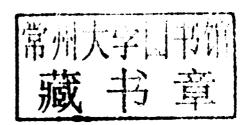
# The Making of Modern Liberalism

Alan Ryan



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Princeton University Press
Princeton and Oxford

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryan, Alan, 1940-

The making of modern liberalism / Alan Ryan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-14840-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Liberalism-History. I. Title.

JC574.R93 2012

320.51'309-dc23

2012002052

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Sabon LTStd text with Bauhaus St. Med display

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### The Making of Modern Liberalism

#### Acknowledgments

I HAVE ACQUIRED an immense number of intellectual debts over the years; acknowledging them would amount to writing my intellectual autobiography. Here, I must confine myself to thanking Pratap Mehta for thinking it was a good idea to collect a selection of my work in the first place; Ian Malcolm for gently leaning on me to advance the project; two anonymous readers for their support; Rob Tempio at Princeton University Press for bringing it to completion; and Kip Keller and Leslie Grundfest for deftly editing the text. Particular debts incurred in writing individual essays are acknowledged in the notes; my larger debts to family, friends, colleagues, and students are well known to all of them.

The essays numbered below were previously published in the places listed. Permission to publish them here is gratefully acknowledged.

- Liberalism "Liberalism" in A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy. The Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, 291-311, eds. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas W. Pogge, Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, Oxford, 1993
- 2. Freedom "Freedom," *Philosophy*, 40 (152), 93-112, Cambridge University Press, 1965
- 3. Culture and Anxiety "Culture and Anxiety" from Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education, by Alan Ryan. Copyright © 1997 by Alan Ryan. Reprinted by permission of Hill & Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC, New York
- 4. The Liberal Community "The Liberal Community" in *Democratic Community*, 91–114, eds. John W. Chapman and Ian Shapiro. *Nomos XXXV*, New York University Press, 1993
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- 6. State and Private, Red and White "State and Private; Red and White," in Violence, Terrorism, and Justice, eds. Raymond Gillespie Frey and Christopher W. Morris, Cambridge University Press, 1991
- 7. The Right to Kill in Cold Blood "The Right to Kill in Cold Blood: Does the Death Penalty Violate Human Rights?" *Cleveland Law Review*, Seventy-first Cleveland-Marshall Fund Visiting Scholar Lecture, 2001

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- 33. Liberty and Socialism Reprinted from Fabian Essays in Socialist Thought, ed. Ben Pimlott, "Freedom and Socialism" Heinemann, 1984. With permission from Elsevier.

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#### Introduction

#### PREAMBLE

THE OLDEST OF THESE ESSAYS was published forty-seven years ago, the most recent a year or two ago; they are a small but representative sample of my work over the intervening forty-five years. They possess a consistency beyond that of their authorship, but I would not wish to be tried for my life on behalf of every last sentence in every last one of them. Indeed, I would not have done when they first appeared; the object of intellectual exchange is to have good ideas reinforced and less good ideas corrected. I have also resisted the urge to rewrite them or to write a running commentary on them; everyone knows the mixed sensations provoked by encounters with our former selves and their thoughts. I have silently corrected typographical errors and adjusted some verbal infelicities—I have come to think that the use of "they" and "them" as gender-neutral singular pronouns reads better than "he or she" or "her or him"—otherwise, apart from eliminating some repetitions, I have left the texts untouched. I disayow in passing below some of what now seems incautious or wrong; but this preface is intended for the most part to explain what makes these essays part of a single intellectual project. These essays were written in response to requests from colleagues and have been scattered among different publications and different kinds of publications; the provocation for collecting them here was that former students and colleagues suggested that both the essays and their readers would benefit if some of these essays were collected in one place; I am happy to believe them, especially since it affords an opportunity to bring out their connections to one another.

