deism. God’s immanent presence, according to this account, is always a possibility, and this possibility is realized when one acts in accordance with justice as fairness. Second, to be in the presence of God is not the same as seeing from the perspective of God. The theological account reads Rawls as saying the perspective of eternity is not the perspective of God, but a perspective that brings one into the presence of God.\textsuperscript{16}

I do not believe I am reading too much into \textit{TJ} in offering a theological account of justice as fairness. Rawls was no stranger to theology in his youth, and even toyed with the idea of going to seminary prior to serving in WWII (Rawls 2009b, 261). Indeed, given the fact that he once believed “[a]n ounce of the Bible is worth a pound (possibly a ton) of Aristotle” (Rawls 2009a, 107), it may be the case that his allusion to Matthew 5:8 in \textit{TJ} is intentional.\textsuperscript{17} He makes clear in the introduction to the paperback edition of \textit{Political Liberalism (PL)} that the ideas that shape justice as fairness “may seem in \textit{Theory} to be religious, philosophical, or moral, and

\textsuperscript{15} I think a more orthodox account would note that God’s self-revelation when acting in accordance with justice is, following St. Paul, never a sure thing. At present we “we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). So any moment of God’s self-revelation is only a reflection of God, plagued by uncertainty. It is a love of God and a hope for this self-revelation that moves one to act in accordance with justice, but this self-revelation is never fully realized at present, always fleeting. As such, some faith that the semblance of God will return is necessary to theologically inspire one to act in accordance with justice once again.

\textsuperscript{16} Whether it is the only way one could come into the presence of God is a question that Rawls leaves open.

\textsuperscript{17} One wonders if the same valuation applies to the work of Kant.
indeed may actually be so” (xli). Rawls admits that there “may actually be” a theological bent to
the text.

In the following pages I am not going to elaborate on this theological account. In fact, I
doubt the conception of the human person from which justice as fairness is theorized can be
reconciled with the conception of the person as put forth in orthodox accounts of Judeo-Christian
theism, at least at a fundamental level. The point of this brief exploration was to show that a
theological interpretation of justice as fairness is implied in the text of TJ, and this interpretation
raises certain metaphysical questions such as, e.g., the nature of God as potentially within rather
than without the world and the nature of humans as beings capable of witnessing God’s self-
revelation in the world understood in this way. Rawls, in the concluding sentence, invites the
Biblically versed reader to interpret justice as fairness through the lens of a broader theological
tradition. Yet, the invitation to articulate a theological account of justice as fairness implied in
the concluding sentence runs counter to the Kantian account of justice as fairness Rawls
explicitly articulates in § 40 of TJ. Here, it is not the prospect of being in the presence of God
that gives justice as fairness normative force, but the prospect of realizing our nature as free,
equal, and rational beings. Whereas the former gives pride of place to God, the latter gives pride
of place to humanity so conceived. Both overlap on justice as fairness – that is, both overlap in
respecting the human person – but both fundamentally disagree on the criteria that render
humans worthy of respect. The former posits the criterion of being made in the image of God,
whereas the latter posits the criterion of potentially and/or actually being free, equal, and
rational.
In his later work, Rawls acknowledges he goes a bit too deep in *TJ*, rendering justice as fairness unstable when it moves from the realm of theory without the world to the realm of practice within the world. Due to its explicit interpretation in terms of a Kantian comprehensive doctrine when other fundamentally opposed comprehensive doctrines could similarly support justice as fairness in practice, Rawls begins articulating a theory of justice as a *political* conception without any single comprehensive ground. Justice is no longer exclusively tied to a Kantian comprehensive doctrine, but is metaphysically free-standing. One effect of this mode of theorizing is a shift in perspective. Whereas a metaphysically grounded justice as fairness is theorized from the perspective of eternity, a metaphysically free-standing justice as fairness is theorized from certain fundamental ideas of citizenship pervading the liberal democratic world. It is Rawls’ turn to the liberal democratic world and the narrative that pervades it that occupies Chapter 3. In the present chapter, I set myself the task of outlining three problems a turn toward the world and corresponding reliance on a narrative ought to resolve.

The thesis of this chapter is that Rawls’ theory as presented in *TJ* needs to overcome two problems – the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium – before it can address the problem of stability that inspires all of Rawls’ later work. Section I discusses the Kantian metaphysical presuppositions of *TJ* and Section II explores in detail how these presuppositions reveal justice as fairness as being rooted in a Kantian comprehensive doctrine. In Section III, I outline the three problems I see confronting a comprehensive account of justice as fairness: nihilism, reflective equilibrium, and stability. A necessary, but not sufficient, condition of the resolution of each problem is the resolution of the problem preceding it, such that the problem of stability can only be resolved once the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium are
resolved, and the problem of reflective equilibrium can only be resolved once the problem of nihilism is resolved. I conclude suggesting how a turn toward the narratively constituted world could overcome all three problems.

Section I: The Metaphysical Presuppositions of TJ

I find the most striking difference between TJ and PL to be their uses of synchronic and diachronic, or eternal and historical, time, respectively. Since this difference gets little mention in the literature on Rawls it is fitting to begin with an elaboration of it, which is rooted in the different “point[s] of view” (2005, 28), TJ and PL reflect. In the former, the point of view is that of parties in the hypothetical situation of the original position in which a political conception of justice is chosen to govern the basic structure of society. In the latter, the point of view is that of citizens in a well-ordered society that developed over time to the point of being generally guided by the principles of justice. Concerning the perspective of the original position, the parties in this situation are hidden behind a veil of ignorance such that they have no knowledge of their natural assets, their conceptions of the good, or their social and economic standing in the society under consideration (Rawls 1999, 118). The veil of ignorance and other characteristics of the original position render the hypothetical choice situation fair, where fairness means that the position is characterized by conditions “that we do in fact accept. Or if we do not, then perhaps we can be persuaded to do so by philosophical reflection” (19). This “we” is neither those in the original position nor those citizens in a well-ordered society, but we real flesh and

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18 Those who have recognized the importance of this shift in Rawls’ later work constituting a small, but growing, body of scholarship include Rorty (1990, 175-196), Eisenach (2002, 12-14), Garsten (2006, 185-7), Thiele (2006, 228-9), Beiner (2011, 283-300), and Taylor (2011).
blood humans trying to make sense of justice in the midst of far from well-ordered societies (PL 28), and so Rawls is saying the conditions of the original position reflect our actual considered convictions, and in turn judgments, concerning matters of justice. If, for any number of reasons, the conditions do not reflect these convictions then Rawls contends that we, being the reasonable persons we are, should be willing and able to revise either the conditions of the original position or our considered convictions in order to bring each in accord with the other. Reflective equilibrium is what Rawls labels this point of accord.

The connection between this method and synchronic time becomes clear in the final section of TJ. Once we reach reflective equilibrium as a result of amending the conditions of the original position in light of our considered convictions and vice versa the perspective achieved is the perspective of all persons across time and social position. We ought to pursue reflective equilibrium because, in so doing, we orient ourselves toward an exclusively human eternity – what Kant (2012) calls the “kingdom of ends” in his The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals – in the form of a universal perspective.

Without conflating all persons into one but recognizing them as distinct and separate, it enables us to be impartial, even between persons who are not contemporaries but who belong to many generations. Thus to see our place in society from the perspective of this position is to see it sub specie aeternitatis: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view. (Rawls 1999, 514)

By being in accord with those of all social perspectives past, present, and future, one’s own considered convictions are freed from the arbitrary contingencies of the particular times and places in which they are articulated and acted upon. To be guided by the principles of justice chosen in the original position is to be guided by the considered convictions of all of humanity,
included in which are one’s own considered convictions. Acting in accordance with these principles, then, signals that one is acting out of respect for humanity.

Rawls’ method not only brings the considered convictions of each in accord with the considered convictions of all across time and social position, it also reconciles the conflicting values of freedom and equality upon which these convictions are founded. Rawls, citing the clearly diachronic work of Benjamin Constant, calls these values the liberties of the moderns and liberties of the ancients respectively. By freedom Rawls means those liberties we tend to associate with liberalism: “freedom of thought and conscience, certain basic rights of the person and property, and the rule of law” (Rawls 2005, 5). By equality, those liberties we associate with republicanism: “the equal political liberties and values of public life” (ibid.). Freedom and equality do not obviously complement each other and, at times, seem mutually exclusive. For instance, it is not readily apparent how the inviolability of the individual made manifest in her basic rights can be reconciled with the common good of the democratic society within which she finds herself. Yet, even in the face of this seeming mutual exclusivity we still affirm considered convictions concerning justice that reflect these values. Freedom and equality, insofar as they ground the considered convictions of all, are thus the values of all. They are the basic liberties humans across time and social position value, and to act in accordance with principles of justice derived from values all humans accept is to respect humanity. To act in accordance with the principles of justice as fairness, in other words, is to affirm the principle of respect for persons.

Delving even farther into the heart of his method, Rawls must show how it is that freedom and equality are valued across time and social position. The most cursory overview of human history reveals that freedom and equality have not been valued in all times and places,
bringing into doubt the respect that supposedly guides the theory. Indeed, freedom and equality seem to be historical exceptions rather than rules. Further, insofar as freedom is the liberty of the moderns Rawls seems to be saying that it was not of value prior to modernity. Without showing how freedom and equality are eternal values, Rawls’s appeal to a synchronic account of justice becomes empirically questionable.

Is Rawls, then, advancing a noble lie when he says we all, ancient, modern, and beyond, value freedom and equality? No. Instead, Rawls is arguing that if the ancients had been aware of the truer, or perhaps realer, account of human nature offered by the moderns they would have recognized the liberties of the moderns as being of value. Freedom is eternally valuable because it, along with equality and rationality (the value of rationality is implied insofar as the convictions rooted in the values of freedom and equality are considered), expresses the nature of humans as “free and equal rational beings” (TJ 501). Because the principles of justice reflect the considered convictions of all concerning justice, and these convictions in turn reflect the values of freedom and equality, to act in accordance with these principles is to express our nature as free and equal beings. It is to express “most fully what we are or can be” (225), and to show respect for this actual or potential nature. By relying on concepts like “nature” and “being” to show how these values extend to perspectives across time and social position, Rawls is showing that a metaphysical account of human beings undergirds his method, where a metaphysical account is understood as “an account of what there is” (PL 379), rather than, say, an account of what there happens to be for the time being.19 A person is deserving of respect, and therefore deserves to

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19 It could be argued that this Kantian metaphysical account is just one of several metaphysical accounts that can support justice as fairness in TJ. Rawls calls this account an “interpretation” of justice as fairness in the text (221-7) and presents this idea of multiple metaphysical accounts supporting justice as fairness in the form of an overlapping
have her perspective taken into consideration in the original position, insofar as she is a potentially free, equal, and rational – potentially autonomous (Kant 1998, 43) – regardless of what she happens to be at the moment. The original position is a hypothetical realization of this potential. What becomes evident in all of this is that the perspective of eternity is not, in fact, the perspective of all humans across time and social position simpliciter, but the perspective of all humans qua potentially free, equal, and rational beings.

Section II: Comprehensive Doctrines

With the assertions that a metaphysical account explains Rawls’ method, justice as fairness reflects the nature of humans as free, equal, and rational beings, and humans are worthy of respect by virtue of their potential to realize their nature, Rawls is grounding justice as fairness in a Kantian comprehensive doctrine. Comprehensive doctrines are a key concept in Rawls’ later work, so briefly attempting to discern what exactly this concept means is warranted. Oddly enough, the very idea of a comprehensive doctrine, which never gets explicit mention in TJ although it is implied throughout, signals a shift toward theorizing justice diachronically.

Put simply, a comprehensive doctrine offers a vision of what it is good to be. Rawls never explicitly defines it in these terms, and I borrow this definition from Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self. I read Taylor’s ontological accounts – an account of what it is good to be – as synonymous with Rawlsian comprehensive doctrines. These accounts specify horizons of consensus in his later work. However, in the introduction to PL Rawls claims, referring to TJ, that “the text regards justice as fairness and utilitarianism as comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, doctrines” (xvi). I define comprehensive doctrines below. Importantly, these doctrines possess some knowledge of the nature of humans as free, equal, and rational or sentient and benevolent, and are therefore metaphysical.
significance in the form of ideals of what it is good to be toward which a human should orient her life, or the criterion that renders a human worthy of respect. In the case of Kantians this horizon is autonomy, in the case of Aristotelians flourishing, etc. These ontological accounts, by placing humans in relation to a good as the horizon of significance toward, or from, which they move over the course of their lives, act as “maps” of moral space humans use to navigate their way toward the best possible life (1989, 41-2). With these horizons I judge how well my life and others’ lives are being lived.

This map metaphor helps clarify what Rawls has in mind when he writes of comprehensive doctrines. He defines comprehensive doctrines as exercises in theoretical and practical reason that “normally” belong to “a tradition of thought and doctrine” (Rawls 2005, 59). We can think of theoretical reason as the map itself, giving us a sense of the moral landscape within which we are embedded and showing us the best paths available to navigate this terrain. On the other hand, we can think of practical reason as the placing of one’s self on the map and the orienting of one’s self in accordance with the paths outlined by theoretical reason. Because I know to some extent my location on the map, I can gauge whether I am moving closer to, or farther from, the good by making continual reference to the map in anticipation of future movements and reflection upon past movements. Practical reason, understood in this way, directs and judges action through a tale of my successes and failures on the journey toward the good (Taylor 1989, 72-3). In other words, theory shapes practice and vice versa through the medium of narratives, meaning that an individual’s life is the story of her adventures navigating this landscape.
In Chapter 2 I defined a tradition, which along with theoretical and practical reason is normally a constitutive element of a comprehensive doctrine, as a shared set of practices and corresponding beliefs oriented toward a telos continuing over time through the medium of intergenerational storytelling. Obviously, taking the telos and the good as synonymous, this definition bears a striking resemblance to Rawls’ definition of comprehensive doctrines. What I take Rawls to mean by a tradition is the intergenerational handing off of theoretical and practical reason. Using the map metaphor, we can elaborate on this definition by thinking of tradition as a gift given by those who treaded this path before, not to be adhered to dogmatically (even if those in the past say otherwise), but as an exemplary guide. It is always the case that I confront various obstacles on the path previous generations did not confront, but this only means that the map must be amended with new paths that circumnavigate these obstacles. For example, J.S. Mill amended the utilitarian tradition by drawing a distinction between higher and lower, or base, pleasures, claiming that higher pleasures are qualitatively more valuable than lower pleasures. He made this amendment because, envisioning a moral landscape where poetry and pushpin were of equal value, utilitarianism as Mill inherited it could not overcome the obstacle of meaninglessness on the path toward maximal utility. Tradition constitutes a sort of meta-narrative in the form of the intergenerational accrual of exemplary stories within which one’s life story occurs.

Of course, we regularly associate modernity with the death of tradition, which seems to bring my claim in Chapter 2 that practices, rules, and principles lose their normative force without traditional embedding into question. In light of this, I want to quickly note what it would take for a tradition to die. It is tempting to say it would only take something like an
insurmountable obstacle on all paths toward the good or the discovery of a new good that makes more sense to us than the old. An example of the former can be found in Patchen Markell’s work on recognition. He believes the “irreducible conditions” of the world render recognition impossible (2003, 3-5). In particular, the irreducible condition of human unpredictability prevents humans from obtaining with certainty knowledge of who they are. Assuming the good is, at least in part, constituted by others’ recognition or re-knowing of who I know I am, the irreducible condition of unpredictability creates an insurmountable obstacle on the path toward the good. We see the latter, a shift in the good, in certain theories of secularization that understand it as consisting “in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church” (Taylor 2007, 2). This story of secularization describes the Western world prior to modernity as one where participation in God’s law or will or love was the good, whereas the good in modernity is no longer necessarily connected to God. For whatever reason, in a secularized (understood in the above sense) world God no longer seems to make sense.

Neither insurmountable obstacles nor the discovery of a new good (these are by no means exhaustive when it comes to problems with traditions) suffice as good reasons for wholesale rejection of the old map, however. If we meet an insurmountable obstacle toward the good on the old paths, we are still veering off old paths in search of a new good whose paths are without such obstacles. In the wake of Western secularization, we still hold on to institutions like monogamous marriage and the family that were seen as landmarks on the path toward God in the past. Except now they are seen as landmarks on the path toward this good as well as many
In the case of a new good that makes more sense to us than an old good, we rely on fragments of old paths in a similar fashion.

It seems, then, that rejection of an old map is only warranted in the most extraordinary of situations, situations where nothing on the old map reflects the world around us. Only in these situations must we blaze an entirely new trail in the hope of discovering an entirely new good without recourse to the past as a guide. Hannah Arendt, citing Winston Churchill, once noted that this is the situation of the post-totalitarian world where supposedly permanent and natural rules of conduct are shown to be fluid (2003, 49-53). To paraphrase Marx, in the wake of totalitarianism we see that everything solid, including tradition, can melt into air. This melting, however, is not for the sake of capital accumulation, but for the sake of nature in the case of fascism and history in the case of Stalinism. Richard Rorty’s interpretation of his later work claims this view of tradition is put forth by Rawls. In the next chapter I show how this is not the case. Indeed, I doubt it has ever been the case that there has been a comprehensive death of tradition, although particular traditions have, more or less, died throughout history.

In any case, in TJ there is evidence that Rawls understands justice as an extension of a Kantian comprehensive doctrine. It presents the nature realized through acting in accordance with principles one would choose in the original position as the horizon of significance toward which humans ought to be oriented. Reflective equilibrium is the outcome of amending the

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20 It might be contended, in a pragmatist vein, that in our present situation we ought to give up on the search for a good and settle for minor improvements to the world as given to us. Perhaps the path we are on is not linear but circular, and our task is to clear obstacles on the path as they present themselves without the hope of advancing toward any greater good. But, even here we get a vision of the good life as embodied in those exemplary figures that perform the act of path-clearing well. And, with this vision of the good life in mind, many of us inevitably sense something more than the act of clearing the path, something greater existing beyond the edge of the trail calling us to seek it out.
conditions of the hypothetical choice situation in light of our practical application of its principles and vice versa. What is missing from this practical application, of course, is any discussion of actual exemplary practice. Further, justice as fairness is an amendment of a tradition of philosophy beginning with Kant insofar as it defines the horizon of significance as the realization of human potential as free, equal and rational – autonomous – beings (Rawls 1999, 221-2). Indeed, it is this vision of autonomy that moves us to respect human beings (Kant 1998, 43) and attempt to theorize from the eternally human perspective of the original position. What is missing from TJ is a history of the evolution of this tradition. Perhaps this evolution would, if the Kantian account actually played out in practice, look something like a history of movement toward the realization of “man’s original capacities” (Kant 1991, 41); that is, a history of progress toward the realization of humanity’s free, equal, and rational potential marked by exemplary individuals and events embodying this exclusively human way of being. Even with a few missing elements, it is fairly clear that Rawls presents justice as fairness in TJ as a theoretical and practical account of what constitutes a good human life embedded in the Kantian tradition of philosophy. Justice as fairness is grounded on a comprehensive account of the human. This comprehensive account is necessary, I contend, to inspire us to rationally imagine the universal perspective of eternity. Yet, it is precisely this comprehensive account of justice, among other things, that renders Rawls’ project unviable when it moves from the realm of theory to practice. It is to this problem of practical viability that I now turn.

Section III; Three Problems with TJ
In the previous sections I outlined Rawls’ method in *TJ* and its metaphysical presuppositions. It must posit a metaphysics in order to give normative force to the universal perspective of eternity. The fact that justice as fairness is theorized from this metaphysically valued perspective moves us to accept its principles. I see three problems confronting the immense, ambitious, and admirable project Rawls puts forth in *TJ*, although this list is not exhaustive. They are what I will call the problems of nihilism, reflective equilibrium, and stability. In the present section I explore each of these problems with a special focus on the third. Each problem not only has internal issues that must be addressed in order to be resolved, but also presuppose that the preceding problems are resolvable. For the problem of nihilism to be resolved, it must be shown that some worldly reality grounds our considered convictions. For the problem of reflective equilibrium to be resolved, it must be shown that nihilism is no longer a problem and that our conceptual definitions can be universally agreed upon from the perspective of eternity, rendering them valid. For the problem of stability to be resolved, it must be shown that the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium are overcome, and that justice and goodness are congruent. With the problems clearly articulated the concluding section explores the shift toward the diachronic mode of theorizing Rawls’ later work, a mode which is shown to solve most of these problems in the next chapter.

a. The Problem of Nihilism

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21 Throughout my exposition of the three problems I will make continual reference to *PL*, but only to clarify the basic argument of *TJ*. The major difference, shifting from diachronic to synchronic time, is not discussed until the next chapter.
Regarding the first problem, Rawls throughout *TJ* assumes all humans possess considered convictions and apply them to worldly phenomena. Humans can observe particular actions or events and judge them right or wrong, good, bad, or evil, in accordance with their considered convictions as general rules. If I have a considered conviction that political influence should not be commodified, then I judge it wrong when a member of Congress only pays attention to, and acts in accordance with, the interests of the major donors to her electoral campaigns. This kind of judgment is determinant: applying the universal rule prescribed by my considered convictions to particular events in the world.

The problem of nihilism is, in part, the problem of seeing all considered convictions and all the judgments they make possible as resting on nothing real in a worldly sense. This may strike many as an odd understanding of nihilism, given its standard Nietzschean definition as seen, for example, in Martin Heidegger’s lectures on *The Will to Power* as “the process of the devaluation of the uppermost values hitherto” (1982, 30). The nothing to which the nihil of nihilism refers in this definition is valuelessness, but to rest content with this definition is to ignore that which precedes the devaluation of the uppermost values: “man [becoming] the measure and center of beings” (28). Preceding the devaluation of the uppermost values is the turning away of individual humans from the world and toward the subject, and a corresponding belief that all values are nothing more than projections of human will.

It is in this turning away that I identify nihilism as the absence of reference to worldly reality. The reality upon which considered convictions rest is made up of the various cultural
and human relationships that *apparently* constitute the world.\textsuperscript{22} By virtue of the fact that these relationships *appear* they presuppose the presence of a plurality of others who witness their appearance and preclude the possibility of these relationships are nothing more than projections of the subject’s will. Worldly reality is intersubjectively perceived.

Relevant for politics, we could place the stories attached to legal and cultural documents under the category of cultural relationships and the stories of humans relating to each other through interpretation or deliberation mediated by cultural relationships under the category of human relationships. Both kinds of relationships are notably absent from Rawls’ project as presented in *TJ*, at least as grounds for our considered convictions. Indeed, there is a good case to be made that the main arguments of *TJ* presuppose, and even reinforce, nihilism as the turning inward of the subject so that he may be “unencumbered” by the world (Sandel 1998) and, therefore, fully autonomous. In any case, under the conditions of nihilism, the conviction that political influence should not be commodified could be replaced with another conviction, or upheld indefinitely, or amended, but never with reference to worldly reality as its ground. *No worldly reality* differentiates the merits of one conviction from the merits of another. At best, Rawls posits Kantian metaphysics as the ground for our convictions, but this ground is only evident to the rational imagination freed from the arbitrary and contingent nature of real relationships. This ground is disconcerting insofar as it fails to recognize that it is only through reference to the contingent relationships constitutive of the world that justice could gain lasting practical realization.

\textsuperscript{22}I further explore reality, so construed, in Chapter 4, Section 2.
Indeed, Hannah Arendt’s work on judgment advances just this sort of thesis. According to her, the recognition that considered convictions are not grounded in worldly reality leads to an “unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment” (2003, 146) because the considered convictions that inform our judgment retain their vitality only with such a ground. With the help of neuroscience, recent work put forth by Leslie Thiele lends support to Arendt’s thesis. Narrative accounts of exemplary persons and events— the stories that make up a tradition— are themselves aspects of worldly reality that inspire and cultivate human judgment (2006, Chapter 6; 286-291). The present age is plagued by the spread of the belief that no worldly reality grounds, or need ground, the convictions which guide our judgment. Convictions derived from distances of reason alone or technologically mediated science that escape the contingencies of worldly reality replace convictions derived from our embedded experience of this very reality. Belief in the superiority and sufficiency of the former catalyzes nihilism, shifting its scope from the marginal concern of certain academic circles to the “objective situation” (Arendt 2005, 204) of our age. If it is in fact the case that our considered convictions are increasingly without ground in worldly reality, and the absence of grounding in worldly reality necessarily leaves considered convictions intolerably open to dissolution, then we must either considerably revise, or completely scrap, Rawls’ project.

b. The Problem of Reflective Equilibrium

The second problem confronting TJ is the problem of reflective equilibrium. Assume, for the moment, that the problem of nihilism is overcome and we are willing and able to judge on the basis of our considered convictions because grounded in worldly reality. Recall that
reflective equilibrium is achieved when our considered convictions concerning justice are in accord with the conditions of the original position. For example, a considered conviction Rawls believes we share and is embodied in the original position is the conviction that a conception of justice should not be chosen solely because it favors one’s own social position (2005, 24). This, of course, reflects the value of equality and takes on the form of the veil of ignorance in the original position.

The problem of reflective equilibrium is the problem of being unable to reach this point of agreement on considered convictions, and therefore being unable to posit acceptable conditions for the original position; conditions that reflect the affirmation of the principle of respect for persons. Rawls alludes to this problem in his discussion of the “burdens of judgment” in PL, claiming there is a certain “indeterminacy” characterizing “all our concepts” (56). Even if we do judge on the basis of considered convictions rooted in worldly reality, and revise these convictions in light of the convictions of others in the hopes of coming to an agreement, the concepts reflected in these convictions cannot be definitively defined. All citizens may value the freedom, equality, and rationality potentially possessed by all humans, and these values may ground their considered convictions, but freedom, equality, and rationality are “essentially contested concepts.” William Connolly, citing W.B. Gallie, defines essentially contested concepts as concepts that “essentially involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (1993, 10).23 What one citizen takes to be the best definition of freedom is not the definition another affirms. Even after sincerely debating the merits of both

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23 See also Klosko (2012, 28).
definitions, they cannot agree on which definition is best. One claims, in a negative vein, freedom is the absence of constraints on a person’s movement, whereas another claims, in a positive vein, that freedom presupposes certain social and material prerequisites beyond the absence of constraint.

A term such as freedom becomes a container for an irreducible variety of definitions none of which has a greater claim to being the definition that would be affirmed from the perspective of eternity than the others. Of course, one definition of freedom may be more widely accepted than others, but this is due in large part to the contingencies of time and place across which no such definition is continually accepted. There are always other definitions silenced by the meaning that happens to be dominant at this point in time. Thus, as Bonnie Honig notes, for Rawls to claim that justice as fairness reflects the perspective of eternity as the perspective of all free, equal, and rational persons across time and social position is for Rawls to ignore the fact that some definitions of freedom, equality, and rationality are being excluded. There are certain “remainders” in Rawls’ theory that he attempts to “dissolve” by contending that their unwillingness or inability to affirm the definitions of freedom, equality, and rationality put forth by Rawls renders them unworthy of consideration in the hypothetical choice situation of the original position (Honig 1993, 127).

The simple acknowledgment of the persistence of these remainders brings into question the value Rawls places on reflective equilibrium. For, if certain definitions of the values that ground reflective equilibrium are systematically excluded in Rawls’ theory, and the definitions of these values are essentially contested, then justice as fairness cannot reflect a truly universal, respectful, perspective. The perspective of eternity that a Kantian metaphysics inspires us to
pursue is permanently out of our reach because rendered particular via the acknowledgment of remainders. As such, claiming that one speaks from the perspective of eternity, or even a perspective arrived at out of an orientation toward the perspective of eternity, always comes at the cost of excluding some other perspectives reflecting the same sort of claim. In other words, the problem of reflective equilibrium proves that Rawls fails to escape the connection between an orientation toward the universal and violence pervading the Greco-Roman tradition.

c. The Problem of Stability

The final problem confronting TJ is the only one I list that Rawls explicitly acknowledges: the problem of stability. A conception of justice is stable when “those taking part in [just] arrangements acquire the corresponding sense of justice and desire to do their part in maintaining them” (Rawls 1999, 398). The sense of justice is “the desire to act in accordance with the principles that would be chosen in the original position” (275). In other words, the sense of justice is the desire to act in accordance with the principle of respect for persons. The sense of justice is not just thoughtlessly affirmed through a certain form of habituation, although this may be sufficient for many citizens to act in accordance with this sense. It must, if it is to effectively regulate the actions of citizens in a well-ordered society into the foreseeable future, accord with those citizens’ comprehensive doctrines. That is, justice and goodness must be congruent. Most citizens in a well-ordered society who critically assess justice in light of their comprehensive doctrines must recognize that it is good to be guided by the sense of justice for justice as fairness to achieve stability. This is more than recognition that one’s good affirms the priority of the principle of respect for persons. It is, instead, recognition that one’s good accords
with Rawls’ respectful method for choosing the principles of justice without specifying the content of those principles. It is, given the fact that part of this method involves a veil of ignorance concerning one’s conception of the good, recognition that one’s conception of the good paradoxically moves her to ignore this conception when discerning principles of justice.

In light of this, the problem of stability can be stated as follows: assuming that neither nihilism nor reflective equilibrium pose a problem for justice as fairness, we assert that we all do in fact share certain considered convictions concerning justice, and that these convictions are rooted in the clearly defined values of freedom and equality. Stability as it relates to the congruence of justice and goodness comes under threat when it is clear that the prioritization of justice vis-à-vis other goods varies across different comprehensive doctrines. It is always the case, for example, that justice conflicts with goods like intimate love, so any comprehensive doctrine that gives goods like intimate love lexical priority over justice when citizens publicly deliberate and make decisions about political concerns poses a problem for Rawls’ theory. Justice is stable when most citizens in their political deliberations and decisions prioritize justice over these other goods and unstable when most citizens in their political deliberations and decisions prioritize these other goods over justice. In order to prove justice as fairness is stable Rawls must show why most citizens living in a well-ordered society would, in their political deliberations and decisions, prioritize justice over other goods if they happen to conflict. He must show why it is good for most citizens to be just.

Initially, it seems that Rawls wants to argue against arguments like the one I presented in Section I above, that the good of justice is not a fully comprehensive good, a good as a horizon of significance directing all facets of a human life as a comprehensive doctrine, but a partially
comprehensive thin good concerned with the regulation of primary goods presupposed by most fully comprehensive doctrines.\textsuperscript{24} Primary goods are “things that every rational man is presumed to want,” things both social and natural (54). By rational Rawls does not have egotistical or self-interested persons in mind, but persons pursuing a plan of life as given by a comprehensive doctrine. Put in the terms of the map metaphor in Section I, primary goods are the most common conditions of theory, practice, and traditional inheritance. It is important that they are things humans are presumed to “want,” not “need,” because this leaves open the possibility that there may be no absolutely necessary primary goods. Of course, without food, water, some way of moving, some way of interpreting the map, some person to give me the map, etc. I would not be able to move in accordance with the path as the map specifies or obtain the map in the first place. Similarly, Rawls wants to say without rights, liberties, health, self-respect, etc. humans would not normally be able to pursue the good. Justice is exclusively concerned with regulating these normally necessary conditions. These conditions are normally necessary because we can easily envision scenarios where humans deny these primary goods for the sake of the good toward which their life is oriented, such as fasting, various vows limiting human interaction, various forms of sacrifice, etc. Points on the path toward the good that negate the conditions that made getting to these points possible are always within the realm of possibility. In any case, to say justice is the thin good in accordance with which primary goods are oriented is to say justice normally makes it possible to pursue what it is good to be. Rawls takes it upon himself in the final third of T\textit{J} to show how this is the case.

\textsuperscript{24} Justice reflects an ontic, rather than an ontological, account when it is partially comprehensive.
There are three ways in which justice can be understood as a thin good. First, Rawls contends that the relations of friends and family are presupposed by most comprehensive doctrines. With this in mind he claims, further, that we have a desire to do justice to those (friends and family) with whom we are intimately related. Assuming that defecting from justice will detrimentally affect some fellow citizens in a society structured in accordance with these principles, that one’s intimates are fellow citizens, and that there is no way to control which citizens will be detrimentally affected if one defects, one ought to uphold one’s sense of justice for the sake of those with whom she is intimately related (1999, 500). Second, moving from what we might call the sphere of intimate to the sphere of social relations, Rawls claims that intrinsically valuable shared institutions and activities are presupposed by most rational life plans as well. He writes, “We need one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for their own sake, and the successes and enjoyments of others are necessary for and complementary to our own good” (458). It is only through these institutions and activities, these “social unions,” that individuals realize their potential excellences. A well-ordered society is a “social union of social unions,” meaning “it realizes to a preeminent degree the various forms of human activity” (500). Insofar as rational life plans presuppose various institutions and activities (marriage, schooling, recreation, etc.) and a well-ordered society, understood as a society whose members act in accordance with their sense of justice, best suffices for realizing these institutions and activities, it is rational for persons to act in accordance with their sense of justice/the principle of respect for persons.

25 In the following paragraphs I refer to various kinds of human “relations.” To be clear, these are distinct from the human relationships constitutive of worldly reality insofar as they lack clear reference to the cultural relationships constitutive of worldly reality.
Of the greatest importance for Rawls is the third and final reason justice is a thin good, which we might call the reason dealing with the sphere of moral relations. The reason dealing with the sphere of moral relations is the metaphysical account of Rawls’ theory described in Section I. Recall that to act in accordance with the principles of justice is to express one’s nature as a free and equal rational being and, by doing so, realize one’s potential insofar as one is human. Whereas the first two reasons for prioritizing justice as a thin good deal with the fact that most comprehensive doctrines presuppose the primary goods justice would provide, so a denial of justice would be irrational, right action in light of the reason dealing with the sphere of moral relations realizes what it is minimally good for a human being to be, which is free, equal, and rational. If humans are not, at a minimum, free, equal, and rational, then there is no human way to ensure that the basic structure of society is governed by anything other than “the contingencies and accidents of the world” (503). To submit to a world such as this is to deny our potential as human beings; it is to degradingly deny those very aspects of human beings that make them worthy of respect. Because the principles implicit in the sense of justice are derived from the thin conception of the good as freedom, equality, and rationality presupposed by all humans qua humans, it achieves stability.

Yet, it is precisely the solution to the problem of stability given by the reason dealing with the sphere of moral relations that renders justice as fairness unstable. In TJ Rawls fails to take into account what the fact of reasonable pluralism that, as Chapter 2 showed, fundamentally characterizes our liberal democratic world. The partially comprehensive doctrine given in TJ posits that justice is good because by acting in accordance with its principles we act autonomously and realize our potential as humans. This Kantian metaphysical account is
fundamentally at odds with other comprehensive doctrines that orient good citizens in our liberal democratic world. A religious comprehensive doctrine that posits that submission to God realizes our potential as creatures made in God’s image is fundamentally opposed to the idea that human potential is realized via autonomous action, yet both may overlap when it comes to certain conceptions of justice.

To elaborate a bit further, there are at least two aspects of the fact of reasonable pluralism that force Rawls to revise his theory if it is to adequately translate into practice. First, there is the conflict over fundamentals amongst comprehensive doctrines, which is unavoidable in a just society. Second, most citizens orienting their lives according to these fundamentally irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines recognize some political overlap across these doctrines in the form of fundamental ideas made manifest in their practices as citizens in a well-ordered society. Given the fact of reasonable pluralism, it cannot be the case that a Kantian metaphysical account of justice is congruent with comprehensive doctrines that fundamentally conflict with that very metaphysical account. As such, the Kantian account of justice outlined in *TJ* is unstable, requiring certain amendments found in Rawls’ later work. It is to these amendments that I turn in Chapter 4.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter it was argued that justice as fairness in *TJ* derives its normative force from a Kantian comprehensive doctrine. This comprehensive doctrine posits that justice is good because to act in accordance with justice is to act from a perspective reflecting that which is definitively human across time and social position. In other words, to act in accordance with
Justice is to act in a way that affirms the principle of respect for persons, where persons are beings who possess the potential to be free, equal and rational.

Justice as fairness so construed is plagued by three problems: the problem of nihilism, the problem of reflective equilibrium, and the problem of stability. The problem of nihilism is the problem of seeing our considered convictions, which are the building blocks of Rawls’ theory, as grounded in no worldly reality. The Kantian metaphysical grounding for these convictions, as presented in *TJ*, lacks the worldly referent that would render justice’s worldly realization possible. The problem of reflective equilibrium is the problem of being unable, once the problem of nihilism is overcome, to reach reflective equilibrium because the values that ground our considered convictions and render persons worthy of respect are essentially contestable. In other words, there is no universally agreed upon definition of these values, even for those inspired by the same Kantian metaphysical account of humanity. The problem of stability is the problem of being, once the problem of reflective equilibrium is overcome, unable to ensure that citizens will prioritize justice over other goods given the varying conceptions of the good to which they adhere. Given the fact of reasonable pluralism that fundamentally characterizes the liberal democratic world, so long as justice as fairness is explicitly grounded in a Kantian comprehensive doctrine it will fail to achieve the consensus across other comprehensive doctrines affirming the principle of respect for persons on different grounds necessary for justice’s stable realization.

In the next chapter I will show how Rawls is able to overcome nearly all of these problems by appealing to the fundamental ideas of a liberal democracy’s public political culture. These ideas develop diachronically through enacting and telling exemplary stories constitutive of
the liberal democratic political tradition. Comprehensive doctrines, when reasonable, are fundamentally irreconcilable attempts to make sense of these stories that, in turn, ensure that these stories are continually told and enacted by liberal democratic citizens.
CHAPTER 4: RAWLS’ HISTORICAL TURN

Introduction

*Only in narrative form do you discern, not in a philosophical or theological explanation, which allows you rather to discuss.*

-Pope Francis (2013)

In the introduction to Political Liberalism (*PL*) John Rawls claims the problem of stability renders justice as fairness impractical unless certain aspects of the theory are amended or clarified. In the previous chapter, I argued stability requires justice as fairness to overcome the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium as well. The thesis of this chapter is that the diachronic construal of Rawls’ project as presented in *PL* overcomes the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium, while hinting at a possible way of overcoming the problem of stability. This possible solution comes to the fore in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” particularly with the introduction of the proviso and the claim that the “wide view of public political culture” the proviso engenders “recognizes that the roots of democratic citizens’ allegiance to their political conceptions lie in their respective comprehensive doctrines, both religious and nonreligious” (2005, 463). The novelty of Rawls’ work vis-à-vis other political liberals like Charles Larmore is its vision of political morality as free-standing not in terms of
autonomy or self-sufficiency, but in terms of its ability to sincerely reflect the support of a plurality of comprehensive doctrines that affirm the principle of respect for persons.

There are, however, certain barriers in Rawls’ later work as it stands that prevent a full-fledged theoretical articulation of free-standing political morality so understood. They are rooted in the story Rawls tells. In particular, his largely negative construal of the religious origins of modernity. What I see in Rawls’ later work is the beginning of an unfinished project, one that sees the public political expression of comprehensive doctrines that fundamentally conflict not solely as a problem, but also as the only way to satisfactorily ensure that liberal political conceptions of justice – conceptions of justice reflecting the affirmation of the principle of respect for persons – retain their normative force in the modern world. In general, what I am suggesting is that the story of liberalism’s rise needs to be complicated if stability for the right reasons is to be possible in the context of reasonable pluralism. Transcendent conceptions of the good, in the complicated story, are not only political problems overcome following the Wars of Religion with the rise of the liberal democratic political tradition, but that which keep this tradition alive.

To be clear, I am intentionally avoiding debates about the disproportionate cognitive burdens religious citizens suffer relative to their secular cohorts given the duties of citizenship, especially the duty of civility and the corresponding principle of reciprocity, political liberalism requires.26 Instead, I am suggesting that political liberalism must relax or amend these duties when it comes to the articulation of comprehensive doctrines in public debates and decisions.

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26 For these arguments see Greenawalt (1995); Wolterstorff and Audi (1997); Weithman (2002); Habermas (2008, Chapter 5); Lafont (2009).
over political concerns so that the political tradition from which these duties are derived retains its vitality. In other words, my argument is that stability requires the continued articulation of comprehensive doctrines in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. Paul Ricoeur (2000, 72-5), Eldon J. Eisenach (2002, 11-4), and Charles Taylor (2007, 532; 2011b, 105-7) all note this aspect of Rawls’ later work in terms of his idea of an overlapping consensus, although none of them sufficiently explore (1) the reasons Rawls relies on a narrative foundation in PL or (2) the need for Rawls to complicate his story in order for the proviso and the wide view of public political culture to have a solid narrative, worldly, foundation. This is my present task.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In Section I I recount the historical ideas and events that brought about political liberalism, ending with an overview of Rawls’ unique assessment of this development. In Section II I reconceive reasonableness in light of political liberalism’s reliance on a diachronic account. In Section III I revisit the three problems with Rawls’ theory as presented in A Theory of Justice (TJ), arguing that all but the problem of stability are overcome when justice is conceived diachronically. In Section IV I suggest Rawls points us toward a way of overcoming the problem of stability with the proviso and wide view of public political culture, but this way cannot be realized unless Rawls’ story is significantly revised to note the essential political role reasonable comprehensive doctrines played in bringing about, and continue to play in maintaining, the liberal democratic political tradition.

Section I: Political Liberalism’s Diachronic Account

In an essay on the topic of political liberalism, Charles Larmore argues that at its base is “one of the cardinal experiences of modernity.” It is the experience, corresponding to “[a]
century of bloody religious wars,” of “reasonable disagreement,” the fact that “reasonable people
tend naturally to differ and disagree about the nature of the good life.” Reason, by which
Larmore means “thinking and conversing in good faith and applying, as best one can, the general
capacities of reason that belong to every domain of inquiry,” cannot alone ensure unanimous
agreement in the political deliberations and decisions of modern citizens (1996, 122). However,
the modern inability to achieve reasonable agreement does not leave citizens without some
shared basis for adjudicating their political deliberations and decisions. Indeed, it is precisely the
past and present experience of reasonable disagreement definitive of a liberal democratic
political tradition that grounds all subsequent theorizing. Larmore writes,

…liberal polities must keep alive a sense of the past experience from which they
derive… The common life on which a liberal order depends must involve… an
allegiance to the past that is more reflective than just a sense of continuity. It
must be the life of a people united by what they have learned together from the
things that once came to divide them. (144)

Only by continually enacting and telling the story of its genesis is political liberalism a viable
possibility.

In light of this it makes sense that a narrative account of political liberalism’s historical
genesis frames nearly every articulation of the theory. In addition to Larmore, consider the work
of Judith Shklar and John Rawls. Shklar offers a brief account in her essay “The Liberalism of
Fear”: “[liberalism] has its origins in post-Reformation Europe. Its origins are in the terrible
tension within Christianity between the demands of creedal orthodoxy and those of charity,
between faith and morality” (2004, 151). Toleration of creedal differences arose as either a
positive expression of Christian charity or a negative expression of skepticism’s disdain for “cruelty and fanaticism” (ibid.). What both grounds for toleration shared was the experience of “horror” at the “absolute evil” of cruelty, which over time became the autonomous – normatively forceful without claiming a comprehensive ground – political principle of “mutual respect” (ibid.). Mutual respect, which I will be referring to as political respect below, became the ground of all subsequent liberal political institutions and practices. Rawls also claims political liberalism finds its “historical origin… in the Reformation and its aftermath” (2005, xxiv). He notes that this conflict was novel in Western history because it was over conceptions of the good that contained “a transcendent element not admitting of compromise,” which, in turn, forced a choice between “mortal conflict moderated by only circumstance and exhaustion, or equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought” (xxvi). I take Shklar’s toleration to be synonymous with Rawls’ equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, and while Rawls is not as explicit about the role political respect plays in his story, it is at the very least implied by his continued reliance on the “criterion of reciprocity” in his later work. This criterion, which becomes “freestanding” over time (163-4), requires liberal democratic citizens to offer reasons in their public deliberations and decisions over political concerns that all other citizens with whom they irreconcilably disagree at in terms of comprehensive doctrines could accept.

Intellectually, Larmore and Shklar see what Mark Lilla calls a “Great Separation” occurring in the decades following the Wars of Religion. The tolerant liberal state disestablished from the church promoted an ethos of mutual respect among its subjects, the stability of which

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required the “intellectual art of distinguishing questions regarding the basic structure of society from ultimate questions regarding God, the world, and human spiritual destiny” (Lilla 2008, 298). The challenge Newtonian science posed to Christian cosmology, which was itself in large part a reflection of Greek cosmology, created the intellectual condition of possibility for this ethos (65). In the wake of the death of Christian cosmology, the liberal ethos manifested itself as a fragile way of being that required, and continues to require, extensive theoretical and practical cultivation. Shklar similarly notes that over time citizens acting within the confines of “fair procedures and the rule of law” cultivated “habits of patience, self-restraint, respect for the claims of others, and caution” (160). Originally, within the context of Latin Christendom, these procedures were justified with reference to “a morality that saw toleration as an expression of Christian charity,” but later saw severance of “the bond between conscience and God,” basing liberal political procedures and principles exclusively on the moral imperative, rooted in fear, to protect the former (151). Unlike Lilla, Shklar does not offer an intellectual reason for this severance, but Larmore does. He argues that the severance is “the inner logic of Judeo-Christian theism” (1996, 42). It rests, not on a negation of a pre-modern cosmology, but on a conception of God as a being who “is so great he does not have to exist” (41). God, so conceived, is not a physical first mover or a moral first principle. God is, instead, beyond any such necessary assertions, meaning all of morality – the “rules of our common life” (44) – may be conceived without reference to God. Paradoxically, a condition of secular morality’s – morality without reference to God – possibility is a particular conception of God.

Recent scholarship on the intellectual role Christianity played in the rise of modernity to some extent confirms Larmore’s, and disconfirms Lilla’s, argument. I will, following Charles
Taylor, call this account of modernity the “Intellectual Deviation” (ID) story (2007, 773-776). Within theology, one of the most influential ID accounts is put forth by John Milbank in his *Theology and Social Theory*.28 For God to be so great that he need not exist, the conception of God’s being needed to undergo a fundamental transformation. The work of Oxford-educated Franciscans like Duns Scotus (1266-1308) and, later, William of Ockham (1287-1347) marked the intellectual beginnings of this transformation, culminating in the nominalist political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). According to Milbank, the modern political ideologies of absolutism and liberalism originate in “a theology of creation *ex nihilo*, reinterpreted in terms of infinite, uninhibited power” (2006, 17). To assert that God’s goodness or rationality is the same as (univocal ontology) or like (analogical ontology) human goodness or rationality is to deny that God is absolutely other in the form of omnipotent will. Instead, when one speaks of God’s rationality or goodness these *names* are nothing more than a means of coping with the reality of God’s absolute difference from humanity (equivocal ontology).29 The goodness or rationality of God is the goodness or rationality that God uniquely wills into being, unconstrained by any previous conception of goodness or rationality. All of God’s creation, including God’s own attributes, are contingent and unpredictable products of God’s omnipotent will. The nominalist God provides a setting for a shift in cosmology, and the modern understanding of the universe as mechanistic rather than teleological begins to manifest itself as the only cosmological conception “compatible with a God whose sovereignty was defined in terms of the endless freedom of fiat” (Taylor 1989, 161). The universe before God’s imposition

28 For other recent theological work advancing this thesis see Illich (2005, 64-79) and Hart (2010, 219-228)
29 For a clear and concise discussion of the three kinds of ontology see Lynch (2004, 153-215).
of order from without was something like the tohu wa-bohu (formless void) of unrelated matter depicted in Genesis 1:2 before God’s imposition of movement and light.

Within political theory, Michael Allen Gillespie’s The Theological Origins of Modernity offers a convincing account of the way modern humans, conceiving themselves as beings “made” in the image of the nominalist God, began transferring divine attributes to themselves and other non-divine phenomena. The nominalist God was “the freely acting, infinite, and radically omnipotent creator of heaven and earth, the first cause and source of all motion, the unity of all things, and the source of all standards of good and evil” (2008, 274). While retaining a nominalist, equivocal, ontology, other characteristics of God were transferred “to human beings (an infinite human will), the natural world (universal mechanical causality), social forces (the general will, the hidden hand), and history (the idea of progress, dialectical development, the cunning of reason)” (273). We still, to a large extent, reside in a world conceived in terms of nominalist ontology, as mechanized (disenchanted) rather than imbued with meaning and purpose (enchanted), even if many of us disagree on the specifics. Meaning and purpose in a mechanized world are, like laws of nature or the laws of an omnipotent God, divine or human constructs willfully imposed on atomized matter from without.

The horrors of the Wars of Religion, and a widespread sense that irresolvable theological debates were their cause, spurred sets of practices that paved the way for the transference of divine attributes to the non-divine. This account is, as Taylor calls it, the Reform Master Narrative (RMN) that complements ID. He writes, “It was perhaps more than understandable that, after the terrible struggles around deep theological issues to do with grace, free will, and predestination, many people should hunger for a less theologically elaborate faith which would
guide them towards holy living” (2007, 225). Following the Wars of Religion new disciplines were introduced by elites throughout Europe to cultivate peace, order, and civility as reflections of a more authentic and less fanatical Christian faith. This new faith rested on the premise that God’s laws could be known through reason or revelation along with a belief that it was within human power to impose these laws in the form of certain disciplines of peace, order, and civility on a fallen world. The experience of efficacy in implementing these disciplines allowed for an “anthropocentric shift” (774) in Western conceptions of the self and the world. Elites began conceiving transformative change as within their own power without any need for God’s grace or guidance, and this, in turn, spurred philosophers like Kant and Hume to devise complementary exclusively human comprehensive doctrines to replace theological ones. Yet, exclusive humanism never fully replaced theism at a political level, such that contemporary liberal democracies continue to be characterized by a plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews, all to some extent overlapping in affirmation of the principle of respect for persons and corresponding enacted and told exemplary stories constitutive of the liberal democratic political position.

Rawls is reluctant to frame his project in terms of this religiously-driven history. Indeed, one of his earliest considerations of the historical origins of political liberalism and, in turn, justice as fairness, does not give special weight to the Wars of Religion relative to the other forces that brought about modernity. In the lecture series “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” published in 1980, Rawls contends that justice as fairness is a “constructivist” conception of justice. By this Rawls means that justice as fairness is the outcome of a procedure (the hypothetical choice situation of the original position) an element of which is “a particular
conception of the person” (516). His use of a “conception of the person” rather than, say, a person as specified by certain natural or essential features avoids the metaphysical dilemmas justice as fairness confronts in TJ, as discussed in the previous chapter. Instead, the conception of the person is given by “the public culture of a democratic society” (518), the culture arising out of the stories enacted and told by citizens constituting a liberal democratic tradition. The values of freedom and equality justice as fairness supposedly reconciles in TJ are no longer conceived as values affirmed by all humans qua free, equal, and rational beings, although they still reflect the principle of respect for persons. Instead, freedom and equality are of value when a liberal democratic political tradition is kept alive and well by citizens who embody, and celebrate embodiments of, these values. This, in turn, means that the original position only makes sense as a procedure determining principles of justice in a liberal democracy where free and equal citizens embedded in, and continuing, this tradition, rather than humans generally, rule and are ruled. According to Rawls, liberal democracy, with its foundational values of freedom and equality, has existed in the West “since, let’s say, the Declaration of Independence” (518). To be clear, freedom and equality were embodied and pursued prior to the Declaration of Independence. In TJ Rawls alludes to the former as the liberty of the moderns and the latter as the liberty of the ancients, relying on Benjamin Constant’s famous distinction (176-7), and later makes this connection explicit in PL (4-5). Thus, as the liberty of the ancients, the embodiment and pursuit of equality goes back to, at least, the time of the polis in ancient Athens. The embodiment and pursuit of freedom, on the other hand, is much more recent.

Freedom’s novelty comes to the fore in Rawls’ 1985 essay “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical.” This value originally manifests itself in the West through “the Wars of
Religion following the Reformation and the subsequent development of the principle of
toleration, and in the growth of constitutional government and the institutions of large industrial
market economies” (225). Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries in the West, presumably as a
consequence of the Wars of Religion and the Peace of Westphalia, developed freedom of thought
and conscience, the rule of law, and the accumulation of capital, all of which continue to signal
embodiments of modern freedom. In Rawls’ story freedom developed prior to the 18th century’s
Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence was the formal documentation
of an attempt to reconcile the values of freedom and equality by appealing to the higher-order
principle of respect for persons that these values reflected. As evidence of this consider Thomas
Jefferson’s claim in Query XIV of his Notes on the State of Virginia, published nine years after
the Declaration of Independence, that every Virginian’s education should consist of, among other
things, “the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European and American history” (2005,
257-8). Equality is embodied in the polis of ancient Athens and the republic of ancient Rome,
freedom in the practices of toleration in post-Reformation Europe, and their respectful
combination in America. We who find ourselves born in, or voluntarily joining, liberal
democracies are participants in “a certain political tradition” (Rawls 1985, 225) that enacts and
tells stories of embodiments of equality, freedom, and the more fundamental principle of respect
for persons.

The final version of Rawls’ story of liberal democracy’s historical development is found
in the introduction to the first edition of PL, and goes into greater detail concerning the origins of
freedom. Here, freedom is once again seen as an outgrowth of the Wars of Religion, but he
emphasizes a certain novelty of cause characterizing these wars without historical precedent.
What is new about this clash is that it introduces into people’s conceptions of their
good a transcendent element not admitting of compromise. This element forces
either mortal conflict moderated only by circumstance and exhaustion, or equal
liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Except on the basis of these last,
firmly founded and publicly recognized, no reasonable political conception of
justice is possible. Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth
of that irreconcilable latent conflict. (2005, xxvi)

The cause of the conflict was the presence of a plurality of comprehensive doctrines oriented
toward transcendent conceptions of the good – all variants of the Judeo-Christian tradition –
ving for power. Prior to the Reformation the hierarchical authority of the Roman Catholic
Church served to tame the radically anti-ethical potential of this transcendent conception.
Access to God was mediated through the Pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests until it finally
reached the common parishioners, all of whom understood this hierarchy to be authorized by
revelation. The Reformation brought the authority of this hierarchy into doubt (xxiii-iv). We see
Catholics and Protestants violently clashing (and, at times, forming coalitions) with each other,
believing victory would prove the conception of the good they advanced was correct. Due to an
unwillingness to compromise on certain comprehensive matters, the warring factions faced the
prospect of endless conflict. Finding this consequence unbearable, all parties agreed to affirm
the principle of toleration – the value of freedom – in the form of practices protecting “equal
liberty of conscience and freedom of thought.” Originally, the principle of toleration reflected an
appeal to Christian charity across confessions – a religious form of the principle of respect for
persons – as a quick glance at John Locke’s famous “Letter” makes clear (2010, 3). Rawls,
unlike Shklar and Larmore, conspicuously avoids noting the religious foundation of the principle
of toleration, presumably because any such claim is far too controversial in the reasonably
pluralistic present world. That is, he employs a “method of avoidance” (1985, 231) in telling the story of liberal democracy’s development. In any case, affirmation of the principle of toleration continued to reflect a “transcendent” element in the form of an unwillingness to compromise with those who refused to prioritize toleration above all else in their deliberations and decisions over political concerns.

With the political embodiment of the principle of toleration, along with other aspects of the modern understanding of freedom, a constitutional consensus freed from an exclusive reliance on a religious foundation came into being. Initially, both the democratic mode of protecting freedom, which is what I have been calling equality, and freedom itself in the form of the principle of toleration were reluctantly accepted by all parties involved. This form of agreement is what Rawls calls a *modus vivendi*: an agreement of convenience that all parties are willing to violate if circumstances allow. For whatever reason (again, Rawls wants to avoid discussion of religious foundations because too controversial), this agreement lasted for a period of time long enough for citizens to “shift [their] comprehensive doctrines so that they at least accept[ed] the principles of a liberal constitution” (2005, 163). That is, after living under institutions that encouraged practical embodiment the values of equality and freedom reflecting the principle of respect for persons for a time citizens amended their comprehensive doctrines so as to render them congruent with respect for persons. Embodiment and pursuit of equality and freedom did not, however, fit into a single comprehensive doctrine shared by all citizens,

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30 The story at this point in *PL* shifts from an actual to a hypothetical history, but it is clear that Rawls thinks at least North America and Western Europe more or less politically developed following this trajectory.
realizing their potential to the greatest degree. If it had, then reasonable pluralism would not have become a fact of liberal democratic political culture.