Like many political theorists, I mix conceptual analysis with criticism of particular writers, and vice versa. If it were not improper to appeal to authority, I would take comfort from the fact that so much of Marx's work was a "critique" of whatever it might be, and that he clearly felt that the best, and perhaps the only, way to articulate what he wished to say about economics and politics, and the methodological difficulties of their study, was to set his own ideas against those of his contemporaries and predecessors. John Stuart Mill, equally obviously, was another writer who thought with and against the writers whose work he discusses in the essays that make up *Dissertations and Discussions* or form the target of book-length works such as *Auguste Comte and Positivism* or the longer and less sprightly

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Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy. If the concept of triangulation had not been discredited by its association with political bad faith, one could say that many of us navigate intellectually by triangulating on our discipline's landmarks. As with navigation in general, that analogy might be the starting point for awkward questions about how and by whom the landmarks were chosen, and whether they lead us into rather than out of danger. I do not ask them here, but plainly, the tradition of political thinking with which I engage is an artifact, not a brute fact.

Intellectual traditions are never made from whole cloth: little of what our more distant forebears wrote was preserved at the time, and little of what was preserved survived thereafter. Generations of political theorists have turned some of what has survived into a canon, but the merits of their selection are far from uncontested, and my own, mildly skeptical view is that what entitles a work to canonical status is only that it turns out to be "good to think with" for a substantial time and a wide audience. But goodness is in the mind of the reader; some readers seek wisdom in a text, others seek the occasion for a rousing argument; some hope to be surprised, and others reassured. There is little more to be said, even though political theorists periodically work themselves into a lather on the subject. Political theory relies very heavily on rethinking the legacy of our predecessors, from Herodotus to Karl Marx, but it is not straightforwardly a historical discipline; it is primarily concerned with the coherence and credibility of the arguments on which it focuses and only secondarily with their causal antecedents and consequences. Historians, even historians of ideas, mostly reverse that emphasis. Political theory relies on conceptual analysis, but is not straightforwardly part of philosophy as taught in the academy; its interest in conceptual analysis is more instrumental than that of philosophy, because political philosophy is, in multiple senses, a "practical" discipline rather than a "pure" one.

#### Talking to the Dead

There are many questions about the coherence of the project. It is often said that we engage in a "conversation" about "things political" with our departed predecessors; it is as often retorted that there is something odd about talking to the dead, who cannot answer back; and many of us have some difficulty in explaining the difference between "conversations" with silent interlocutors and talking to ourselves. One answer is that unless it is to be an exercise in ventriloquism, we must take seriously the historical identity of the writers we engage with, ensuring that their "otherness" is preserved. We must also exercise a form of self-control whose necessity goes without saying, but whose practice does not come easily. We must not credit past authors with our own favorite—or least favorite—ideas; we care about our forebears and value their insights, but they did not have us in mind when they came to them. Whatever else they were doing, they were not (then) talk-

ing to us. Necessary as it is to exercise this self-control, and hard as we should try to remember that our predecessors lived in their world and time and not in ours, it is not always easy; the more engaging a thinker, the harder to preserve the necessary distance. We say "what he must really have meant was . . ." rather than "I wish he had said . . ." usually because we do not notice that sympathetic interpretation has become rewriting.

The historical figures about whom I have written were often fascinating people; but my approach, both here and in the books I have written on Mill, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey is not biographical as I understand the term. My focus is less on the writers' lives than on their arguments, and the interest of those arguments lies in the way they illuminate the subjects we and their authors are concerned with. The point of getting the biographical context right is that it provides our only assurance that the arguments we explain, criticize, repair, or reject really are those that the author put forward and not figments of our imagination. Four decades ago, it was a common complaint that the "Locke" who featured in discussions of "Locke's theory of private property" was rather distantly related to the historical John Locke; matters were worse with "Locke's doctrine of government by consent." The obvious way to fend off such complaints was to distinguish very sharply between the purposes that the historical John Locke may have had in mind when writing the Two Treatises and the literal meaning of what it was he wrote, no matter what purposes animated its writing. In retrospect, I think I was too quick to distinguish as sharply as I then did between "what he meant to say"—which I still take to be essentially a historical question about the author's intentions—and "what what he said meant"—a conceptual question about the implications of the "plain meaning" of the text.