The final stage in the development of liberal democracy saw citizens distinguishing the background culture of civil society from the public political culture of the institutions that governed civil society. At the stage of a constitutional consensus the language of one was the language of the other, but because the world of the background culture constantly fluctuated a new language reflecting the plurality of comprehensive doctrines composing the background culture without exclusively relying on the temporal persistence of any single one had to develop through citizens engaging in the democratic practices of deliberation and majority rule. In order to gain support for their positions and form a majority citizens “[moved] out of the narrower circle of their own views” and “[developed] political conceptions in terms of which they [could] explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public” (165). These political conceptions specified certain fundamental ideas shared across citizens’ comprehensive doctrines that served as sufficient reasons (public reasons), because they were in accord with each citizen’s comprehensive doctrine and could be in accord with others’, for supporting or opposing political thoughts and actions. When comprehensive doctrines began supporting a pre-existing political conception, or attempted to develop a new political conception, that other citizens advancing irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines could accept, they became reasonable. In other words, reasonable comprehensive doctrines were those that affirmed the embodiment and pursuit of the political respect.

With this exclusively political language citizens began recognizing the distinction between the background culture where it was without currency and the public political culture
where it was the lingua franca. This shared acknowledgment marked the last stage of liberal democracy’s development: an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines around fundamental ideas made manifest through the practice of citizens embodying and pursuing freedom and equality in their deliberations and decisions concerning politics. Put simply, an overlapping consensus came into being when a plurality of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines affirmed the embodiment and pursuit of political respect in their deliberations and decisions over political concerns.

For Rawls, the most important fundamental ideas on which reasonable comprehensive doctrines overlapped were those of society as a fair system of cooperation and the person as free and equal. These ideas were, and continue to be, “central to the democratic ideal” (167), and ground the method of theorizing justice outlined in TJ. Freedom and equality – those values reflected in the conditions of the original position – became widely recognized as essential characteristics of the ideal citizen, an ideal clarified through the practices of actual citizens embodying and pursuing these values in their public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. All irreconcilable comprehensive reasons for embodying and pursuing these values were relegated to the background culture of a liberal democratic society, making it seem as if these values were self-affirming in public political culture.

Section II: Reconceiving Reasonableness in Light of the Diachronic Account

With this brief exposition of the history undergirding political liberalism, particularly the later work of John Rawls, we can begin identifying the key difference between TJ and PL. In both TJ and PL the device of a hypothetical choice situation reflecting the values of freedom and
equality is presented as the best means for determining the principles of justice in accordance with which citizens ought to govern the basic structure of a liberal democratic society. In *TJ* freedom, equality, and rationality are valuable because a human expresses her greatest potential only when free, equal, and rational. One realizes her potential to the greatest degree when she lives under and actively supports institutions guided by principles of justice derived from these values. This is true of all humans regardless of time and place, so the perspective of a hypothetical choice situation reflecting these essential human values is the perspective of eternity.

In *PL* Rawls contends that it may well be the case, in accordance with a Kantian comprehensive doctrine, that to live under just institutions realizes to the greatest degree one’s potential as a human being. However, justice cannot be presented in these terms without denying the fact of reasonable pluralism: the fact that liberal democratic citizens politically respect each other while irreconcilably disagreeing on fundamental matters. As such, any comprehensive arguments for political respect must be relegated to the background culture of a liberal democracy. Thus, instead of a comprehensive conception of the human, Rawls grounds justice as fairness in, among other things, a conception of the person as a free and equal citizen. This conception of the person is not immediately presupposed by a plurality of comprehensive doctrines, as it would be if it was a partially comprehensive conception. Instead, this affirmation develops over time through several stages beginning with the reluctant acceptance of liberal democratic institutions by citizens affirming a plurality of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines.

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31 Rawls has a notoriously static view of comprehensive doctrines. I will not engage the merits of his argument here, but I largely agree with the critique Larmore levels against this view (2008, Chapter 10).
doctrines, followed by a constitutional consensus arising out of citizens adjusting their comprehensive doctrines so as to be congruent with the basic liberties embodied in modern democratic institutions, and culminating in an overlapping consensus arising out of citizens developing new public political languages and political conceptions in order to debate and persuade other citizens holding irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. In an overlapping consensus, the new public political languages constitute a public political culture with certain associated fundamental ideas distinct from the metaphysical accounts put forth by the reasonable comprehensive doctrines that compose the background culture. It is from these ideas, which are congruent with a plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines thanks to their diachronic development, that Rawls derives his method for determining the principles of justice. The original position is no longer the perspective of all, but the perspective of all liberal democratic citizens.

I want to begin assessing the merits of Rawls’ historical shift, particularly in light of the three problems explored in the previous chapter, by making sense of his use of narratively construed exemplary embodiments of liberal democratic values to ground his theory. An example is itself a reason, such that to be reasonable in public deliberations and decisions about political concerns includes, but is not limited to, referring to examples embedded in a narrative account that one shares with other citizens. To be clear, this means I am veering way from Rawls’ claim that public reason consists of “the concept of judgment, principles of inference, and rules of evidence, and much else” as opposed to the “rhetoric or means of persuasion” we associate with much of public political discourse (2005, 220). I am contending, instead, that what is of the utmost importance is the political tradition made manifest in exemplary stories
enacted and told over time. This tradition supplies the content, the “ideals and principles” (213), of public reason. Indeed, Rawls’ reliance on an introductory story to frame *PL* indicates that even he, a great philosopher, cannot reason about the subject of political liberalism without a history to situate and, I believe, orient this reasoning.

My contention, following Leslie Thiele, is that an example supplied by a tradition is a foundational reason, that is, “it is the only reason that stands fully on its own, without requiring a chain of other reasons to support it” (2006, 248). To make my case in terms of the political liberal theoretical project I will primarily rely on the work of Charles Larmore. According to Larmore, reasons consist

in a certain *relation* – the relation of *counting in favor of* – that features of the natural world, the physical and psychological facts that make it up, bear to our possibilities of thought and action. Yet relations of this sort also constitute facts – *normative facts* having to do with what we ought to believe or do, and normative facts also figure in the world, now understood more broadly as the totality of what exists. (2008, 128)

I wish to elaborate a few key explicit or implicit points in this definition. First, every reason presupposes a set of possible thoughts constituting the realm of theoretical reason and possible actions constituting the realm of practical reason. Reasons presuppose intentionality and constrained possibility. They always direct an agent toward future possible thoughts and actions within a certain context that delimits the realm of possibility. This delimiting context is the world. Second, insofar as every reason involves the normative fact of a relation of certain physical and psychological facts constitutive of the world counting in favor of possible thoughts and actions it presupposes a sense for the world or a kind of know-how garnered through one’s encounters with the world over time. This sense for the world is what we call common sense. It
is common because the world encountered over time is not mine or yours exclusively, but ours. Common sense is a sense for the world one shares with others who similarly encounter the world over time. Finally, a reason is not a reason for everyone, although it may count in favor of a thought or action that is universally applicable. A reason is not, in other words, “universally accessible” (Larmore 2005, 68). Instead, it is only accessible to, or understood by, those who share common sense.

To see how narrative examples are kinds of reasons as relations of counting in favor of possibilities of thought and action for those who share common sense a quick detour away from Larmore into the work of Martin Heidegger and his heirs is warranted. What I want to claim, first, is that common sense can only be cultivated and understood narratively. Part of this has to do with the time-bound character of our encounters with the world. The moment a child leaves the womb she begins encountering the world with its manifold sights, sounds, tastes, smells, textures, emotions, ideas, etc. Further, being mortal, she is immediately oriented toward the phenomenologically final purpose of death (Heidegger 1962, II.1). The movement from birth to death signifies the temporal nature of her life: she is born and then she dies. While death is the phenomenologically final purpose of her life, through extensive care and education she begins to get a sense – common sense – for the terrain in this strange, foreign, place and, eventually, discovers various other purposes she might pursue before her inevitable encounter with death. As time goes on she becomes more aware not only of where she is, but where she is going in accordance with these purposes (Taylor 1989, 47). She lives her life and understands her life as a series of temporal transitions from what she was to what she is to what she projects to become in terms of these purposes (ibid.). In other words, her life is lived as an enacted story on the
stage of the world. Only as an enacted story on this stage is her life realized, and only through being narratively recounted can it be rendered intelligible and understandable.

In addition to the temporal nature of her encounters with the world, there is also the fact that these encounters are never performed in isolation. Her life story is enacted and understood in relation to the life stories of other actors on the world stage she encounters in the remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future. Hers is one of a countless number of distinct past, present, and future life stories performed on this stage (Arendt 1998, 181-8; MacIntyre 1984, 204-25). It shapes, and is shaped by, the enacted and told life stories of others composing the more comprehensive story of world history, or a living tradition, that is continually unfolding. Common sense, initially cultivated through extensive care and education in her youth, is maintained only through a life of action and reaction, telling and retelling, with others with whom she shares this living tradition.

For those who maintain common sense certain fictional and nonfictional life stories play a special orienting role. So, continuing to think about this in terms of the hypothetical person from the previous paragraph, perhaps she is born in the United States to American parents, and begins attending public school at the age of four. She is likely to be told stories about Founding Fathers fighting for and establishing freedom and courageous citizens fighting for and establishing justice, as well as stories about institutional (slavery, the Holocaust) and personal (Hitler) evil that must be courageously kept at bay. In each story she is offered *exemplary* embodiments of possible purposes toward which she might orient her thoughts and actions, her life: freedom, justice, and the avoidance of evil. Typically, we take these purposes as reasons in themselves such that when we discover that particular thoughts and actions would move us
closer to freedom or justice, or farther from evil, we are saying these purposes count in favor of, or against, these thoughts and actions. Through an education that exposes us to exemplary embodiments of these purposes, they take on the status of reasons. These make up “the stock of stories which constitute [a society’s] dramatic resources” (MacIntyre, 216). Without them the four year old, just like any other child, would be left without bearings in the world. Without exemplary stories her life would be “unscripted” (ibid.), completely senseless.

Theorists and philosophers, particularly those of the analytical and Anglo-American traditions like the early John Rawls, would no doubt be skeptical of the need for examples as worldly bearings beyond early childhood. Perhaps human lives are inescapably narratively construed, progressing and regressing in light of various exemplarily embodied purposes that count in favor of certain thoughts and actions, but surely the reasonable adult need not continually return to the exemplary stories of her youth. Instead, she can rationally abstract the purposes these stories reveal in order to discover certain well-defined principles, rules, and duties – maxims – that unequivocally prescribe the right thoughts and actions. Indeed, reliance on abstracted and well-defined reasons like these signals, as Immanuel Kant puts it, her “emergence from... self-incurred immaturity” (1991, 54); her realization that the story is a rhetorical tool for revealing to the child in a rather imprecise way what the adult’s rational mind can precisely discern on its own.

Disregarding the rather suspect assertion that reason alone – that is, without the guidance of examples – is capable of discerning purposes, these theorists and philosophers seem to have a good pragmatic point. So long as it is evident that particular maxims effectively orient society toward its purposes there is good reason to abide by them. Indeed, if there is widespread
agreement on the meanings of these purposes and the effectiveness of particular maxims in orienting a society’s thoughts and actions toward these purposes, why go any deeper? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

The problems with this reasoning are the first two problems confronting *TJ* I explored in the previous chapter. First, it fails to account for the problem of nihilism because it does not acknowledge the fact that worldly reality changes in unpredictable ways, and in an age of rapidly advancing technology the rate of unpredictable change due to exposure to new people, places, information, ideas etc. is always increasing. Perhaps, say, my car is not broken at present, but I do know that I need to replace regular tires with snow tires in anticipation of possible icy roads in the winter months ahead. The maxims prescribing thoughts and actions that effectively orient society toward its purposes in a given context cannot guarantee comparable effectiveness in a changed context. Given the temporal and spatial nature of the world, changing contexts have always posed a dilemma for reason. Modern technology merely catalyzes this change in terms of frequency and magnitude. Both Hannah Arendt (1998, 188-92; 243-7) and Alasdair MacIntyre (88-108), implicitly and explicitly drawing on Niccolò Machiavelli’s concept of *fortuna*, call this inability of maxims to guarantee comparable effectiveness arising out of the temporal and spatial nature of the world unpredictability. According to Machiavelli, if a prince (really, any political entity) wishes to maintain himself he must exercise his *virtù* – prudence or practical judgment – and always prepare for unpredictability even if a maxim seems to prove itself effective for the time being (1998, 98-9). In a more republican vein, Arendt observes the exercise of this faculty in the act of making promises, an act that stabilizes an unpredictable world by creating “islands of predictability” that remain “valid and binding” for those who share “an agreed purpose” (244-
5). I will further discuss Arendt, promises, and purposes in the next chapter. For now it suffices to note an example of the relationship between promises and purposes: the US Constitution, which is, because amendable, an ever-evolving set of written promises. Without the Preamble listing the various purposes inspiring this set of promises – forming a more perfect union, establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity – the US Constitution would lose its reason(s) for existence.

Second, the above reasoning fails to account for the problem of reflective equilibrium because it does not acknowledge widespread disagreement on the definitions of purposes. Sticking with the example of the US Constitution, what is meant by “a more perfect union,” “justice,” “the general welfare,” or “liberty”? These purposes are notoriously hard to define. For instance, there is obviously no single conception of justice affirmed by Americans generally. Is justice procedural, substantive, or something else? Is it a matter of distribution, oppression and domination, or something else? Following the publication of T.J much ink has been spilled in the late 20th and early 21st centuries attempting to offer an acceptable definition of justice in America. Disregarding the relative merit of the various arguments put forth over this time, the very variety of these arguments proves that Americans are far from agreeing on a definition of justice even if many, perhaps most, of them orient their political thoughts and actions in accordance with exemplary embodiments of this purpose.

With these criticisms in mind I want to return to Larmore’s work on political liberalism. According to Larmore, the guiding purposes and examples of a liberal democracy that unite its citizens are subordinate to, or ordered by, the more fundamental, transcendent, higher-order,
principle of respect for persons (1999; 2005). As I noted earlier, the values of freedom and equality are, in their liberal democratic manifestation, derived from this principle. The principle of respect for persons is distinct from the principle of political respect insofar as mutuality or reciprocity are only expressly required by the former. Continuing with the US Constitution, this distinction between the principle of respect for persons and the principle of political respect (equality) becomes clear. The Preamble references a plurality of purposes, but there is no explicit mention of respect for persons. If anything, in the American context respect for persons is strongly implied in the Declaration of Independence’s assertion “that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” “Men” are not worthy of consideration because of anything they have done or are doing, they do not earn respect, so mutuality or reciprocity are out of the picture. Instead, they are worthy of consideration because of some criterion with which they are endowed, and when they are so considered the principle of respect is embodied.

Of course, like the lower-order purposes outlined in the preamble, the definition of respect for persons is a matter of widespread disagreement. The principle seems to be a more actively other-regarding form of toleration (freedom) across which citizens overlap. Yet, even if this is the case, a clear definition cannot be discerned because every attempt at definition reveals “an account of what it is that commands… respect” (Taylor 1989, 5) – a fully or partially comprehensive doctrine – hidden behind the principle. Do persons deserve respect because they are sentient, potentially rational, made in the image of God, capable of novelty, or something

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32 Cf. Taylor’s discussion of hypergoods (1989, 62-73), the modern variants of which all reflect “the principle of equal respect” (65).
else entirely? Disagreement on these comprehensive criteria – reasonable disagreement – explains widespread disagreement on the scope of respect for persons. This, in turn, has serious theoretical and practical consequences in terms of effectively ordering purposes. Depending on the account one affirms, respect for persons manifests itself in different orderings of purposes counting in favor of particular thoughts and actions differently. This helps explain in the context of present-day America political divergence on issues like abortion, for example.

In the midst of reasonable disagreement an abyss opens up, and the question is whether this abyss can be navigated in accordance with the principle of respect for persons without a precise, agreed upon, definition. If not, we find ourselves in the midst of an intolerably boundless situation, encountering the world in ways that more closely resemble those experienced by the newborn child than the adult. The former encounters the world as a strange, unfamiliar, and unforgiving desert; as something akin to that experienced by those who suffered through the Wars of Religion. The latter encounters the world through the mediation of traditionally cultivated common sense which renders the world traversable with the assistance offered by the oases of examples. Larmore argues for the continued possibility of the latter, claiming that reasonable disagreement does not relegate us to a boundless freedom. Instead, the faculty of moral judgment and stories of moral examples – the faculty and stories corresponding to the principle of respect for persons – provide us with resources sufficient for navigating the abyss. Moral judgment is an exercise of reason that looks to “examples of the exercise of moral judgment” (1981, 281). This is not an instance of circular reasoning. Larmore is saying moral

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33 I am borrowing the “desert” and “oasis” metaphors from Arendt (2003, 201-3).
judgment occurs when, in the midst of reasonable disagreement over the definition of the higher-order principle of respect for persons, one looks to exemplary embodiments of this higher-order principle who similarly did not have recourse to a precise, agreed upon, definition of the principle. My claim, which is put forth in Chapter 6, is that Jesus of Nazareth is one such exemplary embodiment. These examples are reasons that are fundamental without reaching “the bedrock of self-evidence and certainty” (ibid.). As Rawls writes, when we experience the indeterminacy of our concepts in the face of hard cases – abortion, again, being a politically hard case in the American context – “we must rely on judgment and interpretation… within some range… where reasonable persons may differ” (2005, 56). At the root of the principle of respect for persons, and moral reasons generally, is an exercise of moral judgment such that when a precise, agreed upon, definition of the principle is lacking it is the task of the good moral judge to retrospectively bring to mind the exemplary manifestation of the principle in action (imagination) in the hopes of orienting his thought and action in accordance with this principle (judgment). This is not the determinant judgment that follows from considered convictions out of which Rawls theorizes justice as fairness, but the reflective judgment that precedes them. As Paul Ricoeur argues, there is always a “point of futurity” in exemplarity (108), a kind of promise of future action. Further, when one attempts to realize the future thoughts and actions to which an imagined exemplary of respect for persons points, he is always to some extent re-enacting or imitating the story of the example.

Even if the definition of respect for persons is essentially contested on comprehensive grounds, the very fact that citizens appeal to it in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns, and overlap in affirming the principle along with exemplary embodiments of the
values of freedom and equality derived from it, is evidence that they embody and pursue the principle of political respect. This principle posits that citizens *qua* reasonable deserve reasons for political thoughts and actions they could accept. It presupposes a political tradition and corresponding common sense uniting citizens in the midst of reasonable disagreement, and contends that all citizens united in this way are deserving of reasons derived from that which unites them.

Section III: Returning to the Three Problems with *TJ*

With all of this in mind I now want to return to the three problems specified in Chapter 3 and assess whether political liberalism, historically construed, overcomes them. Recall, they are the problems of nihilism, reflective equilibrium, and stability. The problem of nihilism is the problem of being unable to judge or express considered convictions because they are not grounded in worldly reality. The problem of reflective equilibrium is the problem of being unable to share a set of considered convictions once it is shown that they are grounded in worldly reality. Finally, the problem of stability is the problem of most citizens being unable to give priority to their shared considered convictions once it is shown that they are, in fact, shared. The resolution of each problem relies on the resolution of the preceding problem in addition to other factors. In this section I argue that Rawls’ historical grounding of the project initially put forth in *TJ* overcomes the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium, but that more needs to be said if the problem of stability is to be overcome. Evidence of Rawls noticing that more is needed can be seen in his idea of a “wide view of public political culture” put forth in his 1997 essay
“The Idea of Public Reason Revisited.” I discuss the promise of this essay in the next section before concluding the chapter.

In his major works, the closest Rawls gets to explicitly addressing the problem of nihilism is found in the concluding paragraph of the introduction to the paperback edition of PL. He writes,

If a reasonably just society that subordinates power to its aims is not possible and people are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask with Kant whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on earth? We must start with the assumption that a reasonably just society is possible, and for it to be possible, human beings must have a moral nature, not of course a perfect such nature, yet one that can understand, act on, and be sufficiently moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice to support a society guided by its ideals and principles. (lx)34

The shared hope for a just world to come as grounding our considered convictions is Rawls’ answer to the problem of nihilism, but this hope at first glance tends toward nihilism as well. As Hannah Arendt notes, this hope – a hope she, like Rawls, associates with the work of Kant – subordinates the world as it exists to virtues and principles that are not, in fact, found in the present world (2006, 224). That is, a hope for a just world to come subordinates the messy, vicious, and unprincipled reality of the world to the parsimonious, virtuous, and principled visions of philosophy. To ground justice as fairness in this hope is to ignore the fact that philosophy is always a reflection of worldly reality. Philosophy’s hope of worldly disembedding is a hope to negate the very condition of philosophy’s possibility.

34 This has to be one of the most perplexing lines in PL, as it frames PL in the metaphysical terms – the terms of moral nature – that made TJ untenable and the formulation of political liberalism necessary.
At second glance, however, I contend that Rawls’ later work sufficiently addresses the problem of nihilism. The hope for a just world to come is not posited as an abstract ideal known through a process of worldly disembedding, but as an abstract ideal derived from the told and enacted stories of examples constitutive of liberal democracy’s political tradition. These exemplary stories include those listed above: the democracy of Ancient Athens, the republic of Ancient Rome, the widespread practice of religious toleration that slowly developed in the wake of the European wars of religion, and their various imitations. We inheritors of this tradition interpret these examples as manifestations of equality and freedom; of the liberties of the ancients and the liberties of the moderns. Equality is *like* the Athenian polis or the Roman republic. Freedom is *like* European practices of toleration. And, of the utmost importance for political liberalism, the liberal democratic combination of these values – derived from the higher-order principle of respect for persons – is like America. Through telling and retelling the stories of these examples, and relying on them to guide our thoughts and actions, in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns our political tradition is kept alive. That this tradition continues to be handed down by generations of citizens holding a plurality of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines is evidence of an overlapping consensus.

Justice as fairness as I understand it does not impose itself on worldly reality as a wholly abstract ideal. Rawls is not advancing a perverse Gnosticism. Instead, his project begins with the liberal democratic values of freedom and equality reflecting the higher-order principle of respect made manifest in the examples constitutive of a political tradition that, through being enacted and told, count in favor of, or inspire, the political thoughts and actions of liberal democratic citizens. It notes that these values seem to conflict with each other, and with no way
of adjudicating disputes arising out of this conflict the fear is that liberal democracy will bring about its own demise. Recognizing this problem Rawls specifies a method of adjudication by abstracting these constitutive values into the hypothetical choice situation of the original position from which principles of justice meant to reflect the principle of respect for persons are derived, and to which citizens may appeal when significant past events and their corresponding values do not suffice as public reasons for their political thoughts and actions. The principles have the potential to count in favor of political thoughts and actions not because they are arrived at from the perspective of eternity, but because they are fundamentally grounded in values reflected in the constitutive examples of our political tradition. At least part of the normative force of justice as fairness originates in the examples constitutive of the political tradition from which it is derived and not its ability to reflect an eternal perspective, as it was originally presented.\textsuperscript{35}

With the problem of nihilism overcome we can now turn to the problem of reflective equilibrium. This, again, is the problem of being unable to share our considered convictions once it is shown that we are capable of forming considered convictions. The definitions of the liberal democratic values that ground our considered convictions are essentially contestable. There is no single definition of each value on which we can agree. Without agreement on definitions we are left admitting that, while we have considered convictions, they cannot be shared by all.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. Habermas’ jab at this kind of theorizing at the beginning of Between Facts and Norms, “The development of constitutional democracy along the celebrated ‘North Atlantic’ path has certainly provided us with results worth preserving, but once those who do not have the good fortune to be heirs of the Founding Fathers turn to their own traditions, they cannot find criteria and reasons that would allow them to distinguish what is worth preserving from what should be rejected” (1998a, 2). His use of “fortune” here parallels the “luck” he sees as the sole source of an overlapping consensus around values and examples in Rawls’ later work (1998b, 82-3). Given the German historical experience, it is obvious why Habermas would be suspect of relying primarily on history as the basis of political morality. Yet, this very historical experience offers a criterion and reason from which to begin the process of political judgment.
Recall that this problem threatened to undermine justice as fairness because if it is the case that some considered convictions cannot be shared, and so cannot be reflected in the conditions of the original position, then the original position lacks the eternal validity that gives it normative force. This, of course, poses no threat to Rawls’ revised theory; justice as fairness no longer reflects the perspective of all, but the perspective of those citizens who share a particular political tradition.

Yet, even we sharers of this political tradition affirm the essentially contested values of freedom and equality derived from the higher-order principle of respect for persons, so the problem of reflective equilibrium persists. Rawls admits this in *PL* when he writes that a certain “indeterminacy” characterizes “all our concepts” (56). This, along with several other factors including fundamental disagreement across comprehensive doctrines, make up what Rawls calls the “burdens of judgment” that lead to reasonable disagreement on what does and does not constitute public reasons for political thoughts and actions. We may share a considered conviction that inequality among citizens is justified only if this inequality reflects the merit of citizens, but when applied to actual cases disagreement over what does and does not qualify as “merit” inevitably leads to conflicting judgments. As a consequence of the burdens of judgment, we are left with a plurality of liberal political conceptions of justice in addition to the plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Justice as fairness becomes just one of several liberal political conceptions of justice, although Rawls thinks it is the best because it best reconciles freedom and equality in a way that continues to prioritize respect for persons. Since justice as the politically, but not fundamentally, highest good unites citizens of modern democracies, the burdens of judgment pose a serious problem for concord’s prospects. For, if citizens are not
united by a highest good or a single political conception of justice in a modern democracy, then what does unite them?

Rawls contends that citizens are united by their reasonableness. They are united in their being willing and able to relate to each other in the terms of public reason, “terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality” (218). In other words, they are united in their affirmation of the principle of political respect. It is not a single liberal political conception of justice, but the liberal democratic values affirmed by a plurality of comprehensive doctrines and from which multiple liberal political conceptions are derived, that unites a liberal democratic citizenry. This, of course, raises the definitional problem all over again. Are not the definitions of freedom and equality, and the principle respect for persons these values reflect, essentially contested? If so, it seems that no citizen could, in good conscience, recognize reasonableness as a sufficient criterion of citizenship.

I think reasonableness is sufficient, but in making my case I veer away from Rawls’ claim that public reason consists of “the concept of judgment, principles of inference, and rules of evidence, and much else” as opposed to the “rhetoric or means of persuasion” we typically associate with political discourse (220). Instead, as I argued in the previous section, reasonableness must be conceived as crucially including reference to the shared exemplary stories constitutive of a political tradition. The problem of reflective equilibrium, in light of this conception of reasonableness, ceases to be a problem if we shift our focus from correct definitions to correct examples and their correct interpretations. By a correct example I mean an example constitutive of a political tradition and by a correct interpretation I mean an interpretation that praises or condemns the example in ways similar to other interpretations
constitutive of a political tradition. As noted above, equality is like Ancient Athens with its vibrant public life. Freedom is like modern Europe with its religious toleration. The combination of these values in a way that gives pride of place to respect for persons is like America, especially when guided by the promise of the Declaration of Independence. When asked, “Well, what does it mean for freedom, equality, or respect for persons to be like these examples?” one responds not with a clear and concise definition of these values, but with the best interpretation of these examples one can offer that finds their exemplary embodiment praiseworthy, as Rawls does at the beginning of PL and elsewhere. We might contest these interpretations, but contestation is not indicative of a real problem. It is, first, a sign of a vibrant tradition. As MacIntyre writes, “Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead” (1981, 222).

Second, the possibility of contestation is beside the point. What matters is that we are attempting to articulate correct interpretations of the same examples as manifestations of these values. We attempt to make sense of our considered convictions concerning justice in light of the examples that best correspond to the values constitutive of the liberal democratic political tradition. Further, we see the most admirable of our political actions as imitations of these examples. To be reasonable in light of this shift in focus is to be willing and able to deliberate in terms of these examples, and the ideals and principles making up the content of public reason are reflections of these examples. Liberal democratic examples are reasons all citizens of a

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36 One might contend it is far too parochial to claim the example of America speaks to modern democracy broadly, but I do not see why not. The West shares enough of a common past to see the importance of the example as I present it. Moving beyond the West would most likely require discovery of similar examples in other cultures or interpreting these Western examples to make sense in the non-Western world. In any case, this cosmopolitan dilemma is outside the scope of the present project.
liberal democracy could accept, and it is from a subset of these examples that Rawls theorizes justice as fairness.