Setting aside the question whether a text ever has a plain meaning, to which the answer is a boring "yes, it is what an uncontroversial paraphrase reveals," any argument over which there has been a good deal of dispute is unlikely to have a truly plain meaning, and a paraphrase is unlikely to be uncontroversial. I would no longer wish to draw as sharp a line as I once did between what an author meant by what he said and what what he said meant. Some sense of how the author intended his words to be taken and some sense of how the audience likely took them are needed before we can settle on the meaning of what he said, at any rate in the extended sense in which the speech act being performed is an aspect of the meaning. This does not mean that an author's intentions are decisive in determining the content of an argument. To explain an argument is to settle, provisionally, on a view of its derivation from often barely visible assumptions, and to grasp its implications, not all of which the author will himself have perceived. Dialectical reasoning would be impossible if we perceived all the implications of what we say; reductio is the commonest device employed by critics. It is plausible that an author saw many or even most of the implications of what he wrote, but not that he could have had the foresight to see what his arguments would imply in very different conditions from those in which he lived

and wrote. To take an instance in which I certainly misspoke, I would not now say that when Locke writes about property, this reveals a "bourgeois" sensibility; I doubt that the label "bourgeois" suits a British tradition more at home with such expressions as "the middle ranks" of society, and I remain puzzled about the connection in Locke's own mind between "property" in the sense of "lives, liberties and estates" and property in the usual sense of the objects of ownership.

To think we can identify the arguments that writers in the past have put forward, and that it is worth our while to think about them as arguments, implies a limited degree of "platonizing." That is, it implies the existence of the intentional object that, in much the same way as an author's wishes, hopes, and fears, we identify as an author's argument. If it we did not do so, we could hardly talk about Pythagoras's theorem and similar entities. Indeed, we could hardly identify what we ourselves have said, are saying, and intend to say in future; oratio obliqua (indirect speech) would be impossible, and we would be confined to oratio recta (direct speech). There is much to be said about the utility of conversing with the dead, and I shall say only a little of it, and sketchily. The most obvious point is that it stretches the imagination; some people may be able to create out of whole cloth the ideas and insights that Dewey once described as our "funded intellectual capital," but most of us must borrow heavily from the bank of the ages. To take a topic that recurs frequently here, the expressive and communicative aspects of work, it is impossible to use Marx's ideas about species-being as a guide to the organization of a complex industrial economy. Working out why it is so is valuable, less because it is a destructive exercise than because the picture Marx paints of the way we can, in some contexts, achieve self-realization and happiness in our work for other people is so attractive. The thought that we see ourselves in our work, in what we make, and in what others make of it chimes with our reaction to gifts that others have created for us, in which we see an embodiment of their affection for us, and in which even the imperfections may be said to speak to us of them.

John Ruskin hated machine-carved statues in the restored churches of Victorian England because they frustrated that possibility: their perfection obliterated the personality of the sculptor, and the object no longer connected the spectator and the creator in the way a work of art, indeed in the way that all good work, should do. That Marx's passion for vastly expanded productivity is at odds with this concern for individual creativity is not hard to see. But if we enter imaginatively into his youthful wish that all productive work should be expressive and communicative, we begin to see not only that it is a utopian aspiration in a modern industrial economy, as he later realized, but also why writers such as Mill, G.D.H. Cole, Dewey, and other enthusiasts for forms of industrial democracy looked for other ways of reconciling the benefits of the improved productivity brought about by modern industrial techniques with ways of giving workers a stake in the productive process beyond the instrumental stake of their wages. Unleashing their cre-

ativity elsewhere than in the productive process itself was not a utopian ambition. Nor was it a mistake to emphasize the communicative aspects of production and consumption. Even today, when aspirations to industrial democracy are at a low ebb, consumers are sensitive to the fear that their running shoes or T-shirts embody the forced labor of small children in distant countries, even if they do not much mind whether they rent their cars from a worker-owned or a more conventional enterprise. Selectively at least, consumers feel that the clothes they are wearing speak of their origins and the conditions of their creation. All these phenomena have a history, as does their reflection in the thoughts of the most interesting and imaginative political theorists of the past two centuries.