Having resolved the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium, we are now left to confront once more the problem of stability. Stability is achieved when most citizens are willing and able to act in accordance with their sense of justice, meaning that the good of the sense of justice must be congruent with the comprehensive doctrines in accordance with which citizens orient their lives. In TJ, this congruence is proven by appealing to, among other things, a Kantian comprehensive doctrine, partially construed. The idea here is that to act in accordance with one’s sense of justice is to realize to the greatest extent one’s nature as a free, equal, and rational – as an autonomous – being. Most comprehensive doctrines presuppose this partially comprehensive view, so to deny the goodness of the sense of justice is self-contradictory. In PL Rawls acknowledges that this solution fails to take into account the fact of reasonable pluralism. The problem of stability in PL becomes the problem of showing how it is possible for multiple comprehensive doctrines to overlap around liberal political conceptions out of which liberal political conceptions of justice may be theorized.

Rawls’ proposed solution to this problem is found in his account of an overlapping consensus. Over time, citizens shift their comprehensive doctrines in such a way that they eventually become congruent with liberal political conceptions of justice reflecting the principle of respect for persons. The constitutional consensus stage indicates a shift in comprehensive doctrines from the pragmatic acceptance of a liberal constitution derived from and protecting the basic liberties – a modus vivendi – to a moral acceptance of this constitution and the basic liberties as worthy of affirmation regardless of circumstance. The overlapping consensus stage
indicates a shift from affirming a liberal constitution and the basic liberties in comprehensive or
metaphysical terms to affirming them in terms of public reason.

At least two important characteristics of an overlapping consensus are meant to overcome
the problem of stability. First, an overlapping consensus entails the separation of a background
culture composed of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines and a public political culture
composed of liberal political conceptions. The content of these conceptions – the terms of public
reason – is supplied by the examples constitutive of the liberal democratic political tradition
within which the public political culture is embedded. Second, the moral grounds for affirming a
liberal constitution and the basic liberties in terms of public reason are not found in public reason
or its terms, but in the plurality of irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines composing the
background culture overlapping in their affirmation of the principle of respect for persons.
When most comprehensive doctrines can support, in their own terms, liberal political
conceptions of justice derived from exemplary embodiments of values reflecting the principle of
respect for persons in public deliberations and decisions concerning politics stability is achieved.

Yet, even with this proposed solution, the problem of stability persists. We cannot help
but ask, even when Rawls says we should not, why comprehensive doctrines are willing to make
these historical adjustments to liberal institutions.37 Why are citizens with irreconcilable
comprehensive doctrines willing to affirm a liberal constitution for itself? Why, in public
deliberation and decisions over political concerns are free and equal citizens willing to offer
reasons others who hold irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines could accept? Why do they

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prioritize the sense of justice in the form of an affirmation of political respect/reasonableness?38

This is not a question of moral psychology, of the likelihood that humans will acquire a sense of justice – a desire to be reasonable – from growing up under just institutions. We know all too well that humans adapt to most surroundings regardless of justice; that stability can be achieved for the wrong reasons. All we need note is that it is probable that adaptation to just institutions will involve far less violations of citizens’ various comprehensive criteria of goodness or rightness than adaptation to unjust institutions. But, this is still a pragmatic rather than a moral reason. The sense of justice is affirmed out of convenience, meaning that the agreement among various irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines to act in accordance with it is a mere modus vivendi. Instead, the “why” question is a question of the critical assessment of this adaptation in light of these criteria and their respective grounds, in light of our various irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines (141-2). Why, in light of our various irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines, is it not just convenient, but good, to be reasonable? It is to this question that I now turn.

Section IV: Remembering Modernity

Posing this question to Rawls puts him in an awkward position because, as a philosopher limiting himself to the examples constitutive of a liberal democratic political tradition, he cannot answer it. That is, his method of avoidance limits his theoretical work to this circumscribed sphere, which explains his exclusive focus on political conceptions of justice and political

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38 To be reasonable and to prioritize the sense of justice are one in the same (Rawls 2005, 417).
respect. He begins with the assumption that a plurality of comprehensive doctrines in liberal democracies overlap in their affirmation of the principle of political respect as evidenced by citizens continually offering reasons in the form of examples, among other things, reflecting an affirmation of the principle of respect that other liberal democratic citizens with whom they disagree on fundamental matters could accept. In his reply to Habermas’ critique of *PL* he writes,

> A crucial point here is that while the public justification of the political conception for political society depends on reasonable comprehensive doctrines, this justification does so only in an indirect way. That is, the express contents of these doctrines have no normative role in public justification; citizens do not look into the content of others’ doctrines, and so remain within the bounds of the political. Rather, they take into account and give some weight to only the fact—the existence—of the reasonable overlapping consensus itself. (2005, 387)

The circumscribed sphere within which a liberal political conception of justice is theorized is here construed as “freestanding,” which needs to be distinguished from “autonomous.” An autonomous liberal political conception is self-sufficient. A freestanding liberal political conception, on the other hand, requires affirmation from “one or more comprehensive doctrines” external to it, but in political theory and public deliberations and decisions over political concerns “it is neither presented as, nor as derived from, such a doctrine applied to the basic structure of society” (2005, 12). Liberal political conceptions of justice are appealed to *as if* they are autonomous because it is only in these terms that they become reasons acceptable to other liberal democratic citizens with whom political theorists and active citizens irreconcilably disagree at a comprehensive level. In other words, the comprehensive doctrines that move citizens to affirm the examples constitutive of the liberal democratic tradition, and thus create the
possibility of an overlapping consensus, paradoxically must be politically silenced in order to sustain this affirmation. Political respect requires comprehensive silence in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns.

The peculiarity of the method of avoidance is that it seems to threaten the viability of PL as Rawls presents it. At least two threats to PL’s viability come to mind. First, employing the method of avoidance in public deliberation and decisions over political concerns could cause the erosion of all of the irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines that, through an overlapping consensus around it, affirm this very method of avoidance. We see this consequence explored approvingly by Richard Rorty in his essay “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy.” In it, Rorty celebrates Rawls as theorizing the historical development of a poeticized post-metaphysical utopia where “the need for [religious or philosophical] legitimation may gradually cease to be felt” (1991, 264). Any such metaphysical concerns if they do persist will address matters of private perfection rather than public justice, having no import on the latter except at the most fortuitous of moments (1989, 28-9). The self that complements this utopia is a multiplicity of parts, with those parts concerned with private perfection insulating themselves from those parts concerned with public justice and vice versa. This self is not essentially anything (rational, flourishing, divine, etc.), but “a centerless and contingent web” (1990, 271). Rorty supposes that we can live without any reliance on a comprehensive doctrine, our liberal political conceptions of justice are capable of authorizing themselves, and we are better off for it. On this account, it is good to be reasonable because it is good to be reasonable.

Second, the method of avoidance may serve to hide a comprehensive view that pervades all liberal political conceptions of justice. We see this in various critiques of Rawls put forth by,
e.g., Habermas (1998b, Chapter 3), Galston (2009), Klosko (2009, 38-9), and Beiner (2011, Chapter 23). Taking Beiner as an exemplary case, it seems as though Rawls, in avoiding any sort of comprehensive argument is in fact “hiding his more robust philosophical commitments behind a façade of neutrality” (295). Beiner contends that the more robust philosophical commitment is one that sees citizenship as itself a comprehensive view, arguing,

If being a citizen among citizens is an important part of leading a full, flourishing, life, then we can begin to respond to questions about why merely political commitments can trump (what are by definition more metaphysically and more existentially ambitious) comprehensive commitments. (299)

Thus, on this account, it is good to be reasonable because only by being reasonable do we achieve our full potential as human beings. Beiner wants to assert that some variant of civic humanism, itself an a comprehensive doctrine, silently grounds Rawls’ project. This, of course, renders the entirety of *PL*, insofar as its aim is to formulate a political conception of justice independent of any single comprehensive doctrine, unnecessary.

Is there some way to save Rawls’ later project from these threats? Or, more importantly, is it even worth our time to try to save Rawls’ later project? I think we can and should save Rawls’ later project, and this thought rests on the common sense understanding of modern democracy as reflecting both freedom and equality without prioritizing either value. Both threats – that of self-authorizing liberal political conceptions of justice and that of the implied civic humanism of active citizenship – are only threats if equality must be prioritized over freedom. Yet, we know that modernity’s novel introduction of transcendent conceptions of the good unwilling to compromise on certain issues renders this prioritization infeasible. Rawls, unlike these critics, takes the novelty of modernity seriously. He resists the prioritization of equality
because his is a theory of justice for a modern form of democracy always grounded in the fact of plural transcendent conceptions of the good that themselves overlap in affirming a transcendent political element: the higher order the principle of respect for persons that first manifested itself in the principle of toleration. In response to criticisms like these he writes,

> even if the liberties of private autonomy can be internally connected with and grounded on political autonomy, those liberties are not grounded solely in that relation. This is because the liberties of the moderns in justice as fairness have their own distinctive basis in the second moral power with its determinant… conception of the good. (2005, 420)

The problem with this quote, as it stands, is that Rawls leaves the conceptions of the good serving as the basis of modern liberties – that is, freedom as I have been discussing it in this chapter – underspecified. It is a plurality of particular kinds of comprehensive doctrines, those affirming transcendent conceptions of the good that render them unwilling or unable to compromise on certain comprehensive concerns while affirming the principle of respect for persons, that grounds freedom. This is the fact of reasonable pluralism, and the principle of respect for persons that moves liberal democratic citizens to affirm the principle of toleration it itself similarly transcendent – liberal democratic citizens are unwilling and/or unable to compromise in their affirmation of this principle – with the added qualification of being non-comprehensive. Thus, while there may be comprehensive doctrines affirming reasonableness as self-affirming or as a constitutive element of a complete life, these doctrines do not reflect the complex mixture of comprehensive doctrines that overlap in their affirmation the higher-order principle of respect in a liberal democracy.
Consider the example of 20th and 21st century Roman Catholicism. According to Pope John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus annus*, Roman Catholics acknowledge “authentic democracy” as good in itself. Yet, in line with Canon Law 285 § 3 Church clerics cannot run for political office, and in line with Canon Law 287 § 2 clerics are to avoid involvement in political parties and unions unless the rights of the Church or the common good require it. We see in contemporary Roman Catholicism a comprehensive view that recognizes in democratic citizenship a constitutive element of human flourishing, yet also acknowledges a higher, more admirable, fuller way of being that goes beyond flourishing toward orienting one’s life in accordance with God’s will. The cleric, and even more so the saint, are according to Catholicism both more complete or full and, except in exceptional circumstances, unfit for citizenship.

Understood in this way, the devout Roman Catholic lay-citizen has a peculiar relation to other citizens who do not share her comprehensive doctrine. In accordance with her comprehensive doctrine, she sees that active citizenship is constitutive of a flourishing life, but also recognizes that the highest good toward which her comprehensive doctrine is oriented requires a renunciation of a flourishing life for a way of being that transcends it. She cannot participate as an active citizen without feeling a sense that there is something beyond citizenship calling her, or at least calling others she greatly admires such as the devout cleric, saint, or martyr to renounce the civic mode of flourishing. Yet, in answering this call clerics, saints, and martyrs, though they continue to encourage others to engage in politically respectful discourse because constitutive of a good life, are no longer fit for citizenship themselves. They renounce their own flourishing in order to more actively advance “God’s will… that humans flourish… which is biblically called *agape*” (Taylor 2011a, 174). These figures, in a way imitating the
example of Christ, both affirm in guiding those with whom they share a comprehensive doctrine, and radically critique in renouncing an active civic life, political modes of flourishing.

The example of Roman Catholicism poses a problem for the two critiques leveled against political liberalism, but not for political liberalism itself. Construing reasonableness as wholly self-sufficient ignores the devout Catholic citizen’s claim that it is only through her comprehensive doctrine that she affirms reasonableness. Further, she does not see herself as a multiplicity of private and public selves needing to be insulated from each other, but as a self at war with itself seeking a resolution of this war through the transformative fullness of God’s grace promised by her comprehensive doctrine. Construing reasonableness as part and parcel of a complete life ignores the devout Catholic citizen’s sense that the highest life is one that renounces reasonableness in order to be more receptive to this transformative fullness, to conversion. The virtue of political liberalism, on the other hand, is its ability to recognize the liberal democratic claims of pervasive, persistent, and irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines oriented toward transcendent conceptions of the good such as Roman Catholicism. Their co-existence is at the root of modernity’s resistance to the prioritization of equality over freedom, and this root is reflected in an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines affirming the principle of respect on their own terms and consequently rendering reasonableness moral.

The core of political liberalism, then, is the persistence of transcendent conceptions of the good that overlap in affirming the transcendent principle of respect for persons. If respectful practices oriented toward transcendent goods ceased then freedom as political liberalism conceives it would lose its exemplary manifestation, respect for persons would lose its
comprehensive support, and we would be left with a democratic tradition built solely on the exemplary embodiments of the value of equality.

Seeing as transcendent conceptions of the good overlapping in supporting respect for persons do persist, the problem with Rawls’ argument as he initially presents it is that it does tend to ignore this persistence. In the first edition of *PL* he writes that comprehensive doctrines may be introduced in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns only when conditions require, and that during “good times” citizens ought to refrain from articulating their comprehensive doctrines in deliberations and decisions over political concerns (251-2). With this assertion it is as if Rawls is saying that in good times there will be no need to be reminded of the comprehensive support of the terms of public reason, that it will be self-evident that public reason has such support. Indeed, affirming this interpretation of Rawls, Charles Larmore writes, “In a well-ordered society, where all citizens affirm together just principles of social cooperation, no one would need in public debate to look outside this common point of view to settle what justice requires” (2008, 214). This is a variation of the analytic and Anglo-American pragmatic point I referenced earlier, and it is a point made possible by the idea that comprehensive doctrines affirming the principle of respect for persons, politically imitating the modern variation of the Judeo-Christian God, are so great that they need not politically exist. By paradoxically affirming the principle of political respect that requires comprehensive silence, these comprehensive doctrines politically sacrifice themselves in order to ensure that liberal democracy remains well-ordered in its affirmation of the principle of respect for persons.

The problem with this argument is, again, that it ignores the unpredictable ways of the liberal democratic world, veering dangerously close to nihilism and, in turn, threatening stability.
Achieving stability is not so much a matter of focusing on good times, as it is of anticipating bad times, some of which may be brought about by citizens advancing comprehensive reasons in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns because these citizens either (1) forget how their comprehensive doctrines affirmed the principle of respect or (2) advance comprehensive doctrines that have yet to affirm the principle of respect. Assuming the “why” question is unavoidable in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns in a liberal democracy, the former always poses a threat to stability if citizens holding irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines that already overlap in their past affirmation of the principle of respect do not continually reference the comprehensive account of this affirmation in the present and future. That the latter poses a threat to stability is evidenced by liberal democracy’s confrontation with Islam in recent years. By systematically silencing “the implicit metaphysical/theological” commitments that originally lead to the affirmation of respect for persons liberal democratic citizens deprive themselves of resources that would allow them to “recognize the ways in which Muslims’ views parallel, intersect, and veer away from [their] own” (Gillespie 2008, 287) in the hopes of showing that these parallels and intersections point toward the possibility of a correct Islamic interpretation of the liberal democratic narrative and, in turn, an Islamic affirmation of the principle of respect for persons.

Rawls begins to address these problems with a proviso “that reasonable such doctrines may be introduced in public reason at any time, provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support” (xlix-l). The point of this proviso is to cultivate a “wide view of public political culture” wherein there is continual awareness among
citizens of how their various irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines do overlap in affirming the values of freedom and equality, and the principle of respect that these values reflect, in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. As Rawls writes in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,”

Citizens’ mutual knowledge of one another’s religious and nonreligious doctrines expressed in the wide view of public political culture recognizes the roots of democratic citizens’ allegiance to their political conceptions lie in their respective comprehensive doctrines, both religious and nonreligious. (463)

While there may be some citizens who hold comprehensive doctrines that claim liberal political conceptions of justice are self-affirming, the principle of political respect prohibits these views from becoming politically dominant in order to sustain the most widespread affirmation of the constitutive elements of the liberal democratic political tradition as possible. Instead of claiming reasonable comprehensive doctrines need not exist politically, the principle of political respect with the clarification of the proviso can at most claim reasonable comprehensive doctrines may not exist politically. The proviso opens up the possibility of political non-dominance by allowing citizens to advance comprehensive reasons in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns so long as these reasons are eventually translated into reasons other citizens with whom they irreconcilably disagree at a comprehensive level could accept. Among these are reasons reflecting a correct interpretation of the liberal democratic political tradition and its constitutive exemplary stories.

While the proviso and the wide view of public political culture signal a move in the right direction, they cannot be sustained by the story Rawls tells. He fails to note that comprehensive doctrines not only instigated the Wars of Religion, but also played a vital role in moving citizens
to affirm the values of freedom, equality, and the principle respect for persons. As a result, the reader is left with the impression that comprehensive doctrines are at best political problems, an impression that creates a politically debilitating prejudice against the introduction of comprehensive doctrines in public debates and decisions over political concerns. Only a more nuanced and complex narrative account of the role of comprehensive doctrines in bringing about and sustaining the liberal democratic political tradition could overcome this prejudice. To borrow a phrase from Stephen K. White (2000), the articulation of comprehensive doctrines in public debates and decisions over political concerns, beyond potentially posing a threat to liberal democracy, is also the only way to “sustain affirmation” of the told and enacted exemplary stories constitutive of the liberal democratic tradition in a time when the appropriateness of common sense understanding of these examples and corresponding values is increasingly brought into question.

Conclusion

In this chapter I showed how a particular story grounds Rawls’ later work, reliance on a story overcomes the problems of nihilism and reflective equilibrium, and the amendments of the proviso and wide view of public political culture would overcome the problem of stability if not for the fact that the story Rawls tells cannot sustain them. Rawls’ story is that of the gradual rise of the liberal democratic political tradition through citizens embodying and pursuing the values of freedom and equality, both reflections of the higher-order principle of respect for persons, without exclusive reference to comprehensive doctrines following the Wars of Religion. That these wars were over comprehensive doctrines advancing transcendent conceptions of the good
not admitting of compromise forced 17th century Europeans to make a clear choice: either continue warring indefinitely or reluctantly affirm the principle of toleration out of respect for persons. A majority chose the latter, and after a time comprehensive doctrines came to publicly affirm the principle of toleration, forming a constitutional consensus. A commitment to political respect across comprehensive doctrines allowed for a shift from a constitutional to an overlapping consensus wherein citizens holding particular comprehensive doctrines offered reasons others holding different irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines, but sharing the liberal democratic political tradition, could accept in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. The principle of political respect is manifest when liberal democratic citizens interact with each other in terms of exemplary embodiments of freedom, equality, and respect for persons.

Political liberalism, according to this narrative, is moved by a desire to avoid, rather than embrace, comprehensive pluralism at a political level. Yet, the wide view of political culture, the proviso, and the recognition that the roots of citizens’ allegiance to liberal political conceptions of justice rooted in the principle of respect for persons justifying these amendments signal a shift away from the former desire toward the latter. In the next chapter, I look to the work of Hannah Arendt to show how a condition of political stability is the continual affirmation of the exemplary stories constitutive of a political tradition through their being told and enacted from a plurality of comprehensive and non-comprehensive perspectives over time. This work, of course, rests on a more amenable narrative.
CHAPTER 5: FREEDOM, PLURALISM, AND STABILITY IN ARENDT’S THOUGHT

Introduction

_The observable superiority which one man has over another is only his person, his mask, his form, the part he takes in a play. To their fellow men it is only this mask which distinguishes one man from another. They can see no more than this. It has, of course, its value. But this distinction of character does not reach beyond the KRISIS of everything that passes to corruption: it does not reach into the realm of incorruption._

-Karl Barth (1968, 63)

This chapter rests on the premise that Hannah Arendt provides one of the most in-depth explorations of the dynamics of political respect presently available in the field of political theory. Of course, political respect as the relation of citizens to each other from the distance of the world they share presupposes, by definition, the world. If, as Arendt clearly believes, the chief problem confronting the modern world is its ever-increasing worldlessness or instability, then the issue is how to stabilize the world so that political respect becomes a viable possibility. One goal of this chapter is to show how worldly stability and lasting relations of political respect are mutually dependent, and that each endures through publicly enacting and telling particular narratives from a plurality of perspectives. This, I argue, ties back to the problem of stability in political liberalism. Only by allowing a plurality of comprehensive doctrines to enact and tell the
exemplary narratives constitutive of the liberal democratic political tradition in their own terms can liberal democratic stability be maintained.

But, first, I want to briefly explore Arendt’s answer to the problem of worldlessness, which I elaborate in Section 3. The answer to the problem is action: the human faculty to start something completely new. That she locates the answer in action may seem odd, considering the fact that action itself seems to perpetuate worldlessness through the creation of unpredictable and irreversible processes. But, this seeming oddness rests on a misunderstanding. When Arendt claims that action points toward a solution to worldlessness, she has particular kinds of action in mind: those that allow for the persistence and spread of power. These are, of course, the actions of forgiving and promising which create the conditions necessary for moments of political constitution.

Power, like action, raises a red flag for the average reader, but this again rests on a misunderstanding. Consider the following definition from *The Human Condition* (HC):

> Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish new relations and create new realities. (1998, 200)

How word and deed accompany each other in power is of the utmost importance. Consider the example of a human life. According to Arendt, being born is the first deed every human performs in the world, and dying is the moment the collection of deeds that constitute a human life comes to an end. Of course, no human birth allows for the persistence and spread of power. Every birth inevitably poses financial, physical, emotional, etc. burdens, all of which signal a
violation or destruction of previous relations, while also unavoidably constituting new realities. A child violently appears in the world and must be taught, over time, to act in such a way that her reality allows for the spread of other realities. Of course, this education requires a family or community of others who forgive, or pardon, the child for her transgressions as her reality is developed to care for other realities because she does not – indeed, cannot – know what she is doing.

Language is the medium through which the child learns to love the world, but not just any language. It must be a language whose words “are not empty” and “disclose realities.” Perhaps the first exposure a child has to this kind of language is the experience of voluntarily responding to her name when it is called. Or, perhaps, it is the response of recognition in her parents’ faces when she makes a noise that somewhat resembles the words “mom” or “dad.” These conceptual words signify a reality without clear definition, and the child’s willingness and ability to make recourse to these kinds of words in navigating the world once she knows them reveals her community sense. It is through the child’s proper use of the stock of words corresponding to certain cultural realities – exemplary stories – over time that she develops common sense. We might say that once the child develops common sense she becomes an “adult” as a citizen fully capable of political respect, of engaging in public debates and decisions over political concerns from the distance of the world with its stock of cultural words and corresponding realities. I further explore the importance of language for Arendt in Section 2.

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39 I recognize the following discussion skips over issues of gender, adoption, etc. that involve words forced upon a child that do not actually disclose realities but, at times, keep them hidden. I am working within a simple framework to try to grasp what exactly Arendt was trying to show theoretically.
Moments of political constitution, which entail both politically respectful relations and law formation, are the product of non-violent collective births. The act of political constitution creates a novel relation and a novel reality in a way that does not violate or destroy previous relations and realities and allows for the creation of new relations and realities. To explore the dynamics of political constitution Arendt looks to its exemplary embodiment in the midst of somewhat modern conditions: the American Revolution. The American Revolution proved the possibility of organizing a political body in such a way as to allow the coexistence of the past, present, and future experiences of citizens through the politically respectful activities of mutual promise and common deliberation (2006b, 206). The American Revolution gave rise, albeit temporarily, to the foundational mutual promise that paved the way for new mutual promises indefinitely into the future, offering a glimpse at the “people’s utopia” (1972, 231) of the council form of government. Council government begins with voluntary members – the self-selecting elite – of a local “elementary republic” deliberating and deciding about political concerns, nominating deputies to deliberate and decide at the next highest level, and so on up to the federal level of government (270-1). What distinguishes the self-selected elite from the rest is the demonstration “that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world” (271). Of course, the citizen elite can only demonstrate these things by first acting and speaking in local councils in ways that prove their love of the world; their love of past, present, and future relations and realities that appear through the use of words that disclose these realities in public political deliberations and decisions.

In the midst of late-modern worldlessness this whole process becomes far more complicated, in part because worldlessness is characterized by a pervasive lack of common sense
among citizens. If political respect is to be a viable possibility in these circumstances, citizens who possess common sense must forgive citizens who lack it when they inevitably act violently, that is, act in a way that violates and destroys past, present, and future relations and realities. These uneducated citizens, just like children, do not know what they are doing. Arendt writes, “To expect people, who have not the slightest notion of what the res publica, the public thing, is, to behave nonviolently and argue rationally in matters of interest is neither realistic nor reasonable” (1972, 175). In accordance with the law, which always accompanies acts of political constitution, uneducated citizens must be punished. Yet, this punishment must fall short of the permanent categorical and forceful exclusion from public deliberations and decisions over political concerns of uneducated citizens. Such punishment signals a wholly arbitrary and tyrannical move on the part of the educated: combatting violence with violence. As such, forgiveness must be done out of a faith in, hope for, and love of the world’s power to move citizens who lack common sense to begin adjusting their actions in politically respectful, non-violent, ways when they engage in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. Only when political respect comes to characterize the relations of most citizens in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns may worldlessness be overcome, and stability achieved.

One way of thinking about what I am trying to do in this chapter is to envision Arendt and Rawls starting at different points on the same spectrum of political development. Whereas Rawls begins with a world stabilized by politically respectful relations and theorizes what is necessary to ensure that it remains stable in the right ways, Arendt begins with a world rendered unstable by the lack of politically respectful relations and theorizes what is necessary to create a
space where stability may come into being. Where Arendt’s theory ends is where Rawls’ begins, but it is precisely the shared concern for stability, and the role narrative plays in its politically respectful achievement, which allows them to speak to each other.

In this chapter I let Arendt speak to political liberalism, pointing out that the latter’s aversion to the articulation of a plurality of comprehensive and non-comprehensive perspectives in public debates and decisions over political concerns spells its own demise. Deep pluralism is not merely a problem, but also a condition of political liberalism’s possibility qua political. In Section II I briefly explore how the political theories of Rawls and Arendt overlap, suggesting that a failure to see an overlap is largely due to the pervasive influence of Nietzschean interpretations of Arendt’s work. In Section II, I argue that the world is properly construed as two kinds of action: the relation of humans to the tangible artifice and the relation of humans to the intangible human relationships constituting the realm of human affairs. The former is culture, the latter politics, and the stable realization of each depends on the other. In Section III I delve further into the related concepts of freedom, its constitution, and Arendt’s ontology of appearance, suggesting that politics as she conceives it is sufficient for achieving common sense stability and avoiding the senseless flux of totalitarianism. I conclude suggesting that political respect, while avoiding the totalitarian violation of apparent relations and realities, does violence to individuals. Throughout the chapter I attempt to provide a coherent account of Arendt’s work on these topics, remaining as faithful as possible. When unfaithful – for example, when I argue that Arendt actually does think tradition matters – I am trying to render her work more coherent or sensible than it actually is.
Section I: Arendt and Political Liberalism

Arendt, much like Rawls in *PL*, presents a conception of politics freed from any “metaphysical” ground, where metaphysics signifies any governing principle without the world. Politics without a metaphysical ground – politics for an age wherein “the traditional thought of God” (1978a) is dead – is the activity of preserving a public space where great tangible and intangible things, or cultural artifacts and human relationships constitutive of the world as culture and politics, may disclose their meaning to citizens through the process of fitting them into told and enacted life stories. Citizenship in this “post-metaphysical” conception of politics minimally entails being willing and able to preserve this public space and respond to great things by interpreting them in speech and deed from a plurality of perspectives. Indeed, only through continued interpretation in the form of a plurality of narrative re-enactments and retellings over time does something become “great,” where greatness signals a thing’s being fit for “everlastingness” or “immortality” (1998, 18-19). In other words, greatness signals a thing’s deserving to endure or achieve stability by virtue of being intersubjectively affirmed over time. A condition of stability’s possibility is the foundation and preservation of a public space where plural reenactments and retellings of stories continue to affirm various objects over time.

Political liberals, rightly, push back against the kind of politics Arendt advances because it fails to achieve stability for the “right” reasons. Stability for the right reasons is stability that reflects an affirmation of the higher-order principle of respect for persons that is constitutive of the liberal democratic political tradition. Arendt, of course, celebrates respect as “a regard for

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40 See Beiner (2008, n. 8) and Villa (1999, 120-5) for brief discussions of Rawls and Arendt on politics without metaphysics.
41 Cf. Kateb (2000, 135-44), although Kateb is not necessarily a political liberal.
the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us… independent of qualities we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem” that is sufficient to “prompt forgiving of what a person did” in order to release him or her from the predicament of the irreversibility of his or her deeds (1998, 243). Forgiveness is performed “for the sake of the person,” where the “person” is understood to be the self who is revealed through the preservative and interpretive endeavor of politics (ibid.), from the distance of the world. Out of respect as Arendt conceives it, one forgives the person qua persona and not qua unique individual. I return to this distinction in the conclusion.

The principle of respect for persons advanced by political liberals is not synonymous with Arendtian respect. The latter, which is political respect, “entails distinction, choice, the privileging of certain human beings” (Beiner 1996, 278). It is respect applied to past, present, and future citizens. Respect for persons, on the other hand, extends beyond citizens to the strangers and the weak who are unwilling and/or unable to be citizens (Larmore 2008, 99). Inspired by respect for persons, liberal democratic citizens affirm liberal political conceptions of justice opposed to the injustice of domination. Domination, understood as subjection to the “arbitrary will of others” (ibid. 190), frequently is physically and emotionally painful, and therefore cruel (Shklar 2004, 156), but it is not definitively so. Positively construed, liberal political conceptions of justice affirm hospitality toward strangers and the weak, striving to treat them as if they were fellow citizens. This is done by actual citizens enforcing only those laws – the “positively established fences which hedge in, protect, and limit” the public space where greatness and political freedom become living realities (Arendt 1968, 81-2) – they imagine these particular persons could accept if they were willing and able to be citizens, or relate to each other
from the distance of the world.\textsuperscript{42} Moved by the principle of respect for persons constitutive of the liberal democratic world as it is, the liberal democratic citizen acts in accordance with the world as they imagine it would be in their public debates and decisions over political concerns. When liberal democratic citizens appeal to this imagined perspective they exercise public reason, which always, by virtue of its awareness that the world that moves them to act in accordance with the principle of respect for persons is never as respectful as it could be, acts in a self-critical manner.

In a recent article, Linda Zerilli uses Arendt to argue against stability for the right reasons, bidding “farewell” to public reason. “To belong to a democratic political community,” writes Zerilli, “is to have a ‘common world’ … and this common world exists only where there is a plurality of worldviews” (2012, 21). If by “exists” is meant “lastingly appears” or “achieves greatness” then I agree, but this is not what Zerilli has in mind. The act of getting one’s narrative construal of political reality straight is what I, following Leslie Thiele (2013, 9-11), take Arendt to mean by political judgment. Political judgment allows for both the world and freedom to lastingly appear through interpretive integration, and this is done not by citizens telling and enacting just any stories, but the \textit{right} stories. Zerilli, on the other hand, claims political judgment occurs when a plurality of citizens “decide what will count as part of [their] shared common world” (2005, 165). Political judgment does not proceed from the world as it is given, but decides how the world will be given at contingent and arbitrary moments where one is freed from its givenness. Political freedom, according to Zerilli, is revealing one’s self through

\textsuperscript{42} To avoid confusion with the definition of freedom offered in the previous chapter, I will refer to Arendt’s conception of freedom (the narrative enacting and telling of public speeches, deeds, and events) as \textit{political freedom}.  

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deciding what will count as part of the world without relying on a common sense understanding of what already counts.

By construing political judgment in this way, Zerilli easily dismantles public reason. Only by assuming that respect for persons already counts in the liberal democratic world can political liberals declare public reason the political judgment of liberal democratic citizens. It is precisely the givenness of respect for persons, and really the givenness of any constitutive part of the world, which Zerilli denies, or at the very least subordinates to her conception of political freedom as deciding what will count as part of the world in the absence of any part being given. Zerilli frames the problem of givenness in epistemological terms, asking, “how do we know, prior to the actual moment of speaking and judging, what another person will count as reasonable… in the context of a political debate” (2012, 10)? A simple retort is that a liberal democratic citizen “knows” what will count as reasonable – that is, what will reflect an exercise of public reason – by virtue of possessing the “educated common sense” cultivated through the narratively construed embodiment and pursuit of the values constitutive of the liberal democratic political tradition that he or she shares with past, present, and future citizens (Rawls 2005, 14-5). Zerilli’s counter would be both normative and empirical. Normatively, this claim to “know” precludes political freedom as the public revelation of one’s self in the act of deciding at contingent and arbitrary moments. Empirically, this claim to “know” through common sense cultivated in this way cannot hold given that citizens live in an age fundamentally characterized by the death of tradition. There is no meaningful distinction between citizen and stranger on this view.
There are several problems with Zerilli’s normative critique of public reason, but for now I want to focus on what I take to be the erroneous Nietzschean interpretation of Arendt that is its ground. This interpretation rests on a rather ephemeral conception of the world, not as given in any sense, but as constantly in flux as a condition and result of self-disclosing decision. In a recent critique of Western feminism as seen, e.g., in the work of Susan Moller Okin, this conception of the world is evident. Zerilli equates “liberal cultures and practices” with standards and rules that are “barely subjected to judgment but rather [are] confirmed as universal,” as if the liberal democratic citizen could pass political judgment independently of the liberal democratic political tradition within which her common sense has been cultivated (2009, 296). Dana Villa is one of this interpretation’s most outspoken critics, claiming that “Nietzschean aestheticism, in the form of perspectivism, has the effect of either placing one beyond any community of interpretation (the genealogical standpoint), or denying that a viable ‘background consensus’ exists” (1996, 105). He notes that, even if citizens do increasingly find themselves without actual communities and consensuses, politics is praiseworthy for Arendt only if it is inspired by “a care for the world, a care for the public realm,” that is, only if it is performed from an appropriate given distance (1999, 127). Arendt writes, “politics is not so much about human beings as it is about the world that comes into being between them and endures beyond them” (2005, 175). She praises politics, not as self-disclosure through decision at contingent and arbitrary moments, but as the world-changing and world-preserving disclosure of one’s persona: the self acting and speaking through the mask of the world.

43 For similar Nietzschean/agonistic interpretations of Arendt see Honig (1993, Chapter 4), although she admits that she “radicalizes” Arendt’s work (115-125) and Markel (2003, 62-6), although he admits he does not stay true to “the letter of her works” (63).
The vagueness of Arendt’s concepts irritatingly tends to hide her prioritization of the world as it is given, and without this prioritization it can seem like her empirical claim that tradition is dead also means the past has died. When she writes of “the common world” or “the public realm,” Arendt is referring to a concept with at least two mutually dependent parts: a kind of human relation to artifacts (great tangible things) and a kind of human relation to human relationships (great intangible things). The former is culture and the latter is politics.44

Villa believes the common world consists of no more than politics – the purely human activity of creating and preserving the laws and institutions, or the constitution, that delineate a public space wherein human relationships may appear (2007, 988) – but this fails to take into account the world as culture, and the countless tangible artifacts upon which it depends, that also appears in public space and provides the raw materials needed to fit human relations into life stories and politics into a shared civic story. Indeed, without the presence of both culture and politics the laws and institutions delimiting public space lose their purpose: political freedom. That is, public space is meant to be a space “where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of history” (2006a, 153). What Arendt means by freedom is, to some extent, what Rawls is referring to when he speaks of the value of equality. Thus, interpretations of Arendt as a constitutional patriot ignore the political importance of the traditional stock of stories of

exemplary events and persons inherited by citizens that allow them to confer upon their constitution “the dimension of depth” (Arendt 2006a, 94) through correct narrative construal.

Put differently, if the purpose of a political constitution is political freedom, and political freedom is a “worldly reality” when stories of political activities are enacted and told, then political freedom presupposes the presence of a shared political tradition. As such, when Arendt writes of the death of tradition she has something other than this shared political tradition in mind.45 What politically died was a Romantic conception of tradition as a set of formal and informal behavioral rules that were authoritative because followed since time immemorial, which itself developed out of the death of the Roman conception of tradition as a set of formal and informal behavioral rules that were authoritative because divinely sanctioned (Arendt 1994, 315; 2006a, 120-8). What this death left was not a set of behavioral rules per se, but a collection of stories of exemplary persons and events that citizens inherited from the past. Reified in durable cultural materials like monuments and public documents whose meanings were preserved through continued telling and enactment, these stories provided a repertoire of words and deeds from which one could draw to tell and enact her own life story, and which she passed on to future generations through this telling and enacting. These stories, being shared across generations, constituted the building blocks of a tradition. A political tradition is constituted and continued by citizens enacting and telling stories of exemplary political performances. Put

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45 This peculiar understanding of tradition is clear in On Revolution, where Arendt claims the “experiences” of the Founders bound them to the past, and not “tradition” (189). A tradition, if it is to be anything more than an interestingly odd spectacle to be enjoyed from an appropriate distance like a dusty museum exhibit, must give pride of place to lived experience.
differently, a political tradition is constituted and continued by citizens embodying and pursuing political freedom over time.

As I showed in the previous chapter, political liberals implicitly or explicitly rely on certain exemplary stories constitutive of the political tradition from which they derive the fundamental ideas with which they theorize liberal political conceptions of justice. Rawls’ story is that of the gradual rise of the liberal democratic political tradition through citizens embodying and pursuing the values of freedom, equality, and the principle of respect for persons without exclusive reference to comprehensive doctrines following the Wars of Religion. That these wars were over comprehensive doctrines advancing transcendent conceptions of the good not admitting of compromise forced 17th century Europeans to make a clear choice: either continue warring indefinitely or reluctantly affirm the transcendent principle of toleration as an attenuated form of the principle of respect for persons. A majority chose the latter, and after a time comprehensive doctrines came to publicly affirm the principle of toleration, forming a constitutional consensus. A clearer commitment to the more fundamental transcendent principle of respect for persons across comprehensive doctrines, made manifest in the values embodied in the Declaration of Independence and subsequent political actions inspired by similar ideas, allowed for a shift from a constitutional to an overlapping consensus wherein citizens holding particular comprehensive doctrines offered reasons others holding different irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines, but sharing the liberal democratic political tradition, could accept in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns.

Arendt, notably, does not emphasize the importance of the Wars of Religion. For her, modernity is defined by three “great events”: the discovery of America, the Reformation, and the
invention of the telescope (1998, 248). Politically, the great modern events are the American and French Revolutions, but these occurred within an already well-circumscribed modern world. One may be tempted to identify the significance of the Reformation with the Wars of Religion and subsequent practices of toleration, but Arendt, in a Weberian vein, claims its significance was purely economic: it sparked the capitalistic “expropriation and accumulation of social wealth” (ibid.). If respect for persons is to have a place in her thought, it is not found in this event, or in the Declaration of Independence, which she conspicuously misinterprets as no more than an expression of a reciprocated understanding. Instead, it is found in an event that preceded the Wars of Religion by over 1500 years: the life of Jesus of Nazareth. This will no doubt strike most readers as odd for a number of reasons, which I try to address in the next chapter, but for now I want to explore how Arendt’s conception of politics can move us toward an understanding of the articulation of plural comprehensive and non-comprehensive correct interpretations of exemplary narratives as a condition of stability.

Section II: The World as Action

The writings of Hannah Arendt are puzzling, to say the least. To try to solve all of these puzzles is surely a fool’s errand, and perhaps I will prove myself a fool in trying to solve a few of them in this chapter. The first is the puzzle of piecing together the relation of action and the world in Arendt’s work. In The Human Condition (HC), which was originally titled Amor Mundi (love of the world), Arendt embarks on an extensive exploration of how the modern world fell, and continues to fall, out of love with itself; HC presents the story of modern world alienation. Thus, it is tempting to interpret her political theory as an account of action without
the world. In this section I hope to show why this interpretation is seriously mistaken, that meaningful action always also presupposes the world and vice versa.

But, in order to understand how action relates to the world, we need to explore what Arendt means by *amor mundi*. To answer this question two other questions must be addressed. First, what does it mean to love? In an exploration of St. Augustine’s conception of the will, Arendt offers the reader a glimpse into her understanding of love. She writes, “there is no greater assertion of something or somebody than to love it, that is, to say: I will that you be – *Amo: Volo ut sis*” (1978a, 104). To love the world, then, is to will that the world be, to affirm the world’s being. In *HC* the closest Arendt gets to explicitly conceiving action as an instance of willing the world to be is her claim that action arises out of “the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking” (246). This “will to live together” is, I contend, synonymous with a human’s “community sense,” an underspecified concept articulated in Arendt’s Kant lectures that seems to ontologically precede the common sense cultivated through sharing a common world (1992, 72). That is, only when one’s community sense is made manifest in certain kinds of action may a common world, and subsequently common sense, come into being. Here we begin to see the answer to the second question, which concerns what exactly Arendt means by “the world.” The world is, on this account, the reality-disclosing way humans relate to each other in speech and deed; the world is a kind of action. Thus, the appropriate question is not, precisely, *what* the world is, but *how* the world is. The answer is “related… to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together” (1998, 52). The world is a kind of *relation between* humans and at least two phenomena: human artifacts and human relationships.
As a kind of relation between humans and the tangible artifice they create, the world is a mode of relating to anything from buildings, statues, and commodities (those things that allow for commodious, rather than laborious, living) to literature like legal documents, speeches, novels, and poetry. That is, the world in this first sense is “culture,” which Arendt defines as “the mode of intercourse of man with the things of the world” (2006a, 210). Characteristic of “the things of the world,” beyond their being the physical product of human hands, is the fact that they are not properly related to humans in terms of consumption. Human artifacts *qua* worldly are not needed to sustain life, although their absence may render life unworthy of living and irreparably destroy the common sense of cultivated relaters. Worldly artifacts are meant to publicly appear and endure beyond the lifespan of their makers and cultivated relaters, and at least part of their significance lies in their ability to transcend the futility of time; to achieve greatness. “[O]nly when the totality of fabricated things is so organized that it can resist the consuming life process of the people dwelling in it, and thus outlast them” is the world as culture stable or durable (2006a, 206). The world as culture is meant to serve, by virtue of its ties to durable objects, as a permanent dwelling place for those who find themselves born into it. It is the source of greatness’ time-transcending character.

As a kind of relation between humans and the collection of intangible human affairs – the “‘web’ of human relationships” (1998, 183) – the world is a way of relating humans to the space where human relationships appear. This is, in part, what Arendt has in mind when referring to politics. The space where human relationships appear is more specifically composed of humans acting and speaking *to* one another, with each individual’s deeds and words forming a unique life story that affects the life stories of the others to whom she acts and speaks. These stories are not
made, like artifacts, but told and enacted. Politics is the source of greatness’ intersubjective character. Over time this collection of told and enacted life stories takes on the shape of history, “the storybook of mankind” (184). The world as politics is the story of the preservation of the storybook which, with the addition of intergenerational time conferred by culture, takes on the form of a political tradition.

The relationship between the world as culture and the world as politics is traditionally one of mutual dependence.

Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object; without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes. (1998, 204)

The told and enacted stories of human affairs put culture to use, continually imbuing it with an intersubjectively derived meaning in a way that would be irreparably lost if culture related to artifacts alone. Without stories culture would be left with the poetic instrumentality that brings artifacts into being, but poetic instrumentality alone necessarily violates the tangible artifice, continually destroying it out of an unrestrained love of beauty in order to make it anew. The stories constitutive of the realm of human affairs preserve the tangible artifice by imbuing it with meaning. Politics, as such, “sets limits to the love… of beauty” (2006a, 210) that moves the artist by giving pride of place to telling and enacting the stories that render the work of art meaningful.

The world as politics, on the other hand, relies on the world as culture to imbue enacted and told stories with a time-transcending permanence they would otherwise lack. At times Arendt seems to underplay this second form of dependence. So, for example, she notes that
Pericles insisted that “without assistance from others, those who acted [would] be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages” (1998, 197). Pericles believed that the Athenian polis alone without cultural materials like poetry or architecture could ensure the remembrance of the enacted and told stories of Athenian citizens. Yet, only a few pages after this line in HC Arendt writes, “Pericles’ speech, though it certainly corresponded to and articulated the innermost convictions of the people of Athens, has always been read with the sad wisdom of hindsight by men who know that his words were spoken at the beginning of the end” (205). Indeed, we would not even be aware of Pericles’ words if not for Thucydides recounting them in his History, which itself is a cultural artifact by virtue of its being written and, seemingly, immortal.46

The modern problem of worldlessness threatens to sever the traditional relationship between the world as politics and the world as culture. This worldlessness is the product of several related phenomena: the advancement of modern technology in terms of speed and scope, the commodification of the tangible artifice upon which the world as culture depends, and the belief that the world as it appears, that is, as it is intersubjectively experientially encountered is not real. As a result of all of these factors culture and politics, and, in turn, common sense, are

46It may be argued that Arendt rejects the need for the tangible world. So, for example, in On Revolution she writes, “Experiences and even stories which grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events, sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again. What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in its turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even sheer reference, arise out of it” (212). However, to only focus on her insistence that “incessant talk” overcomes the futility of enacting and telling stories is to ignore her further claim that incessant talk is itself futile without the guidance of concepts. From whence, it may be asked, do these concepts arise? The answer may be found a page earlier, where Arendt notes that the American Revolution would have lacked any meaningful framework without “book-learning and thinking in concepts” (211). That is, written historical texts provided the conceptual resources for the Founders.
eroded. Without culture and common sense, humans are potentially left in a world of constant flux or becoming; a worldless world.

Arendt’s, not necessarily accurate, assessment of post-war Germany presents a clear example of worldlessness, so construed. She returned to West Germany in the winter of 1949 (between its becoming the Federal Republic of Germany on May 5, 1949 and a sovereign state in 1955) for the first time since fleeing the country in 1933, and noted a widespread attempt on the part of German citizens to escape worldly reality. Germans experienced the destruction of much of the tangible artifice and intangible human relationships constitutive of pre-war Germany – roads, buildings, monuments, works of art, common morality, etc. – as a consequence of human nature rather than an unfathomable historical aberration and a corresponding sense that all of this “ought not to have happened” (1994, 14). To make sense of the state of post-war Germany in this way was to deny the senselessness of the acts that brought it about, it was to offer a story of Nazism that did not reflect the reality of the situation.

Germans failed to the get the story of Nazism straight for a number of reasons. They were largely “indifferent” to the destruction that surrounded them in part because of a widespread “nihilistic relativity about facts” and in part because “the experience of totalitarianism… robbed them of all spontaneous speech and comprehension… [and rendered them] incapable of articulating thoughts and adequately expressing feelings” (252-3). The destruction of the tangible artifice and widespread inarticulacy went hand in hand: words lost their durable referents and cultural artifacts lost the medium through which they could be imbued with narrative meaning. In response to post-war worldlessness, Germans sought functional
replacements for the tangible artifice in commerce and the intangible realm of human affairs in the activity of labor. In a moving assessment, Arendt writes,

Watching the Germans busily stumble through the ruins of a thousand years of their own history, shrugging their shoulders at the destroyed landmarks or resentful when reminded of the deeds of horror that haunt the whole surrounding world, one comes to realize that busyness has become their chief defense against reality. And one wants to cry out: But this is not real – real are the ruins, real are the past horrors, real are the dead whom you have forgotten. But they are living ghosts, whom speech and argument, the glance of human eyes and the mourning of human hearts, no longer touch. (254)

Through business the German citizen reconciled himself to worldlessness, seemingly beyond worldly redemption.

Yet, the citizens of West Berlin offered Arendt a glimpse of hope amidst the post-war cultural and political wreckage. Berliners, who suffered “the most horrible physical destruction” (254), were able to find the words necessary to begin to get the story of the war straight. They offered Arendt “a frank and detailed recital of what happened to Berlin’s Jews at the beginning of the war,” and instead of “shrugging their shoulders” at the destruction surrounding them and busily distracting themselves from reality Berliners took the “time to show one around the ruins… and somewhat solemnly [recited] the names of the streets that [were] gone” (254-5). By narratively recounting the historical facts, Berliners suffered through the cathartic task of making sense of the harsh and novel reality of Germany’s post-war situation, revealing both their responsibility and a taste for political freedom.

Arendt claims that West Berlin was not a very important exception to the rule of worldlessness in Germany due to its lack of interaction with the rest of the country, but this need
not raise doubt about the importance of the example for getting a sense of the relation of action and the world. By narratively construing the historical events (actions) that brought about their situation – the reality of the world as it appeared – Berliners began the task of understanding and signaled that they were moved by their community sense. By using words in these narrative accounts in a way that was appropriately related to reality – relying on the fragments of culture left in the war’s wake – Berliners began the task of judgment and signaled a willingness to appeal to a fragmented common sense in order to offer correct narrative accounts of reality.

 Appropriately used conceptual language like that used by the Berliners is indispensable when attempting to understand and judge reality, worldless or not. The European languages with their rich etymological origins remained in the midst of the destruction of much of the tangible European artifice, pointing to a past that material alone no longer secured (1994, 12). In these languages “the past [was] contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts [sic] to get rid of it once and for all” (1968a, 49). Thus, the importance of language for Arendt is not so much its communicative telos, or a kind of encyclopedic and codified reliance on definitions, as its “disclosing quality,” which “always has a historical background” (1979, 323). She writes, “Most concepts in the historical and political sciences… have their origin in some particular historical incident, and we then proceed to make it ‘exemplary’ – to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case” (1989, 85). Most political and historical concepts etymologically disclose a reality in the form of an original exemplary encounter experienced and interpreted from a plurality of perspectives – an original appearance – such that when they are appropriately used they signal the persistence, albeit fragmentary, of culture and common sense. For example, politics always points back to the polis, and if the memory of the polis were to be irretrievably
lost a common sense understanding of politics would be lost with it. This is why its tangible manifestation in artifacts like written histories is indispensable, and why their irretrievable loss is so horrifying.

The reason Berlin was not very important for Germany as a whole, and why the post-war German experiment in democracy always disappointed Arendt, was the failure of West German citizens to take responsibility for themselves by creating and preserving an authentic political constitution. What the Berliners possessed was a willingness and ability to make political freedom manifest, but they lacked the broader support across Germany to create a permanently constituted space where political freedom could lastingly appear. In the next section I explore what is needed to constitute this space

Section III: Political Freedom and Its Constitution

The need for a permanently constituted space for the manifestation of political freedom allows me to shift my focus toward a different question: where does law fit into all of this? That is, what does the world as culture and politics have to do with the making and enforcement of law? Indeed, the question of how to make and enforce law in a way that shows respect to those who are subject to the law is, perhaps, the political question according to political liberalism. In this section I look to Arendt’s writings on the American Revolution and the ontology of appearance, arguing that law non-violently arises out of the freedom-inspired actions of mutual promise and common deliberation. The political activity of mutual promising presupposes a plurality of citizens overlapping on the shared purpose of realizing political freedom and the activity of common deliberation presupposes a plurality of citizens overlapping in their use of
words that reflect apparent reality. Clearly, these actions are closely related to the world as politics and the world as culture. Law, insofar as it rests on these actions, delimits a permanent public space where political freedom becomes a lasting reality. Further, because it rests on actions that presuppose a plurality of persons, law as a worldly stabilizer requires plurality.

Before moving on to a brief exploration of law in Arendt’s thought, however, I want to note that the concern for the world as culture is not completely absent from the writings of political liberals either, although it does not seem to have greatly concerned Rawls. Take, for instance, Charles Larmore’s lamentation concerning the historical forgetfulness that accompanies the replacement of culture with entertainment:

[The] most important [mechanism of social unity] of all is a common historical experience, including the memory of past conflicts, even civil war, that were sparked by opposing ideals of the good life but are seen now as having given way to a shared practice of equal respect… In contemporary Western societies there exist powerful forces that imperil the vitality of historical memory. One thinks of the pervasive news and entertainment media with their fixation on ephemeral amusement. Against this threat, liberal polities must keep alive a sense of the past experience from which they derive. (1996, 143-4)

Equal respect, here, means political respect. The modern principle of political respect is rooted in the told and enacted stories of peaceful resolution of conflicts spurred by comprehensive differences. Without telling and enacting stories of its embodiment, political respect would lose its vitality.

Turning back to the laws that preserve the space where these kinds of stories may continually be enacted and told, the exemplary embodiments of the non-violent mode of legislation are seen in the brief appearances of council systems that characterized, first, the
American, and subsequently other modern, revolutions. These councils formed spontaneously through the actions of mutual promise and common deliberation, and it is these actions that Arendt believes could non-violently gave rise to law in the people’s utopia of a council government.

A promise, according to Arendt, is an island of certainty in the worldly ocean of uncertainty. A mutual promise, whether tacit or express, is the shared expectation that plural promisors will perform or avoid performing certain actions in the future. Mutual promises “bind,” to some extent, the actions of promisors. Yet, as Arendt makes clear in her essay “Civil Disobedience,” these promises are not forever binding. They may be dissolved when “unexpected circumstances arise” and when “mutuality… is broken” (1972, 93). Beyond circumstance and mutuality, however, is a third factor that characterizes every mutual promise: “an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding” (1998, 245). Laws, conceived as mutual promises that non-violently bind citizens, serve the agreed purpose of political freedom. They are valid and binding as long as they delimit a public space where political freedom may be a lasting reality.

The purpose of political freedom is realized only when the formal constraints of mutual promises are complemented by far less formal common deliberations. In common deliberations law-bound citizens engage in persuasive debate in order to begin the process of forming a public opinion regarding a particular political concern. According to Arendt, the political concern – and any other worldly interest – is not real until this process of opinion formation takes place; until the concern appears as the same object of a diversity of subjective understandings, or subjective opinions. When the object presents itself to a particular citizen it seems, and only through its
seeming to a plurality of citizens does it gain apparent reality (1978, 21). In other words, all that is (at least as far as politics is concerned) appears.

As an unlikely example of the ontology of appearance and its relation to political freedom we can look to Robert Nozick’s famous “experience machine” thought experiment:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences? (1974, 42)

This is a mechanistic depiction of experience and its relation to happiness. If the human mode of experiencing is fundamentally a product of internal processes without any reference to our actual encounters with the world in its cultural and political manifestations, then all that is hides. Arendt notes that the location of the real in the hidden explains the widespread uprootedness and superfluosness that characterizes the lives of modern persons and gives rise to the experience of loneliness, which sets the stage for the senselessness of totalitarianism (1973, 475). In line with this, Nozick insinuates that the ontology of hiddenness is humanly unbearable, that the human qua human would refuse to plug herself into the experience machine, because she wants to do certain things and be certain ways that reflect actual contact with the world that is similarly encountered by others in all of its messy reality, rather than an artificial, mechanistic, predictable, completely unreal world (43). One cannot love doing certain things and being certain ways without also loving the actual context of cultural and political relations within which doing and being become real by virtue of appearing.
As Arendt sees it the experiences of one’s continual encounters with the world only make sense, only become meaningful, when depicted in a way that gives ontological priority to appearance. When one tells and enacts the story of her encounters with the world she signals this prioritization, but not just any story will do. At a 1972 conference on her work Arendt made this clear: “Everybody who tells a story of what happened to him half an hour ago on the street has got to put this story into shape.” (1979, 303). When the ordinary human being puts her story into shape she appeals to ordinary language rather than the language of expertise, and to rely on ordinary language is always also to rely on common sense. Common sense, recall, is a product of previous encounters with the world rather than the knowledge of, say, a social scientist who stands at a disengaged distance from the world. Any attempt to narratively depict one’s experiences that ontologically prioritizes the hidden – making sense of one’s experience as fundamentally a product of neurological processes, the subconscious, etc. – indicates a failure of understanding, ultimately rendering these experiences meaningless.

To be clear, searching the hidden depths of the human may help explain failures to judge, but these explanations must always serve the ends of political freedom and, therefore, give pride of place to narrative accounts of worldly encounters in the terms of ordinary language. Reliance on the hidden depths should be the exception rather than the rule in making sense of one’s experiences. This explains Arendt’s rejection of modern psychology as a “desert psychology” that tries to help its patients by adjusting them to the worldless conditions of modernity, identifying the sense of the meaninglessness corresponding to these conditions as something pathological that could be overcome with proper treatment (2005, 201). Instead of identifying depression or anxiety as states of being that are fundamentally internal, we must first rule out the
possibility that these are *appropriate* responses to external conditions. Only when it is shown that these responses are inappropriate should an internal explanation be explored, along with any counseling or medical treatment necessary for realizing the patient’s potential to partake in political freedom. Psychology and psychiatry are emancipatory practices according to this view. Arendt’s point is that in the midst of worldlessness depression and anxiety are the understandable responses of those who are moved by their community sense or a love of political freedom, longing for the constitution of public space within which political freedom and common sense could be living realities. Arendt believed that only by acting in ways inspired by this love – as exemplified in, e.g., the councils springing from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 – might the experience of loneliness, and in turn totalitarianism and worldlessness, be sufficiently kept at bay.

Bringing this back to common deliberation as it relates to non-violent legislation, the persuasive orator speaks from the perspective of greatness, the perspective of appearance, relying on an intersubjectively durable stock of common sense concepts and corresponding exemplary stories to move her fellow citizens to change their opinions about the concern under consideration. Persuasion “reckons and knows how to deal with the multitude” (2005, 13), but it does so in a non-violent, politically respectful, way. As Bryan Garsten (2006) has so convincingly shown, persuasion is not a matter of manipulation or pandering, but an invitation to critically assess one’s opinion regarding a particular concern through the intersubjectively durable lens of common sense. That one may never end up agreeing with the majority public opinion or the mutual promise it prescribes is of secondary importance to the fact that the process of forming the public opinion that informed the new promise is non-violent.
Thus, Arendt’s claim that the public opinions and mutual promises that arise out of this process signal “the constitution of some entirely new, unconnected body politic” (2006b, 200) is only half right. The public opinion and mutual promise are, obviously, entirely new, but they are not entirely “unconnected” from that which preceded them. They are unconnected insofar they are wholly contingent: nothing about the opinion that was formed or the promise that was made was necessary. They could have been otherwise. However, they are connected to that which preceded and will follow them insofar as they were formed in a way that did not violate pre-existing relations and realities and left open the possibility of future relations and realities.

Laws, as the outcome of mutual promise and common deliberation, “guarantee the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation, absorbs all new origins and is nourished by them” (1973, 465).

Indeed, the non-violent character of legislation in Arendt’s vision is the very source of the law’s authority. This is clearest in the example of the American Constitution, which derives its authority from “its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented” in a way that remains “tied back to the foundation” (2006b, 194). Of course, according to Arendt, the actions that gave birth to the Constitution were mutual promise and common deliberation. These non-violent foundational acts constitute the “spirit” or “principle” of American law. If systematic barriers prevent citizens from amending and augmenting the law through these foundational acts or if government continually fails to abide by the law, the law loses its authority over citizens (1972, 74). It becomes nothing more than a violently imposed set of codes. In such cases civil disobedience which, by virtue of being “civil,” non-violently organizes for the purpose of re-constituting a space where political freedom might appear, is warranted.
Bringing this back to political liberalism, my claims is that Rawls’ later amendments – the proviso and the wide view of public political culture – signal his acknowledgment that stability, which is politically identical to authority, according to Arendt (2006a, 95), is achieved only when the exemplary stories constitutive of a political tradition are told and enacted from a plurality perspectives. For Rawls, the comprehensive nature of these perspectives is particularly important, but within Arendt’s framework stability rests on a kind of leveling of the perspectives of all persons sharing the world who engage in mutual promising and common deliberation. Each perspective, whether reflecting a worldview or a personal preference, is one way those objects that concern mutual promising and common deliberation seem among many. Comprehensive worldviews reflect one among countless subjective opinions sharing the world that, when articulated with the help of a shared stock of concepts and corresponding exemplary stories, form the intersubjective space where the object of concern appears.

Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that Arendt’s concept of political respect, which she calls respect for persons, is exemplified when citizens publicly deliberate and decide political concerns from the distance of the world. By “world” Arendt means a way of relating culturally to the tangible human artifice and politically to human relationships. Culture and politics are mutually dependent: culture offers politics a conceptual depth and durability it would otherwise lack and politics preserves the public space where new concepts are made manifest, and old concepts retain their vitality, by rendering them intersubjectively meaningful through plural enacted and told in narrative form. Only through preserving a public space for the telling and
enacting of life stories with the aid of told and enacted exemplary stories constitutive of a political tradition from a plurality of perspectives is stability achieved.

With all of this in mind I want to conclude by raising doubts about the “non-violent” character of political respect. In giving pride of place to the relations and realities corresponding to persons as citizens, it runs the risk of complacently violating persons as individuals. This problem is not lost on Arendt. In the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* she writes, “every appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its appearingness, a kind of disguise that may indeed – but does not have to – hide or disfigure it” (1978a, 20). Political respect, because it always potentially hides or disfigures the individual, runs the risk of misanthropy. To avoid this the individual must be conceived, at least in part, as reflecting something other than Being that is dignity conferring, to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Lévinas (Kearney 1984, 61). The dignity of the individual is rooted in a reality that does not appear, although the respectful actions moved by this reality – testifying to its existence – continually appear, bringing into question the affirmation of a self-contained politics as nothing more than the relation of *personas*. Acting out of a concern for the dignity of the individual regardless of appearance is, I contend, exemplary of the higher order principle of respect for persons that pervades liberal democratic common sense.

47 To be clear, I am not echoing Honig’s sentiment there is no being behind the doing of political action (1993, 81-2). Indeed, while Arendt clearly thinks the private sphere allows for self-cultivation that gives depth to one’s political performances, she still subordinates the individual to worldly appearance. I agree with Honig that “remainders” matter, but I disagree that they matter politically for Arendt. If individuals are unwilling or unable to interact with others from the distance of the world, Arendt deems them politically irrelevant.
Of course, the word *persona* is the Latin root of “person,” and this etymological fact is indispensable for understanding the difference between political respect and respect for persons.

I must quote Arendt at length on the historical origin of the word:

…it signified the mask ancient actors used to wear in a play… The mask as such obviously had two functions: it had to hide, or rather to replace, the actor’s own face and countenance, but in a way that would make it possible for the voice to sound through… The distinction between a private individual in Rome and a Roman citizens was that the latter had a *persona*, a legal personality, as we would say; it was as though the law had affixed to him the part he was expected to play on the public scene, with the provision, however, that his own voice would be able to sound through… Without his *persona*, there would be an individual without rights and duties, perhaps a ‘natural man’ – that is, a human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word, indicating someone outside the range of the law and the body politic of the citizens, as for instance a slave – but certainly a politically irrelevant being. (2006b, 96-7)

*Amor mundi* is synonymous with *amor humanitas* only if there is nothing about the human that exists without the world. *Homo*, the individual human being independent of political affiliation (I do not think this necessarily makes him “natural”), is “politically irrelevant” because the concern of the citizen as *persona* is first and foremost the space between individuals where culture and politics appear: the space that begins and ends with the mask. In the terms of the previous chapter, it seems as though Arendt prioritizes equality over freedom.

What Arendt offers is a vision of stability, but she stops short of showing how stability could be for the right reasons. That is, she stops short of showing how stability and respect for persons might not completely negate each other. This would take, I contend, an exemplary story in the stock of conceptual stories constituting the world as culture that points to the possibility of affirming the dignity of the individual. This would be a great, or intersubjectively durable, story not of avoiding evil, but of doing good. Arendt points to the life of Jesus of Nazareth as such an
exemplary story, and I now want to turn to the possible political implications of this story being a constitutive part of the world.
CHAPTER 6: RELIGION AND ARENDTIAN POLITICAL LIBERALISM

Introduction

*The matter is quite simple. Man shall begin by loving the unseen, God, for thereby he himself shall learn what it is to love. But the fact that he really loves the unseen shall be indicated precisely by this[:] that he loves the brother he sees. The more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the men he sees. It is not the opposite, that the more he rejects those he sees, the more he loves the unseen, for when this is the case, God is changed to an unreal something, a fancy. Such a thing can occur only to a hypocrite or to a deceiver in order to find an escape, or to one who misrepresents God, as if God were grasping for his own interest and his being loved, rather than that the holy God is gracious and therefore always points away from himself, saying, as it were, “If you wish to love me, love the men you see. Whatever you do for them you do for me.” God is too exalted to be able to accept a man’s love directly, to say nothing of being able to find pleasure in what pleases a fanatic.*

-Søren Kierkegaard (1962, 158)

If we take Hannah Arendt at her word she is no political moralist, or, at the very least, moralizing politics is the least of her concerns. This lack of concern for political morality – to be precise, a lack of concern for justice derived from respect towards those who may not share the world that mediates citizens – is the definitive mark of political realism (Williams 2005, 1-17; Larmore 2012). In this chapter, I argue that while Arendt’s primary goal is to theorize the
politically realistic conditions necessary for achieving worldly stability in the face of the worldlessness of totalitarianism, she hints at the possibility of political moralism in her frequent remarks on authentic religion and, in particular, the exemplary life of Jesus of Nazareth. According to Arendt, Jesus is the only Western example of acting in accordance with “authentic” (2006a, 134) religion’s love of God as goodness, which she understands as a conception of God freed from traditional metaphysics. Morality is the response of love to the sensed goodness of a thing, regardless of how that thing may appear. When speaking of respect for humans this sensed goodness, according to Arendt, is the soul.

However, while Arendt’s analysis of Jesus’ example – more generally morality – and its tenuous relationship with politics is the exclusive focus of this chapter, this need not be the only authentically religious example. As Richard Kearney notes, this seeing good, and the faith in, hope for, and love of the good that may be seen regardless of appearance is found in the stories of exemplary persons in all three Abrahamic faiths (2010, Chapter 1) as well as non-Abrahamic faiths (149-51) who take on the stance of hospitality toward strange or unfamiliar things; a stance that goes beyond a regard for the other from the distance of the world. The fact that so many of us are moved, or could be moved, by this prospect of seeing good regardless of appearance seems to indicate for Arendt a positive, and lasting, aspect of our religious, particularly Axial, inheritance.

Supporting evidence for this interpretation of Arendt is found in On Revolution. Discussing the council system in the final chapter she writes that councils will consist of a self-chosen elite “from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be ‘happy’
without it” as distinct from a “self-excluded” group “who do not belong” because they do not share this taste for public freedom. This self-exclusion, far from being arbitrary discrimination, would in fact give substance and reality to one of the most important negative liberties we have enjoyed since the end of the ancient world, namely, freedom from politics, which was unknown to Rome or Athens and which is politically perhaps the most relevant part of our Christian heritage. (2006b, 271-2)

Arendt seems to be saying that those who have a “taste” for goodness, those who are moved by goodness, ideally will self-exclude themselves from the activity of politics.

Arendt never clarifies what is politically relevant about this self-exclusion in the remainder of the text, and her silence is perplexing. At first glance, it seems as though she is saying that goodness ought to have no political import, but if this is the case then her assertion that freedom from politics is politically relevant is senseless. If one recalls, however, that politics is the activity of constituting and preserving a public space where political freedom in the form of the great, or intersubjectively durable, stories constitutive of the world may appear, Arendt’s description of this self-exclusion begins to make sense. By signaling freedom from politics, the example of Jesus of Nazareth does not preserve a public space where the enacted and told stories constitutive of the world may appear, but his story paradoxically endures as apparently good in this space and is, therefore, a constitutive part of the world. Assuming that the self-chosen citizens in the ideal council system are inspired by a love of the world, this paradoxically great and good example should influence their deliberations and decisions over political concerns.
Shifting from the ideal to the real, we can see this sort of dynamic playing out in Arendt’s controversial essay “Reflections on Little Rock.” In it she notes that equality, by which I take her to mean the way the mediation of the world they love equalizes citizens, is the “innermost principle” (2003, 205) of politics, most clearly reflected in, along with the right to run for public office, the American “right to vote, according to which the judgment and opinion of the most exalted citizen are on a par with the judgment and opinion of the hardly literate” (204). Political equality does not, however, give way to any of the strong moral imperatives one associates with modern conceptions of justice.48 So long as no legal barriers stand in the way of opportunities to vote, run for office, and access public services deemed necessary by citizens in order to go about the business of their daily lives, as they did in the case of segregationist laws and public services in the American South, Arendt believes equality is realized in politics.

Thus, there is nothing morally transformative, per se, about the activity of politics as Arendt understands it. There is no change of heart that accompanies the activity of telling and enacting stories in a way that preserves the told and enacted stories of the past and allows for future told and enacted stories. Political respect allows for the persistence of prejudice and convention, which among other things create barriers to affirming the dignity of the individual, and can do nothing to combat these barriers. Those persons entrusted with securing equality of opportunity may do so begrudgingly when it comes to members of certain social groups with scoffs, disapproving stares, and derogatory language fueled by prejudice or convention, so long

48 Here I am in sharp disagreement with George Kateb, who claims, “We call such respect, when it is publicly institutionalized, by the name of justice” (1984, 91). I am not sure who the “we” is to which he is referring, but it seems to me that the justice prescribed by this kind of respect is far more circumscribed than the justice that “rolls down like water” envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. What Kateb is describing is, at best, an attenuated pre-modern political form of justice.
as prejudice or convention do not interfere with their task. Political respect can be, it seems, quite disrespectful. Arendt’s politics is, in this sense, very conservative (Canovan 1996, 20-1), indicating that there is no transformative moral source in politics proper for combating the prejudice and convention that many Americans, rightly, find abhorrent because a denial of an individual’s dignity.

Oddly enough, Arendt finds this kind of source alive and well in the public religious activities of Americans, exemplified in the “public force” of certain churches guided by “the principle of the uniqueness of souls” (Arendt 2003, 209). The church understands itself as the “body of Christ” in the world. It is an imperfect collective imitation of the example of Jesus of Nazareth; a collection of sinners telling and enacting the story of a character capable of seeing and being moved by the goodness of things regardless of their appearance. Arendt identifies the love of goodness that guides these authentic manifestations of religion, and not the love of the world that guides the activity of politics, as a vital moral resource in the liberal democratic world of America.

My thesis, rephrased in light of this brief assessment of Arendt’s “Reflections” essay and tied back into Rawls’ work, is that the moral aspect of political liberalism, its affirmation of the higher-order principle of respect for persons, is not derived from the activity of politics in the liberal democratic world, but from enacting and telling the stories of paradoxically great and good examples like Jesus of Nazareth. The activity of politics is influenced, but not dominated, by the introduction of the comprehensive doctrines attempting to get straight the stories told and enacted of this original example, and this influence results in the cultivation of a liberal democratic common sense insofar is it reflects the principle of respect for persons. As I showed
in Chapter 4, from liberal democratic common sense citizens can discern certain fundamental ideas, and out of these fundamental ideas political conceptions of justice emerge that can, at the very least, help to translate certain irreconcilable disputes regarding the plural ontological accounts of respect in such a way as to preserve the liberal democratic world.

Before elaborating my argument, I want to bring Arendt’s Nietzschean depiction of God’s death, which seems to be the largest barrier to the advancement of this chapter’s thesis, into question and defend my belief that this depiction is, at least in part, mistaken. The “traditional thought of God” that dies is not one that dominated our world for “thousands of years” (1977a, 10), but one that gained prominence in the 13th and 14th centuries through a growing hostility to Aristotelian philosophy reflected in the work of nominalist philosophers like William of Ockham and Duns Scotus who argued that “omnipotence,” more precisely an “omnipotent freedom,” is “the cardinal characteristic of God” (Gillespie 2009, 21). This vision of God eventually, through the medium of René Descartes’ and Thomas Hobbes’ philosophical work in the 17th century, was translated into a vision of humans as beings able “to master nature through the exercise of [their] infinite [wills]” (40-1). The ideas of the sovereign individual and state take root at this time, and are clearly reflected later in, e.g., those parts of Immanuel Kant’s corpus that emphasize autonomy as the fulfillment of human nature. What is of the utmost importance from nominalism onward, which Nietzsche rightly noted but wrongly attributed to the entire history of Western morality, is the will (MacIntyre 1984, 113-4; 1990, Chapter 9). The primacy of the will is wrongly attributed to the entire history of Western morality because prior to the turn to nominalism in opposition to Aristotelian philosophy morality was not separate from
ethics, will was not separate from practice, and God’s omnipotent will was not separate from, or
a more definitive aspect of God than, the sensed incarnate goodness of things.

As such, Arendt should have written that the “traditional thought of God” as definitively
an omnipotent will has died, but the “traditional thought of God” as first revealed to humans as
incarnate goodness survives. Indeed, it must survive, perhaps in myriad forms, if the respect
beyond citizenship that we rightly admire is to be a human possibility. There is no need to
completely think God anew. At most, there is a need to amend some supposedly traditional
thoughts about God that may, for whatever reason, subordinate the religious primacy of sensed
incarnate goodness. If God is incarnate goodness, what this means is that supposedly traditional
thoughts about God that deem incarnate goodness as of secondary importance are wrong.

With this far too brief clarification out of the way, the chapter proceeds as follows.
Section I tries to explain why religion, which is a constant topic of interest throughout Arendt’s
academic career, is so rarely explored in the secondary literature on her work. I suggest that the
scarcity of literature is due to at least three factors: the “standard” interpretation of Arendt that
sees religion as of little to no relevance in light of the horrors of totalitarianism, an interpretation
of Arendt that sees religion as fundamentally prejudiced against politics, and an interpretation of
Arendt that finds her exclusive reliance on the example of Jesus of Nazareth far too exclusive. I
conclude the section arguing that none of these factors provides good reason to not take Arendt’s
writings on religion seriously. In Section II a literature review of the scholarship that does take
Arendt’s writings on religion seriously is explored. This scholarship falls into three categories:
non-theological scholarship that sees Arendt as rejecting all theological accounts of Jesus, non-
theological scholarship that sees Arendt as retaining some theological accounts of Jesus, and
theological scholarship that questions Arendt’s contention that religion and politics are antithetical. I argue that Arendt leaves the question of Jesus’ divinity open, and that his example transcends worldly limits by virtue of its paradoxical greatness (lasting appearance) and goodness. Section III tries to clarify how this transcendence fits into Arendt’s work on politics and religion by exploring two sets of distinctions: secularity and religion, and immortality, eternity, and *aeviternity*. I claim that Arendt seems to describe politics as exclusively secular and concerned with immortality, but that the *aeviternal* example of Jesus as paradoxically great and good shows the persistence of an example that transcends the limits of the world while simultaneously being a constitutive part of the world. This kind of paradoxical example is the root of authentic religion. Section IV offers an Arendtian account of political liberalism as grounding respect for persons in the *aeviternal* example of Jesus of Nazareth. I argue that reasonable comprehensive doctrines are fundamentally irreconcilable attempts to make sense of this paradoxical example that cultivate, through public articulation, liberal democratic common sense.

Section I: In Search of a Religious Arendt

There are surprisingly few scholarly pieces discussing Arendt’s writings on religion and/or its interactions with politics. I say “surprisingly” because, after politics and philosophy, religion is the subject most frequently written on in Arendt’s corpus. Her entire 1929 dissertation, originally entitled *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*, explores the complex relations of

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the human individual, God, and human society in terms of different kinds of love. It was not a project she finished and then filed away, but one she continually revised in anticipation of its English publication sometime between 1964 and 1965 (Scott and Stark 1996, 115). This, sadly, never came to fruition during her lifetime. However, her religious writing does not end with her dissertation, although the dissertation is by far her most explicitly religious work. She dedicates the entirety of Section 10 of *The Human Condition* (arguably her most important book) to an exploration of the activity of doing good for the sake of goodness, which Jesus of Nazareth first introduced to the Western world. In Chapter 2 of *On Revolution* she performs an elaborate comparative literary analysis of the dynamics of the “Christ-like” figures imagined in Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Dostoevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor” from his *The Brothers Karamazov*. One of the “lights” whose biography she includes in her *Men in Dark Times* is Pope John XXIII, whom she judges worthy of inclusion not because he is a man of great character in an age of monotony and boredom, but because of his willingness to imitate Jesus’ example even at the expense of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. In her last book-length work *Willing* she includes entire chapters on St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus, all great Christian figures and thinkers. In addition, several of Arendt’s essays are explicitly religious, covering topics ranging from the influence of Augustine and Kierkegaard to the appropriate interaction of religion and politics. As already noted in the introduction, 1959’s “Reflections on Little Rock,” paints churches in a somewhat positive light claiming they make up the “only public force that can fight social prejudice” in America (209). This brief list of her writings on religion is not exhaustive. Several of Arendt’s posthumously published works deal with the figure of Jesus and dynamics of goodness as well. Indeed, a point she reiterates
throughout many of these pieces is that we who live in the Western world cannot meaningfully judge a person good without the figure of Jesus or one of his imitators, such as St. Francis of Assisi, coming to mind.

Taking all of this into account it is obvious that Arendt thought religion was a topic worthy of consideration, so why do so many Arendt scholars steer clear of these elements in her writing? This may be partly due to what Ronald Beiner calls “the ‘standard’ view” of Arendt’s work, which posits that religion ceased being of concern to her after she witnessed the horrors of totalitarianism (1996, 267). Indeed, there is ample evidence for this view in her work. For instance, she thinks moral philosophy and religion cannot deal with the problem of totalitarianism because, in its presence, they prove themselves to be no more than malleable “manners, customs, and habits” (2003, 75). A line from her reply to Eric Voegelin’s review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* lends even more support to this thesis. She writes, “Those who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents” (1994, 407). Yet, this explanation cannot account for the recurrence of religion in so many of the primarily political works she wrote following these events. What she is saying in these lines is that religion fails to address the most pressing political problem of our time – the event of totalitarianism – not that it should be wholly discarded.

50 He notes that Young-Bruehl’s first edition of Arendt’s biography, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, upholds this view; offering scant attention to the perplexities of the metaphysical/religious themes brought up in the dissertation. The second edition of the biography published eight years after Beiner made this assessment contains no additional content exploring the dissertation, offering the same brief asides about the dissertation with a short summary of the work in an appendix. To be fair, in her *Why Arendt Matters* Young-Bruehl does address how Arendt would view contemporary religious fundamentalism as a perversion of religion (45-57) and certain religious acts of unconditional love as commendable (95-107).
Others might contend that Arendt repeatedly returns to religion in order to understand it and eventually overcome it. Such a view, seen in e.g. the work of deliberative democrats explored in Chapter 2, argues that religion had its place in the past, but is useless as a yardstick in the present where everything must be thought anew. Religion reflects a kind of prejudice against politics we inherit from the past that, through its thorough critical engagement, can be shed. This position has textual backing in her declaration of the death of the God of metaphysics in the introduction to *Thinking* or her description of the irretrievable breakdown of the Roman trinity of religion, authority, and tradition (2005, 51-2). But to conclude from this that God and metaphysics are no more is to ignore her when she writes, “if anything is dead, it can only be the traditional thought of God” (1978a, 10), or claims that such a thing as “authentic religion” exists “with its unrelenting stress on the individual” (2006a, 134). In this chapter I contend that this authentic religion is composed of the remains of past religion that survive these metaphysical “deaths” pervading the present. That is, this religion survives – to borrow an oft-cited metaphor from Arendt’s introduction to Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* – as a lasting pearl or piece of coral “at the bottom of our [religious] existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea” (1968b, 49). My claim is that Arendt understands the example of Jesus of Nazareth, pried loose from the seabed of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as one of these pearls; a pearl that can shed light on, but not fully illuminate, our religious existence. The example may be the *Urphänomene* (51) – the phenomenological archetype, the exemplar – of religion for the West.

This brings me to one last possible reason for avoiding her work on religion: it is exclusively focused on the figure of Jesus of Nazareth and the Judeo-Christian tradition. This exclusive focus strikes one as odd in part because Arendt is a Jew. However, Arendt sees
traditional Judaism as a “national religion” (1994, 17): a religion confined to a particular social group defined by a covenant with God. Oddly, her discussions of Judaism rarely delve into its ethical monotheism, that God’s covenant entailed a universally applicable ethics in the form of justice toward the weak and strange (Deuteronomy 10:14-19). In the context of modernity the Jews remain a social group, according to Arendt, but one differentiated from other social groups by both the absence of God and the absence of history (2007, 15-6). At a philosophical level, the Enlightenment signaled the irreparable severing of the Jewish people from their divine and historical roots, and the holocaust was the worldly realization of this separation. With this separation the ethical injunctions derived from the divine and historical roots of Judaism lost their validity for the Jewish people. The only common denominator that connects contemporary to ancient Jews is their status as social pariahs. If this pariah status is the definitive mark of Judaism, then it is not an authentic religion as Arendt understands it.

Yet, it is tempting to push back against Arendt’s view of “authentic” religion. Its authenticity is revealed by the fact that it survives the death of the traditional thought of God, as already noted, but recent events bring this “death” into doubt. The clash of cosmopolitan civilizations, the historically Christian and historically Muslim, has become a definitive mark of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A large contingent of citizens in both civilizations are seeking to subordinate law derived exclusively from public deliberations and decisions about political concerns to universally applicable laws derived from their respective religious traditions (Habermas 2008, 114-119).

Arendt was well aware of this possibility. In an essay originally published in 1953 entitled “Religion and Politics” she prophetically wrote,
If we try to inspire public-political life once more with ‘religious passion’ or to use religion as a means of political distinctions, the result may very well be the transformation and perversion of religion into an ideology and the corruption of our fight against totalitarianism by a fanaticism which is utterly alien to the very essence of freedom. (1994, 384)

Note that in these lines she fears both the religious and political consequences of the religious subordination of politics, although such consequences are not definite. I believe this fear is largely a product of her belief that the traditional thought of God no longer makes sense to modern citizens. Indeed, all of Arendt’s writings on religion, and its interaction with politics, rest on this assumption. If the traditional thought of God no longer makes sense to Western citizens, then the religious belief through which citizenship is conferred must be posited as a logos – a law, order, etc. inaccessible to the mind clouded by the mediation of worldly reality – that takes priority over the traditionally cultivated common sense of these citizens. Rather than common sense or, more fundamentally, community sense, the logos reflects a kind of “supersense” (Young-Bruehl 2006, 46). This is what Arendt means when she says that religious subordination of politics may turn “religion into an ideology,” which she defines in The Origins of Totalitarianism as an –ism that “can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise” (1973, 468). In the case of religion, we could think of the single premise that transforms it into an ideology as the supersensory will of God. Because political freedom is only realized when common sense is prioritized, the prioritization of an abstract principle like the supersensory will of God over common sense is “alien” to its “very essence.”

The fact that this logos reflects the experience of some of the citizens in all liberal democracies brings the idea of God as wholly supersensory into doubt. For many citizens in
historically Christian and historically Muslim worlds the principle of abiding by the will of God is validated by their subjectively and communally experiencing this will, and not as something completely outside of lived experience. It is this fact that brings the death of God, though perhaps not the traditional thought of God, into doubt. That is, while the death of God is brought into doubt by the persistence of subjective and communal experiences of God’s will, these experiences still pose a problem in liberal democracies insofar as it is only the experience of some citizens as inheritors of the same political tradition, and so does not reflect common sense experience. Liberal democracies, whether they like it or not, are characterized by some form of what Charles Taylor calls “secularity 3” wherein “belief in God… is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (2007, 3). Thus, even if the majority of citizens in these countries see the will of God reflected in their lived experience, the mere fact that all are aware of the possibility of doubting that this will was actually experienced signals that the traditional thought of God is still dead.

We can see this, for instance, in Egypt’s recent attempts at democratization. Throughout the 2011 Egyptian revolution it was well known that many of the protesters who acted to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak were “secular” even though the most influential political group opposed to the President’s regime was the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. This secular-religious divide, no matter what percentage of the population each side composed, reflected the reality of secularity 3 in contemporary Egypt. As the Muslim Brotherhood retained dominance over the next two years, Egypt’s new constitution was widely perceived as recognizing the Muslim Brotherhood’s understanding of Shari’ah as the ultimate source of its authority and not the Egyptian citizens themselves. Given the fact that there were and continue to be “secular”
Egyptians, this indicated an imposition of the supersensory will of God in a context defined by the common sense experience of secularity, and may be read as one factor inspiring the eventual overthrow of President Morsi.\footnote{One way out of this dilemma might be positing that to prioritize common sense experience \textit{is} to abide by the will of God. This would mean that it is a violation of God’s will to claim one is able to access God’s will through a “supersense.” This resembles the position of “liberal Muslims” such as M. A. Muqtedar Khan (2004) or certain Catholics like Charles Taylor (2007). According to Khan, “a fixed Shari’ah is a recipe for authoritarianism,” so “the content of law in an Islamic democracy should be a democratically negotiated conclusion emerging in a democratic society” (64-5). Yet, this solution faces a few problems. It posits a knowledge of God’s will, a knowledge of “the divine perfection,” that is in fact “unreachable by human effort” (Abou El Fadl 2004a, 35). If anything, prioritization of common sense experience is only the best approximation of God’s will. This seems to be Taylor’s position (745). But this leaves the prioritization of common sense open to doubt, which is intolerable from a position that affirms human freedom above all else. Further, from the Muslim perspective, even if prioritization of common sense experience is the best approximation, it tends to be too revisionist and relegates God to a position of irrelevance (Abou El Fadl 2004b, 122-5).}

Of course, certain variants of the Judeo-Christian tradition confront the same limits we see in Judaism and Islam so understood, but Arendt thinks that particular elements of Judeo-Christian theism overcome these limits. A quick glance at John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” shows that Judeo-Christian theists can easily identify themselves as a particular social group, much like the Jews.\footnote{Cf. Bellah (1967).} Yet, if the Judeo-Christian tradition is definitively social, then it cannot live up to its universally applicable ethic. To identify as a member of the group “Judeo-Christians” is to identify one’s self as reflecting one social difference among many rather than a way of being in the world that signals something other than a group difference simplicer (Arendt 2003, 209).

Neither has the Judeo-Christian tradition, as Chapter 2 made clear, been historically separated from political dominance. Following its fall, Rome borrowed certain elements of the Christian faith in order to preserve the authority of what was left of the Empire, and the resulting
cosmopolitan ideal bears a striking resemblance to Muslim states deriving their authority from Shari’ah. Yet, if the Judeo-Christian tradition is definitively political, then it cannot survive our common sense experience of secularity 3. In its clash with modernity, politically dominant Judeo-Christian theism confronts the same problems as politically dominant Islam.

Arendt exclusively focuses on Judeo-Christian theism because she sees something lasting in it that does not fit into either social or political categories. Her view echoes, and is largely influenced by, the views of Fyodor Dostoevsky. An example of this can be seen in the opinion of one of the most explicitly orthodox characters in Dostoevsky’s fictional work: Alyosha’s spiritual mentor, Father Zosima, in The Brothers Karamazov. Father Zosima calls on the monk, who we can understand as the authentic Judeo-Christian theist, to “Love all men, love everything,” and this even if such unconditional love relegates the authentic Judeo-Christian theist to a state of loneliness where she does not belong to any group or community, but only to God (300-1). It is a call to deny worldly ties; to deny their hold on one insofar as they may limit her capacity to receive the strange and weak from whom she senses goodness regardless of how they appear.

With this in mind we get a better understanding of what Jesus means when he declares in the unsettling passage from Luke 14:26-7 that all of his disciples must hate anyone to whom they are particularly tied, including the family and the self, for all of these ties – all of these relations – inescapably limit agape. That is, Jesus is denying the worldly ties of the self, family, or social group in favor of the universally applicable ethic of agape inspired by a sensed regardless of appearance. For Arendt it is the continually told and imperfectly re-enacted story of the life of
Jesus, and its universal applicability, which persist when his example is no longer perceived as primarily social or political.

Section II: Engaging Religion in Arendt Scholarship

To varying degrees the sparse theological and non-theological scholarship on Arendt’s religious writing takes account of her positive view of Jesus’ example. The non-theological scholarship falls into two groups. The first group recognizes something valid in the practices of Jesus, but claims that Arendt “demythologizes,” or at least ought to demythologize, these practices. That is, for Jesus’ example to remain valid it must be separated from divine mystery as seen in the Gospel of John and the Johannine and Pauline epistles. This was the task undertaken in the theological work of Rudolf Bultmann, under whom Arendt studied at the University of Marburg where she minored in Theology.

Examples of this interpretation can be found in the work of George Kateb (1984, 89-96), Margaret Canovan (1992, 179-85), and Saul Tobias (2011) on Arendt and morality. Kateb’s is the first, and perhaps most in-depth, defense of the role of goodness and morality in Arendt’s work. Kateb calls the novel morality Jesus introduces to the world “Christian absolutism,” by which he means, following Arendt, unconditional love or doing good for the sake of goodness. He notes that Arendt is wary of the modern tendency to pervert this love through the political transformation of compassion, which is “related” to the love of goodness but is not synonymous with it, into pity that inspires terror. He concludes his discussion of this novel practice suggesting that its co-optation is necessary in the modern, liberal democratic, world, but only “in some ‘demythologized,’ ‘revaluated,’ attenuated condition. It cannot do without the politicized
love of humanity” (96). This, of course, is not far from the thesis of this chapter, but Kateb fails to elaborate the dynamics of this relationship, why Christian absolutism must be “demythologized,” and what exactly such demythologization entails. Canovan (1992) offers an answer to this last point, noting that Arendt recognizes the validity of the selflessness embodied in Jesus’ life, and claims that Arendt “demythologized” him by looking to him as an exemplar of goodness rather than as the Son of the trinitarian God; as Christ (179). Finally, Tobias (2011) looks to Arendt’s idea of neighborly love as a potential bond that could create a global community, relying primarily on her dissertation. Yet, Tobias explicitly avoids any of the religious implications of relying on this form of love because they are “distinctively Christian” (85-6). The assumption underlying all of this work is that the example of Jesus and the corresponding concept of goodness his example reveals do not need theological accounts of Jesus (accounts of the divine mystery surrounding his life) to be possible and, further, may need to reject theology in order to retain their possibility in modernity.53

The second group of non-theological scholarship is much smaller, but does not view Arendt as articulating, or needing to articulate, a full-scale rejection of the theological understandings of Jesus’ example. In an essay analyzing her dissertation in light of her later work, Ronald Beiner claims Arendt both criticizes Augustine’s assertion that politics is futile and upholds his assertion that it cannot offer a relation to eternity. Political futility is overcome by virtue of the time-transcending immortality secured through human cultural remembrance (280-

53 A more extreme view is offered by Chiba, who argues that Arendt’s work is meant to invalidate the example of Jesus because the love he practiced could not affirm a human in her true particularity, but only insofar as she reflects God: “In the thought of Arendt the love which accepts ‘thou’ unconditionally is clearly neither the ‘love for God’ nor ‘self-love’ which characterizes the life of the citizens of the earthly city in Augustine; it is rather the ‘love of the world’” (1995, 534). This take on Arendt is explored more fully in the theological scholarship discussed below.
1). However, immortality is not eternity; worldly permanence is not cosmic wholeness. Beiner recognizes this and asserts that Arendt is still moved by the promise of eternity; a promise which she saw in Augustine’s exploration of the unconditional love that binds together the church as the body of Christ. Young-Bruehl (2006) claims that Arendt is right that authentic religion is free from politics, but wrong in asserting that this means it is politically irrelevant. Relying on Arendt’s understanding of religion, Young-Bruehl argues that the fundamentalist versions of Christianity and Islam seeking political dominance we witness at present are nothing but perversions of these religious traditions (49). Further, Young-Bruehl claims that Arendt’s exposure to authentic religion in the form of Pope John XXIII brings the idea that religion must be free from politics into doubt. In his attempts to imitate Jesus he showed himself to be “great” and these actions “revealed him as a person,” which is to say someone whose persona is worthy of remembrance (106). Indeed, she goes so far as claiming his actions, which included initiating the Second Vatican Council, began “democratizing” the Roman Catholic Church (107). Like Beiner, Young-Bruehl does not see a full scale rejection of theology in Arendt’s work. Unlike Beiner, she thinks that Arendt’s assessment of the incongruence of religion and politics is mistaken.

Finally, there is the theological, or at least explicitly religious, scholarship on Arendt and religion. This scholarship focuses on the theological merits of her understanding of Christianity and its grounding in the example of Jesus. For the most part, those who write from this perspective reject Arendt’s assessment of Christianity as being far too otherworldly. Bernauer (1987) was the first to give expression to this view in an assessment of Christian themes and discussions of Christianity in Arendt’s work. He claims that Arendt is too quick to deem
authentic religion exclusively otherworldly or exclusively free from politics. This assumes that religion is only authentic if it is incapable of loving the world, which is a perversion of Christian self-understanding, seeing the Christian as a pariah who lovingly criticizes the world (21). The Christian criticizes lovingly because she recognizes that the world is more good than the worldless desert of totalitarianism; it is closer to her telos, which is God. However, the Christian always sees the world as less good than God. Breidenthal (1998), analyzing Arendt’s dissertation without much reference to the rest of her corpus, argues “[h]er mistake arises from her assumption that for Augustine, and for the Christian tradition as a whole, Christian charity has no surplus to bring to the work of neighboring” (499). That is, Arendt thinks the unconditional love embodied in the example of Jesus is either less capable or equally capable of affirming the human individual in her particularity than the love of the world embodied by the citizen. Gregory (2008) echoes and builds upon Breidenthal, contending that Arendt’s conception of Christian love “leads either to inwardness or intimacy, both of which are worldless” (217). The person who is loved is not affirmed for himself, but only insofar as God is “at work” in him (237). He thinks this is a perversion of a proper Christian worldview, which sees Jesus as the neighbor who allows us to love all neighbors as themselves, and not merely as paths to God (239-40). The theological/religious scholarship generally agrees that Arendt wrongly pits religion in opposition to politics, and should instead see religion as improving politics.

I think Beiner’s assessment points us in the right direction when it comes to correctly assessing the proper relationship between religion and politics in Arendt’s writings on the topic, although there are points in Arendt’s work that seem to indicate otherwise. This chapter could
be read as an amendment to Beiner’s basic thesis. Arendt does seem to be torn between time-transcending perspectives, but there are in fact three rather than two. There is the perspective of immortality (intersubjective temporal durability or greatness) achieved through creating and maintaining a political tradition, the perspective of eternity achieved through the speechless wonder of philosophy, and the perspective of aeviternity achieved through the religious witness of a paradoxically immortal and good example. That is to say, in much of her work on the topic, Arendt seems to be torn between three different modes of transcendence.

All of the scholarship on Arendt misses the mark in one way or another. The problem with the theological/religious scholarship and Young-Bruehl’s position is that they only see a tension between religion and politics in Arendt, while failing to recognize that Arendt does view religion favorably as a ground of morality. Beiner correctly sees Arendt as torn between modes of transcendence, but fails to recognize the perspective of aeviternal transcendence implied in her writings on authentic religion. Even though authentic religion and politics stand in some tension, both are constitutive of liberal democratic common sense.

On the other hand, the non-theological scholarship fails to recognize that, while Arendt substantially amends the Christian narrative such that only the life, and not the death, resurrection or divinity, of Jesus of Nazareth is of primary importance, she has a particular way of describing this character and the activity he inspires that brings the claim that she rejects theological accounts of Jesus’ person into doubt. Arendt contends that imitation of Jesus’ example is humanly possible only if God/goodness discloses itself to the actor who publicly appears in a space where goodness necessarily hides (1998, 76). The moment the lover of goodness attempts to remember goodness as something sensed in a seen thing, or give it worldly
reality through narrative construal, goodness “instantly becomes hypocrisy” (2005, 137). Articulation never does justice to, but always misses the mark of, goodness. Arendt claims this sin against goodness through remembrance or articulation actually destroys goodness (1998, 76). Barring vows against thinking and speaking, then, humans will always articulate such experiences and, in turn, kill the goodness to which they bear witness. Those who, out of a love of goodness, attempt to discern the goodness of things are almost always also implicated in the death of goodness. It is outside the realm of worldly possibility to render goodness great.

The humanly unbearable dynamics of doing good bring into question the common interpretation of Arendt as demythologizing Jesus of Nazareth, the exemplar of goodness. Of course, Arendt never says Jesus is God incarnate. Canovan claims she, at most, thought of Jesus was a “unique and extraordinary man” (1992, 179). I think the answer to the question of Jesus’ divinity is a bit more complex, and Arendt – rightly to my mind – leaves the question open.

Jesus perplexes Arendt in a way Socrates, the other unique and extraordinary man who preoccupies Arendt in much of her work, never does. Both were moved by a love of something that cannot last in the world: goodness and wisdom (1998, 75). Yet, whereas Socrates’ wisdom consisted in his knowledge that no person can be wise, the extraordinariness of Socrates consisted in his discovery of the “feasibility and importance” of the activity that lead him to this conclusion. Thinking, according to Arendt, is an “ever-present possibility for everybody,” and the fact that we remember thinkers like Socrates who stay true to themselves in “borderline situations, that is, in times of crisis and emergency” is not particularly perplexing (1978a, 191; 2003, 106). Insofar as all humans are potential thinkers they are capable of staying true to themselves in such exceptional situations, and testifying to this fact through their actions.
The extraordinary character of Jesus goes beyond the fact that he was the first in the Western world to discover the activity of doing good, and extends to the fact that his example is great even though the activity it reveals ought to preclude the possibility of intersubjective durability. In *On Revolution* Arendt describes “the person of Jesus of Nazareth” as “the only completely valid, completely convincing experience Western mankind had ever had with active love of goodness as the inspiring principle of all actions” (2006b, 72). This completely valid and convincing experience is also “profoundly paradoxical” precisely because goodness is destroyed the moment it appears (1998, 74-5). In other words, Jesus somehow escapes the dilemma of hypocrisy the doer of good faces when exposed to public scrutiny, and Arendt can offer no political account of how his example is capable of doing this. By virtue of the fact that the goodness made manifest in Jesus’ example lasts, even when publicly exposed to plural perspectives both old and new, and, further, continues to inspire others in countless diverse ways to affirmatively tell and enact the story of this example, it proves itself to be a constitutive part of our world. By virtue of the fact that the exemplary goodness of Jesus intersubjectively endures, Jesus’ example proves itself capable of transcending the limits of worldly possibility.

It seems to me that this exemplary capacity to transcend the limits of worldly possibility inspired by a love of goodness is the root of what Arendt calls authentic religion. Arendt’s authentic religion is, so construed, post-Axial in character.\(^{54}\) Recall, as noted in Chapter 2, that post-Axial religious traditions are characterized by practices inspired by a transcendent object kept alive through telling and enacting the stories of certain pivotal figures who first discovered

\(^{54}\) Philosophy insofar as it is concerned with eternity is post-Axial as well, although Arendt’s insistence that eternity remains hidden seems to bring into question all post-Axial attempts to bring temporality in line with eternity.
and/or perfected these practices. The practice of doing good – *agape* – is inspired by the object of God as goodness. In the West, according to Arendt, the only valid and convincing example of this practice is found in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and it is continued through the imperfect, and therefore faithful, telling and enactment of stories of goodness. Broadly construed, we might call the traditional collection of these particular stories the church.

Section III: Two Key Distinctions in Arendt’s Thought

The modern world, on my reading of Arendt, is partially constituted by that which from the perspective of politics ought not constitute it: the valid and convincing examples of doing good. The valid and convincing example to which Arendt continually returns is Jesus of Nazareth. What is important here is the paradoxical picture of the world my interpretation of Arendt offers: a picture of the world as partially constituted by that which transcends its very limits.

This is not, for the most part, the world as Arendt seems to envision it. In the next section I will push back on her vision of modernity. Here, I wish to parse out two sets of distinctions that recur in her writings on the modern world, and their relation to modern politics: secularity and religion, and immortality, eternity, and *aeviternity*. Arendt seems to say that the activity of politics inspired by a love of the world is an activity that is both exclusively secular and exclusively concerned with worldly immortality, but the *aeviternal* example of Jesus of Nazareth brings this semblance into question. As Arendt understands the example, it paradoxically remains intersubjectively durable while retaining its goodness. By virtue of the fact that Jesus’ example is paradoxically great and good it transcends the limits of worldly
possibility, signaling that modern politics is not exclusively secular or immanently self-sufficient.

a. Secularity and Religion

Secularization is not a phenomenon Arendt whole-heartedly celebrates. It is bittersweet at best. The modern world, according to Arendt, is fundamentally characterized by secular processes. By “secular” Arendt means that these processes have an “immanent meaning which even God [cannot] alter” (2006a, 70). Another way of describing secular processes is as self-making (autopoetic) systems; systems that determine all activities falling within their sphere of influence in accordance with a principle immanently derived from the system itself. These principles, far from reflecting traditionally cultivated common sense experience of these processes, are revealed to reason disengaged from the world, allowing humans to reflect on these processes from an “objective” perspective (1998, 280-4). Disengaged reason freed from the constraints of common sense experience can come to know the logos that directs these dominant secular processes, and with this knowledge is able to structure the world to better accord with these processes. This mechanistic conceptions of secular processes is clearly an outgrowth of nominalism.

Arendt is wary of celebrating a world fundamentally characterized by secular processes so understood because it perpetuates “wordlessness” in the form of the lonely and exclusively rule-governed conditions out of which totalitarianism arises. Under Nazism the logos was nature, and under Stalinism the logos was history (1973, 461-2). In each instance, the
“objective” directives of nature or history trumped the common sense experience of totalitarian subjects.

Because totalitarianism rests on a full-scale rejection of common sense, and worldly stability depends on the continuation of common sense through enacting and telling stories oriented by a traditional stock of exemplary stories, totalitarianism cannot last. Its failure to give pride of place to worldly reality spells its very demise. However, the fact that totalitarianism’s worldlessness is self-defeating does not mean we can passively wait for totalitarian regimes to self-destruct. Given various modern technological advancements the demise of a future totalitarian regime may also mean the demise of the earth and, therefore, the world.

The solution to the problem of modern worldlessness is not found in a return to the otherworldliness of religion or the eternity of philosophy, but through humans taking responsibility for the roles they play in these secular processes, appealing to the community sense that makes common sense possible. This is the positive side of secularization: it offers the solution to the problem it creates. As I noted in the previous chapter, Arendt finds the quintessential example of taking collective responsibility in the American founding, wherein the Constitution was established by the founders through mutual promise and common deliberation whose authority would be grounded in the common sense experience of all future generations subject to its rule. The Constitution’s authority, in other words, “reside[d] in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented” (2006, 194) through the common (public) deliberations and mutual promises (decisions) of every new generation. By deriving its authority from common sense experience reflected in public deliberations and decisions about political
concerns, rather than relying on a supersensory logos, the American Constitution became a world-preserving document.

But, why not religion? Is it not the case that the Declaration of Independence makes reference to a Creator; that rights are not immanently derived from secular processes but a divine gift? Is Arendt just outlining a revisionist history?

Arendt denies the capacity of religion to overcome the problem of worldlessness for at least two reasons. First, she contends that any such reference to religion in American founding documents or events indicates nothing more than an “involuntary thought-reaction” that wrongly integrates these moments into the “Hebrew-Christian tradition” (2006b, 199). Modern politics rightly understood, like all other processes in modernity, is an activity that occurs without reference to transcendence (2006, 70). To make reference to transcendence in authorizing political activity is to posit a new supersensory logos in place of nature or history.

It might be contended, as I argued in section I above, that she is similarly positing a nonsensical principle in opposition to common sense religious experience. Arendt’s response to this counter can be found in the second reason she denies the capacity of religion to overcome the problem of worldlessness. In the face of totalitarianism, religious morality, moved by a fear of divine punishment, “played hardly any role” in terms of resistance (2003, 63). Because it played hardly any role, it proved itself to be for the most part no more than “a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people” (50). Moral precepts derived from religion made as much sense collectively as the dictates of the logos of nature or history. In other words, they were nonsense. They were as nonsensical for most subjects under
totalitarianism as the guiding principles of totalitarian regimes. Therefore, they could easily be exchanged with little to no sense of loss. Secularized politics, at the very least, rests on a hope, rooted in community sense, that a constitutionally delimited space where political freedom may appear could cultivate, and give pride of place to, common sense once again.

b. Immortality, Eternity, and *Aeoviternity*

The second recurring set of distinctions – immortality, eternity, and *aeviternity* – is inextricably tied to the first. It is only through intersubjectively encountering the world as culture and the world as politics that one’s community sense becomes common sense. By immortality Arendt means the lasting character of an object; the object’s “endurance in time, deathless life on this earth and in this world as it was given” (1998, 18). It is the “drive to immortality,” the immortality of one’s *persona* through the performance and remembrance of great deeds, the immortality of tangible artifacts, and the love of politically and culturally relating to immortal examples and artifacts, that stands “at the foundation of political communities” (2006, 72). What a lack of common sense indicates in modernity is a lack of this drive to immortality, a lack of taste for greatness. Arendt seems to think that if moderns began trying to make sense of things as they are given, and not through the mediation of certain conceptions of reason or science that have privileged access to a supersensory logos, they would discover a natural taste for great objects.

A sign that the modern world lacks common sense, as noted above, is its functionalization or mechanization, turning its constitutive parts into use objects made temporary through consumption. Under totalitarianism great objects are deemed valuable only insofar as
they serve the ends of the logos, and in the modern world within which totalitarianism is possible
great objects increasingly serve “the biological life process” (2006, 202). Moderns, like the
citizens of Germany discussed in the previous chapter, consume great objects in order to improve
their spiritual, psychological, and physical health, and valuing great objects in accordance with
these ends gives the modern world a fluid and fleeting character. The sense that the world is
fundamentally a world of flux gives rise to the belief that no object can truly be great, and that
any activity moved by a love of the world, including the constitution of a stable space where
political freedom could be a living reality, is ultimately futile. As a result, moderns turn away
from the world, creating a humanly unbearable void of loneliness and meaninglessness that the
logos promises to fill.

It is the humanly unbearable character of a world of flux that Arendt believes can act as a
spark for the renewal of common sense, and therefore a renewal of an immortal world, in
modernity. Describing a world in flux, a worldless world, as a “desert,” Arendt writes,
“precisely because we suffer under desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the
danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it” (2005, 200).
Among these “true inhabitants” are those moderns who willfully obey nonsensical rules. That
some moderns suffer in a world of flux, that some moderns refuse to become true inhabitants in
this world, because it makes no sense to them reveals a natural taste for greatness; a natural taste
for the immortal, durable, or stable. In other words, those who refuse to be at home in the world
of flux by publicly testifying that it makes no sense, making publicly known how inadequate the
world of flux seems to them as a human abode, appeal to their community sense – “the will to
live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking” (1998, 246) or the love of the
world. So long as these appeals continue there is reason to hope that a stable world within which common sense could once again be cultivated is within the reach of modern humans.

As opposed to immortality, eternity is not of the world in at least two senses. First, one experiences eternity through the “singularity” of contemplation rather than the plurality of thought or action. Because contemplation is singular it “has no correspondence with and cannot be transformed into any activity whatsoever, since even the activity of thought, which goes on within one’s self by means of words, is obviously not only inadequate to render it but would interrupt and ruin the experience itself” (20). Since worldly reality is only insofar as it appears, it precludes the possibility of experiencing eternity. As opposed to the active experience of immortality, the experience of eternity is the experience “of beholding passively a revealed truth” (77). It is an experience that falls outside the purview of common sense without being complete nonsense. The experience of eternity is the experience of sublimity, of a kind of reality that transcends the world by virtue of being experienced yet inexplicably hidden.

Because eternity is only experienced in hiding, it cannot be made apparent in told and enacted stories from a plurality of perspectives, and so must always remain in hiding. This need to remain in hiding is the second sense in which eternity is not of the world. The experience of eternity is “unspeakable” and “without word” (20), that is, to even refer to the experience of eternity as the experience of eternity is to turn it into something else. Certain kinds of poetry or sacred texts perhaps come the closest to doing justice to the experience in word. Indeed, I believe this to be the case, but Arendt clearly thinks such works of art are the product of thinking rather than contemplation (167-74). Regardless, she shares with apophatic religious traditions the belief that God or eternity, that hidden thing experienced in contemplation, cannot be named.
It is, perhaps, better written as eternity. What eternity names is something other than eternity, something which can constitute the world through appearing and being interpreted through a plurality of perspectives in a way that eternity cannot.

The experience of eternity does not exhaust the possibilities of religious experience, however. Judeo-Christian theism’s, and it seems “authentic” religion’s, novelty vis-à-vis apophatic religion is its insistence that God is manifest in the goodness of worldly, incarnate, things. Authentic religion stands somewhere between worldly immortality and hidden eternity. Arendt has no trouble naming the experience of authentic religion, calling it “the experience of love in the sense of an activity” (76-7). God is named here as both the object of love as goodness and the activity of love itself. The experience of love as an activity is “otherworldly” without being hidden. Its transcendence rests in something other than its being inarticulately experienced.

While Arendt never explicitly uses aevternity or aevum to describe this kind of transcendence, it is clearly implied by her discussions of authentic religion. According to Arendt, when one does good, that is, becomes a practitioner of love, one is “guided by a transcendence that does not conceive of itself as realizable on earth (eschatological consciousness)” (1994, 40). This transcendence is best understood not as the singularity of eternity, but as aevternity. Aevum is “a now which is also forever, in which heaven and earth are facing each other, and therefore the flesh which is already in heaven and the flesh on earth will somehow be glorified together” (Cayley 2005, 214). Put simply, the perspective of aevternity is a vision of the lasting unity of goodness and the world, of the embodied divine plurality, not the disembodied divine singularity, of the eschaton. The peculiarity of Jesus of
Nazareth, again, is that his is the only completely valid and convincing example of living life in accordance with this vision in the West. Further, Jesus’ example, insofar as it is great, gives the world something analogous to the vision of the lasting unity of goodness and the world which should not be possible in the world. Jesus’ example transcends the limits of worldly possibility because it is both great and good.

There have, of course, been attempts to do good since the event of Jesus of Nazareth’s life in the West, some of them quite admirable, some of them with little to no reference to his example (Oxfam, for example). Within Arendt’s framework, however, there is always something lacking in these attempts that was not lacking in the original event. For example, the French Revolution, according to Arendt, was theoretically grounded in a hope to rid the world of evil and hypocrisy through the political cultivation of “natural” or “absolute” goodness (2006b, 71-2). The political cultivation of goodness necessarily negates the activity of politics, which is not for humans insofar as they are good or humans insofar as they are evil, but humans qua personas interacting with each other from the distance of the world as cultural and political relations. The activity of distanced interaction cultivates virtue where virtue means speaking and acting in such a way as to preserve the world. It is virtue as “virtuosity” (2006a, 151), as telling and enacting one’s life story well, where wellness signifies telling and enacting one’s life story with the aid of the correctly used traditional stock of stories. By turning politics into an activity to cultivate goodness beyond virtue the immortality of the world, its stability, is continually under threat.

Even when citizens do not attempt to politically cultivate goodness it still runs into political trouble because it is subject to a “curious muteness or, at least, awkwardness with
words.” Doers of good suffer from an “incapacity (or unwillingness) for all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both because it interest, it is between them” (2006b, 76). Since their speech does not concern the worldly in-between, but the goodness regardless of appearance, doers of good perform an activity with no political import. When one speaks out of a love of goodness it cannot be construed as one of the plural perspectives that politically preserves public space because its concern is with a phenomena that fails to appear. Speech that reflects a love of goodness is outside of the scope of politics. It is beyond interpretation.

Jesus of Nazareth’s example is not similarly subject to these criticisms, at least as it is recounted in the Bible. Of course, his speeches and deeds pose a threat to the stability of the world – they contain “clearly anarchic elements” (Arendt 1968a, 58), spurring action that ignores apparent commonality rather than deliberation over a shared interest – but they also somehow last in it. The story of Jesus is not the story of a mute man awkward with words, but a man who was able to live a life guided by a love of goodness while eloquently speaking of this love. The story of Jesus is the story of a man who is able, beyond all worldly limits, to combine goodness and greatness. Those who tell and enact this story, as opposed to the French Revolutionaries who looked to perfectly embody and know natural goodness, are well aware that it is outside of the realm of worldly possibility to embody and pursue goodness in a way comparable to the original example. They will always miss the mark of the example in their enactments, but this missing the mark does not mean the stories of the new enactors are not worth telling.

In a biographical essay on Pope John XXIII, Arendt took it upon herself to tell one such story. Good Pope John was one of ten European men and women in the “dark times” following
WWII Arendt considered sources of hope for the world. The essay in question is peculiar. In it she celebrates the pope as a “real Christian” on St. Peter’s Chair, as the rare example of a faithful follower of Jesus’ example (57). She admires the spoken and written stories about him, the latter showing “the complete independence which comes from a true detachment from the things of this world, the splendid freedom from prejudice and convention which quite frequently could result in an almost Voltairean wit, an astounding quickness in turning the tables” (63). There is a conspicuous lack of muteness or awkwardness in this description. Pope John XXIII seems, as Young-Bruehl claims, like a good and great character.

Arendt insists, however, that the pope was rather uninteresting and unexceptional. There was nothing in the world that mediated his relation with other persons in a way that revealed his character or persona, the distinct aspects of the story of his life, to be great or exceptional (67). What, then, made him a source of hope for the world? How could Arendt recount such interesting stories about this man while deeming his life story rather uninteresting? It seems that what made Pope John XXIII interesting, and perhaps what similarly makes Pope Francis of great interest for many in the 21st century, was his faithful imitation of the character of Jesus. It is only this character who can be of interest to the world, who can lastingly appear in the world, through those who tell and enact his story. This is why even Jesus’ most devout enactors describe themselves as sinners, failing to live up to the example, as at best seeing “in a mirror, dimly,” knowing “only in part” what is meant by seeing good, by seeing from the perspective of aevum (1 Corinthians 13:12). This partial knowledge is garnered through telling and enacting the story of Jesus’ example; the only example of doing good that could possibly be of interest in the Western world precisely because it intersubjectively endures.
Section IV: An Arendtian Political Liberalism

How does aeternity tie back into respect for persons and what might be its political import? Recall that Arendt seems to associate love of the world with “prejudice and convention” in her essay on Pope John XXIII, that in “Reflections on Little Rock” Arendt is quite clear that politics can do nothing to combat social prejudice, and that prejudice and convention signal a denial of the dignity of the individual. Political respect almost always tends toward disrespect of the individual and, even if not, can do nothing to combat this kind of disrespect if it happens to arise.

As I argued in Chapter 5, the Arendtian definition of political respect is nearly identical to the revised Rawlsian definition of reasonableness I presented in Chapter 4. To be reasonable is to be willing and able to offer reasons in public debates and decisions over political concerns derived from, or in the form of, the exemplary constitutive stories of a political tradition. In the case of the liberal democratic political tradition, these are stories of the exemplary embodiments of the values of freedom and equality, and the principle of respect for persons that these values reflect, that through being continually retold and re-enacted keep the tradition alive. It is through telling and enacting these shared stories that liberal democratic common sense is cultivated, and the liberal democratic world rendered stable.

The problem of instability that perplexes Rawls in his later work is the problem of showing why liberal democratic citizens should be reasonable. The definition of reasonableness seems too thin from the perspective of liberal democratic common sense, too comfortable with the status quo, too concerned with equality as political freedom and not freedom as tolerance of
fundamentally irreconcilable difference. Reasonableness signals support, through telling and enacting the exemplary stories that inform it, for whatever the constitutive elements of the world happen to be in a given epoch. In the liberal democratic world these constitutive elements happen to be exemplary stories rooted in respect for persons, but they have been otherwise in the past and conceivably will be in the future. This, Rawls is well aware, reeks of relativism.

Arendt, of course, would be perfectly fine with leaving reasonableness relative, but for reasons that are not relative. So long as citizens are publicly making sense of the constitutive elements of their particular world through its narrative construal, as well as trying to get these stories straight through the correct use of examples, they are being human and preserving the world. Arendt’s political theory rests on the rather thin assumption that humans are born for politics and that being political by preserving a public space where cultural and political relations may lastingly appear through being narratively appropriated from a plurality of perspectives is sufficient for avoiding worldlessness and, in turn, totalitarianism.

I think Arendt is correct that humans are born for politics and that the common sense cultivated through the continued engagement and affirmation of the world that characterizes politics may avoid the horrors of totalitarianism. Avoiding totalitarianism is not, however, the only concern of political liberalism. It is one of many concerns that fall under the more general concern of avoiding cruelty and domination out of respect for persons (and possibly other beings) that is constitutive of liberal democratic common sense. Respect for persons finds its source in something outside of politics, a source that moves citizens to defend the victims of cruelty and domination, including acts perpetrated by prejudice and convention, regardless of the victims’ willingness or ability to be political. It is a kind of respect grounded in the sensed
goodness of things rather than their appearance *simpliciter*. It is the sensed goodness that moves liberal democratic citizens to respect persons, and *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines are accounts of what it is that constitutes this goodness regardless of appearance.

Arendt’s concern is that politicization of something like respect for persons begins to functionalize politics. She, much like Rawls before the proviso amendment, fears that reliance on a politically influential principle that finds its source outside of politics signals the introduction of new logoi that, depending on who is in power, will subordinate the common sense experiences that politics makes possible, and render reasonableness impossible. This fear is perhaps most evident in her discussion of the explanation of art in her essay “The Crisis in Culture.” She writes,

> it is the very beauty of religious art which transforms religious and other-worldly contents and concerns into tangible worldly realities; in this sense all art is secular, and the distinction of religious art is merely that it ‘secularizes’ – reifies and transforms into an ‘objective,’ tangible, worldly presence – what had existed before outside the world, whereby it is irrelevant whether we follow traditional religion and localize this ‘outside’ in the beyond of a hereafter, or follow modern explanations and localize it in the innermost recesses of the human heart. (2006a, 205)

Comprehensive doctrines that are by definition outside of politics are like those traditional and modern explanations of works of art. They may be indispensable for making sense of one’s subjective experience of things one encounters in the world, but “irrelevant” when it comes to giving an account of the common sense experience of these very same things. A comprehensive doctrine is just one of many ways an encountered thing may seem, and the encountered thing’s worldly reality rests on it appearing to a plurality of perspectives.
In other words, what accounts for the common sense experience of a thing that lastingly appears is not the function or role it plays within a comprehensive doctrine, but its greatness. That liberal democratic citizens with irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines continue to enact and tell stories of exemplary embodiments of the values of freedom and freedom, and the principle of respect for persons these values reflect, over time is proof that they are great. Greatness is “secular” insofar as it exists independently of any single perspective, comprehensive or otherwise. Each perspective taken by itself is politically “irrelevant.” However, greatness is also, in a sense, not secular insofar as a condition of its possibility is citizens telling and re-enacting the stories of worldly encounters from a plurality of perspectives, comprehensive or otherwise. Each perspective taken as one among many is politically relevant so long as it continues to see the same object.

The problem with relying on a purely political account of liberal democratic common sense experience, without some reference to goodness, as the sole basis of reasonableness is that it cannot explain the respect for persons constitutive of moral aspects of the liberal democratic political tradition. On the other hand, respect for persons, insofar as it requires some reference to a sensed goodness that is not apparent, seems to discount politics to the point of rendering the cultivation of common sense, and therefore reasonableness, impossible. If respect for persons, and therefore an other-regarding liberalism, is to be possible within the Rawlsian/Arendtian political framework, if it is to be possible without dominating the common sense experience that politics makes possible with a supersensory logos, it cannot be grounded in goodness alone or greatness alone. Goodness alone comes at the expense of greatness and greatness alone comes at the expense of goodness. Respect for persons must, instead, be grounded in a thing that is
paradoxically great and good, a thing that achieves *aevum*. The ground of respect must be an example that intersubjectively endures as good through its story being told and enacted from a plurality of perspectives over time.

Put differently, a paradoxically great and good example both presupposes politics and transcends politics. By virtue of the fact that it is great, it presupposes politics. The example intersubjectively endures through plural tellings and re-enactments of its story over time. By virtue of the fact that it is good, it transcends politics. A purely political account of liberal democratic common sense, which is the only account politics can offer, cannot make sense of the goodness of a great example. Indeed, politics’ inability to make sense of the good and great example is precisely why it is paradoxical. This inability is the impetus for devising accounts of the paradoxically good and great in the form of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. That is, because politics alone cannot offer an account of goodness regardless of appearance liberal democratic citizens must resort to accounts of this goodness in something other than politics in the form of comprehensive doctrines.55

In the modern West this paradoxically great and good example, Arendt believes, is the life story of Jesus of Nazareth. I tend to agree with this assessment, although I think paradoxically great and good examples exist in other Abrahamic and non-Western religious traditions. I realize that pointing to Jesus of Nazareth’s example as paradoxically great and good may seem like veiled apologetics, but even a very orthodox theistic account of the example is

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55 This may seem controversial, but I believe I am just reiterating a point made by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* that deontology or utilitarianism, advancing justice and benevolence respectively, are “more or less secularized successor notions” of agape as responding to sensed goodness (1989, 516). See also my account of the religious origins of liberal democracy in Chapter 1.
only one possible reasonable comprehensive doctrine attempting to get the story of Jesus straight among others, many of which are fundamentally irreconcilable with an orthodox theistic account. Obviously, Arendt does not affirm such an account.

In any case, a cursory glance at the admiration Jesus of Nazareth receives across comprehensive doctrines in the modern West should suffice as evidence that contending that his paradoxically great and good example is the ground of respect for persons is not veiled apologetics. Immanuel Kant claims that Jesus’ example “opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality” (1998, 97). John Stuart Mill writes, “In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility” (1992, 128). In addition to deontological and utilitarian comprehensive doctrines being able to get the story of Jesus straight, a crass materialist comprehensive doctrine may as well. Renowned atheist Richard Dawkins writes, “I think we owe Jesus the honor of separating his genuinely original and radical ethics from the supernatural nonsense which he inevitably espoused as a man of his time” (2006). Obviously, these are not fundamentally reconcilable comprehensive doctrines, yet they all overlap in affirming Jesus as an exemplar of goodness.

The problem with theistic, deontological, utilitarian, or materialist comprehensive doctrines (this is not an exhaustive list) is that they tend not to see themselves as interpretive attempts to get the story of a paradoxically great and good example straight. Instead, these comprehensive doctrines tend to conceive the accounts they offer of Jesus’ example as ontologically prior to any experiential encounter with the example. There is a tendency to claim Jesus’ example is good because it is (traditionally thought, metaphysical) God incarnate, realizes
autonomy, maximizes utility, or embodies a scientifically provable ethics rather than first encountering the example as it appears – in its paradoxical greatness and goodness – and developing or discovering these kinds of comprehensive doctrines in order to get the story of their encounter with the example straight. This tendency is problematic because it signals the prioritization of a logos – God, autonomy, utility, science – over common sense experience. Any comprehensive doctrine that gives ontological priority to the comprehensive interpretation of the encounter with Jesus’ example rather than the encounter itself is unreasonable because it fails to give pride of place to the common sense experience that reasonableness presupposes.

The paradoxically great and good example of Jesus of Nazareth leaves open the possibility of, and presupposes by virtue of its greatness, reasonable pluralism. If this example is understood as a text like the prophetic speeches of Moses, then perhaps an Augustinian hermeneutics can clarify the dynamics of comprehensive interpretation. Amending a quote from his *Confessions*, the correct thing to say in the face of the conflicting reasonable comprehensive attempts to get the story of Jesus’ example straight is that the example reveals “whatever truth anyone could find upon these matters, rather than [expressing] one true meaning so clearly as to exclude all others, though these contain no falsehood to offend me” (1992, 12.XXXI). Each reasonable comprehensive doctrine, made reasonable by affirming the exemplary goodness that apparently grounds respect for persons, may be understood from the perspective of the liberal democratic political tradition as an expression of a true meaning, or, better, a correct interpretation, of the example.56

56 It seems to me that there are at least two “false,” or incorrect, interpretations of the example. One posits that perfect enactment is within the realm of present human possibility. This, of course, leads to the dilemma of
The peculiarity of the greatness of Jesus’ example goes beyond the fact that it is paradoxically great and good to the fact that it remains great without equal enactment. Enactment, just like telling, of an exemplary story is essential for keeping any practice alive, and those who are the closest to imitating Jesus in doing good works are also those who are most aware of their inability to reach the standard he sets; they are those who are most aware of their sin. Arendt writes, “The strain he put on his followers must have been beyond bearing, and the only reason we don’t feel this anymore is that we hardly take them seriously” (2003, 117). The humanly unbearable task of doing good reveals just how exceptional Jesus was in his ability to perform this task well.

Jesus’ most faithful imitators in the present world escape the hypocrisy levelled against those who claim to be good through continually acknowledging their failure to live up, which in turn brings life, to the original example. Niccoló Machiavelli in his Discourses on Livy notes that the Judeo-Christian religion “would be altogether eliminated if it had not been drawn back toward its beginning by Saint Francis and Saint Dominick. For with poverty and with the example of the life of Christ they brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there” (1996, 211-2). In the time immediately preceding the lives of these saints the Roman Catholic Church, as G.K. Chesterton describes it in his biography of St. Francis, “looked old… as now; and there were some who thought it dying… as now” (2002, 225). St. Francis, in particular, unlike Machiavelli’s contemporary Savonarola, who Machiavelli saw as a lover of power rather than a lover of goodness, “in truth and not in pretense… continued to tread in hypocrisy.

The other posits that Jesus is not an exemplary embodiment of goodness; that he is just as guilty of hypocrisy as the person who claims to be as good as Jesus.
muddy places” (Machiavelli 1988, 198). It was the “truth” or authenticity of Jesus’ exemplary goodness that inspired St. Francis to faithfully imitate that example, and while the imitation revealed nothing more about St. Francis as a person than that he was a faithful and sinful servant of the example, it brought the example back to life in a world where it seemed dead. St. Francis in his time, perhaps not unlike John XXIII in Arendt’s time, was “the mirror of Christ rather as the moon is the mirror of the sun. The moon is much smaller than the sun, but it is also much nearer to us; and being less vivid it is more visible” (Chesterton 2002, 284). Of course, the moon would be invisible without the sun.

The most faithful imitators of the example of Jesus do, in a sense, engage in activities that outwardly appear self-denying rather than self-affirming. The “strain” the example of Jesus places on its imitators is “beyond bearing” for them as humans because it requires them to act publicly and then immediately to go into hiding. They “hide” by attributing their acts to the exemplary source of their inspiration rather than themselves, and claim all good they do is for the sake of, and made possible by, the original example. Sin understood as falling short of perfect imitation of the original example is due to the fact that Jesus’ imitators never fully deny their worldly interests. Perhaps part of the reason Jesus’ example is paradoxically great and good is its ability to authentically sacrifice itself for the sake of goodness.

Because imitation of Jesus’ example demands self-sacrifice it is not, like politics, for most humans. As Charles Taylor puts it, those who take on the task of imitation go “beyond flourishing” (2007, 431). This, it seems to me, is the point where religion and politics part ways, similar to the point where art and politics part ways in Arendt’s “The Crisis of Culture.” The conflict between art and politics is a conflict “that cannot and must not be solved” (2006a, 214).
Art, in order to be made, always does violence to its medium. Jesus, understood as a kind of exemplary performing artist, does violence to the artistic medium of the *persona* – the self viewed through the mask of the world – for the sake of the sensed goodness of things regardless of appearance. Those who enact the story of Jesus perform a similar kind of violence out of a faith in, hope for, and love of the goodness of things. They, along with those who tell the story, see dimly and with a great amount of doubt what Jesus claimed to see clearly, and part of the reason they cannot see clearly is that they remain attached to their *personas*. This is not to say the *persona* is all bad or evil, for a worldly life is most definitely a condition of flourishing, but that it stands in the way of moving to a point beyond flourishing to care for those who are distorted or hidden by the mask of the world: the strange and the weak.

In sum, the task of politics is to preserve a public space where political freedom may become a living reality through telling and enacting stories over time and setting these stories straight through correctly using the traditional stock of exemplary stories, and the task of liberal democratic politics is to do the same, but in a way that gives pride of place to the principle of respect for persons. In order to do this in a way that achieves stability, liberal democratic citizens tell and enact stories of exemplary embodiments of respect for persons from a plurality of perspectives. In the West, this exemplary embodiment is originally found in the paradoxically great and good story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, acting in ways that denied the primacy of his worldly *persona* in order to care for the weak and strange persons who were distorted and hidden by the world. The common sense that arises out of narratively encountering this great and good example cannot rest content with a love of the world. In other words, the liberal democratic political tradition turns the political activities that gave birth to it on their heads,
publicly testifying on behalf of the voices silenced and distorted by a love of the world and attempting to adjust its laws and policies in a way that takes these voices into consideration. This is the task of public reason, properly understood, and reasonable comprehensive doctrines show a willingness to perform this task not merely by offering reasons all other citizens could accept, but by continually critiquing public deliberations and decisions over political concerns in accordance with the criterion that renders humans worthy of consideration and care regardless of how they appear; the same criterion that inspired Jesus of Nazareth to exemplarily live and die the way he did.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argued several things. First, I argued that the tendency of the political theoretical literature on Arendt to overlook her writings on religion, and explore its possible relation to politics, is without good reason. Second, I argued that Arendt’s conception of politics as purely secular is only partially correct because some of the plural perspectives that allow for the apparent manifestation of worldly reality narratively construe and interpret worldly objects in comprehensive terms. Further, I claimed that Arendt sees “authentic” religion persisting in the example of Jesus of Nazareth, which *transcends* the limits of world by appearing good. Third, I argued that examples like Jesus of Nazareth, providing politics with valid and convincing instances of living one’s life out of a love of goodness, provide an exemplary ground for the principle of respect for persons that pervades liberal democratic common sense, and thus a possible avenue through which stability could be achieved for the right reasons.
Finding such an exemplary ground is vital for political liberalism because only through telling and enacting exemplary stories of manifestations of the principle of respect for persons can this principle continue to shape the public deliberations and decisions of liberal democratic citizens in a way that ensures the primacy of common sense experience and, therefore, political freedom. To be clear, I am not claiming Arendt is a political liberal, but that, at most, she is able to fill a few holes over which political liberalism still trips. According to Arendt, stability, worldly permanence, or immortality is possible only when a public space is constituted where political freedom may become a worldly reality through telling and enacting life stories guided by the traditional stock of exemplary stories. Political respect, as distinct from respect for persons, is the way citizens relate to each other from the distance of the world narratively construed, that is, the way citizens relate to each other in accordance with common sense and the traditional concepts and corresponding examples that inform it.

Respect for persons arises out of one, or a small subset of, the stock of exemplary stories that constitute the liberal democratic political tradition, so the question is how respect for persons can attain a special status relative to other principles and values without arbitrarily imposing itself. The peculiarity of respect for persons, understood as a care and concern for the sensed goodness of something regardless of how it appears, that gives it a special status relative to other values and principles in the liberal democratic world is that it should not be able to have an exemplary worldly referent. It should be, in other words, completely antithetical to political respect because the person who is moved to care for a thing because of its sensed goodness regardless of its appearance denies the ontological primacy of appearance, and therefore worldly reality. The respectful actor is moved to care for the person behind the mask of the world, not
the persona of the self mediated by the world, and this sort of care requires the respectful actor to discard her own worldly mask and, possibly, herself. The only way she can appear in the world is as a hypocrite, as someone who claims to be moved by sensed goodness but, in fact, is moved by some other worldly interest.

The example grounding the principle of respect for persons must paradoxically overcome this dilemma by transcending the limits of worldly reality through being both great and good or, in other words, appearing good over time. Arendt points to Jesus of Nazareth as just such an example. His was the only completely valid and convincing example available in the West of apparent goodness, so if respect for persons is to retain its vitality in shaping public deliberations and decisions over political concerns in liberal democracies it needs the story of this example to be continually told and enacted, albeit with continual acknowledgment by enactors that they fail to live up to the example.

Because the example grounding respect for persons transcends the limits of worldly reality, its story cannot be made straight, or interpreted through, reference to other examples constitutive of the world. It falls outside of the purview of purely political interpretation. As such, it gives rise to various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that affirm the principle of respect for persons and its exemplary ground, but fundamentally disagree on the criteria of goodness that moves the example to do good. When these comprehensive doctrines are articulated by citizens in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns in a way that gives pride of place to the common sense experience of encounters with their exemplary ground, they do not signal eminent instability, but stable political affirmation of the principle of respect for persons. That is, they signal an overlapping consensus around the principle of respect for
persons. Thus, the liberal democratic world is not entirely secular, or politically self-affirming, in two senses: the principle of respect for persons is grounded in an example that transcends the limits of worldly reality and the accounts that interpret this example must make reference to some criteria of goodness that falls outside of the scope of politics.
Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso: where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian theist; and where this tradition so offends, I prefer to call myself religious in the sense of seeking God in a way that neither excludes other religions nor purports to possess the final truth. And where the religious so offends, I would call myself a seeker of love and justice tout court.

-Richard Kearney (2001, 5-6)

In conclusion, I want to return to the beginning because I believe my argument has come full circle. I argued in Chapter 2 that religion was a not a sufficient condition of the Wars of Religion and the treaties that ended these wars appealed to the Christian sentiment of pity, which is the sentiment that accompanies agape. I also claimed that from the practices of toleration that protected freedom of thought and liberty of conscience made possible by these treaties arose comprehensive doctrines that conflicted with Judeo-Christian theism at a fundamental level. What I am now claiming, along with Charles Taylor (1989, 516), is not that this fundamental conflict can be overcome, but that these comprehensive doctrines overlap in their affirmation of a “secularized” variant of agape in the form of respect for persons. Its narrative ground is still the example of Jesus of Nazareth, but respect for persons does not need to be supplemented with a single orthodox theistic interpretation of this example in order to retain its normative force in public deliberations and decisions over political concerns. Indeed, if it did require a single
incontestable interpretation the example and the corresponding principle would completely lack worldly reality. All of this ties back into justice insofar as modern justice is, at its root, concerned with respect for persons. In other words, the overlapping consensus around liberal political conceptions of justice follows from an overlapping consensus around affirmation of the principle of respect for persons as embodied in its exemplary ground.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I showed that the principle of respect for persons needs an exemplary ground because political stability is impossible without narrative construal. Political stability is achieved when a public space is constituted within which political freedom may appear, or become a worldly reality, through citizens enacting and telling life stories oriented by the traditional stock of exemplary stories that continually accrues over time. Exemplary stories are the ground of all political principles and values constitutive of the world, and through continually telling and re-enacting these stories citizens cultivate common sense. When political stability is self-affirming, completely immanent, or secular, it confronts at least two problems. First, in prioritizing common sense and worldly reality without qualification it stands in stark opposition to the principle of respect for persons, which moves citizens out of a sensed goodness to sacrifice their worldly identity in order to care for things regardless of how they appear. Indeed, without this sacrifice the embodiment of respect for persons becomes inescapably hypocritical, something done to maintain appearances rather than in spite of appearances. Political respect – the way of relating to others from the distance of the world as cultural and political relations – tends toward disrespect. Second, secular political stability has no resources at its disposal to address the first problem.
In Chapter 6 I showed how the paradoxical character of Jesus’ example offers a way out of this dilemma. By virtue of being both great and good, or appearing good over time, Jesus’ example transcends the limits of worldly reality because ordinary humans cannot appear good in spite of appearances. His example reveals the disrespect toward which political respect tends, and offers a way of combating it that calls for self-sacrifice. Politics by itself cannot offer an account of the goodness embodied by Jesus because goodness should not appear, so comprehensive accounts of the criterion of goodness regardless of appearance that moved Jesus, and continued to move others, to act in this way needed to be devised. So long as these comprehensive doctrines affirm the exemplary embodiment of respect for persons, and allow others to freely encounter Jesus’ example without the assistance of comprehensive interpretation, they are reasonable.

To get a sense for what I am envisioning, I want to borrow an example from Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller.” In this essay, Benjamin explores the activity of storytelling through an examination of the work of Nikolai Leskov. In Leskov’s work, Benjamin identifies a sort of ambiguous combination of the religious chronicler and the profane storyteller. He writes,

Both the chronicler with his eschatological orientation and the storyteller with his profane outlook are so represented in his works that in a number of his stories it can hardly be decided whether the web in which they appear is the golden fabric of the religious view of the course of things, or the multicolored fabric of a worldly view. (1968, 96)

Following the argument I presented in the previous pages, I take the worldly view to be exemplified in political respect and the religious view to be exemplified in respect for persons. The problem with Benjamin’s assessment of Leskov’s work is that he does not toy with the possibility of the ambiguity itself being eschatological. Instead of the stark contrast between a
golden fabric, which calls to mind the overwhelmingly sublime sameness of the whiteness of
Moby Dick, and a multicolored fabric, calling to mind a similarly overwhelmingly sublime
difference, why not consider the possibility of a multicolored fabric with gold strands sewn
throughout? These gold strands would not negate the colors on this view, but give them a
brightness they would otherwise lack. This brightness, further, would shed light upon the
previously hidden gold strands flowing outside the confines of the multicolored tapestry. To be
clear, the multicolored tapestry here represents the sphere of greatness and the gold strands
represent the criteria that moves us to do good.

The question is whether the tapestry can be extended to incorporate all of the gold
strands, and this is doubtful as a human possibility. Of course, it could surely be extended to
incorporate more, but there are some gold strands that are beyond multicolored retrieval:
Africans thrown off slave ships and left to drown in the Atlantic Ocean, Jews, homosexuals, and
others gassed and buried anonymously in German soil, women relegated to the hidden sphere of
the household, humans dying in prison, dying from neglect, and dying from war. There are
more, of course, but the point is that we kid ourselves if we contend it is possible to tell the
stories of each and every one. We kid ourselves if we think it is possible to politically redeem
them. Many, if not most, of these gold strands are relegated to a sphere of anonymity outside of
the multicolored tapestry. The task of the actor moved by respect for persons is to seek out and
act on behalf of the anonymous gold strands, those who Cornel West describes as emitting “the
funk” (2011, 97), and they may really be funky. They may reek of dried bodily excrement and
various other substances, and be loud, offensive, and ungrateful. In sum, they are far from great,
far from appearing well, far from pleasing our aesthetic and political sensibilities, yet they still
deserve care. The problem is striking a balance between caring for the gold strands to the point of annihilating apparent difference, and caring for the multicolored fabric to the point of ignoring those persons who do not at present, and perhaps cannot or will not ever, fit into this fabric. I am not sure how to best go about doing this.

Finally, I believe respect for persons can move beyond reliance on Jesus’ example alone, but this requires an ability to find analogous examples in other traditions. That many, as the Kearney quote with which I began this conclusion implies, find Jesus’ offensive example offensive to love and justice is less a matter of actually finding the story of his life antithetical to these ends and more a matter of disagreeing with dominant interpretations of his story. Catholicism offends these ends in countless ways, Judeo-Christian theism offends these ends in countless ways, and (some variations of) religion offend these ends in countless reasons, but is it the case that the story of Jesus told in the synoptic Gospels, and the continual enactments of this story, must similarly offend? If we generally agree that love and justice are worthy purposes, then we must be able to point to exemplary embodiments of these purposes. Thus, I highly doubt that most inheritors of this story, when separated from exclusively theistic interpretations, find it so antithetical. If many do find it so, they must point toward a more exemplary embodiment of these purposes. Again, I doubt this is possible in the West without a wholesale transformation, or more likely attenuation, of what these purposes entail. I fear that, with attenuation, we settle for a known possible possibility of the multicolored fabric rather than a hoped for impossible possibility of reaching out to the gold strands that fall outside of the fabric’s borders. Thus, the concern is, more so, offending the ends of love and justice as envisioned by those inheritors of other traditions with whom inheritors of the tradition implicitly
or explicitly constituted by the story of Jesus increasingly politically interact. My hunch is that a hope for commonality in affirming some form of respect for persons across exemplary difference rests in an exploration of the Axial shifts these other traditions similarly underwent and the exemplary persons who brought them about.
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