Beyond this, thinking about politics is essentially historical in a way in which thinking about physical nature, the subject of the physical sciences, is not. The physical sciences have a history, but it is irrelevant to their content. One aspect of this is obvious enough. The laws of physical nature are invariant; either we know them or we do not, but physical nature is not itself engaged in a process of refashioning the laws it obeys. We talk of molecules possessing "memory," but that is strictly by analogy. Similarly, computers do not literally remember as we do: we remember with their assistance. This is not the proposition that all natural phenomena can be deterministically predicted; open systems defy prediction, and any natural phenomenon whose causation depends on human action is no more predictable than that human action itself. Plant biology cannot predict the fate of a tree in a rain forest encroached on by local tribes or industrial loggers. It is of the essence of the laws governing human societies that they are subject to change; the laws of the Medes and Persians may have been a byword for stability, but the empires of the Medes and Persians were overthrown and their laws became of no effect. Crucially, societies run on memory. Not only is their orderliness dependent on their members obeying laws whose validity is a question of pedigree—a matter of their having been accepted forever or having been passed by whatever local process it takes to create valid law; they rely on innumerable commitments above and beyond those encapsulated in law, and anyone intending to honor, or even to evade, those commitments must rely on individual and collective memory to know what they are.

Indeed, the identity of societies and their political institutions is very largely a matter of collective memory. As an organized political entity, a society has internal and external obligations that are binding on it only because it has a persisting identity as that society; even when a society experiences revolution and the postrevolutionary regime engages in wholesale repudiation of the obligations incurred by its prerevolutionary predecessors, the larger social entity persists, and its identity is a matter of language, culture, historical memory, and anticipation. Although a society is not a person writ large, the state that provides its order is, like other institutions, a *persona ficta* (an artificial person) with a life history and a capacity for making agreements and obeying norms. The French legal system regards corporate

entities as *personnes morales*, and although they are matters of artifice, they have histories, purposes, and go through birth and death; the U.S. Supreme Court decided more than a hundred and twenty years ago that corporations were legal persons.

Nonetheless, it is only by the continuous, intellectually aware activities of human individuals that states and lesser corporate entities exist at all; without the thoughts and actions of personae non fictae there would be no such entities. This imports a degree of indeterminacy into our characterization of these entities, their goals, and their capacities; think of such questions as whether a religious group is a church or a sect. When writing about thinkers remote from ourselves in space, time, or social setting, the indeterminacy is redoubled, since we have to understand both what they wrote about and how they understood it. Was the Athenian polis the Athenian state? Did Aristotle write about "the Greek state" when he wrote about the polis? It is not infrequently said that before the seventeenth century, theorists "had no concept" of the state. What the claim means is hard to tell. One thing it has meant is that when Machiavelli speaks of the prince intending to mantenere lo stato, we should not think that he is intending to preserve the state but to hold onto his recently acquired power. It is more of a stretch to go on from that localized and simple point to suggest that when Roman writers wrote about the political system with which they were best acquainted, they were not writing about the Roman state. If that entity was not a state, it is hard to know what it was. Anthropologists who write about stateless societies would not include Rome among their number. By the same token, when we talk of city-states such as Greek poleis or the republics of medieval Italy, we appear to regard them as states. Yet we do not wish to say that when Sir John Fortescue writes about the corpus mysticum that is the "realm of England" and Hegel writes about the state that is "the march of God upon earth," they are writing about the same thing. The fifteenth-century English state neither did nor could rest its authority on its capacity for the rational management of civil society; nor could the state that Hegel wrote about rest its authority on the thought that Frederick William III was the Lord's anointed. Examples could be multiplied to the point of exhaustion.

#### liberalism and Its History

In the context of the essays collected here, the three issues that raise difficult questions about the way other thinkers at other times understood their own societies are whether we can speak of liberalism before the term came into use in the nineteenth century, to what extent writers about freedom have written about the same thing, and what Greece and Rome thought about rights if they did not conceptualize subjective rights as we do—that is, rights amounting to claims that an individual may make or not make at will. These are familiar issues, much discussed elsewhere in the literature, but not much

discussed by me except here. The simplest way of answering these questions here is to explain what provides the unity in what follows. I begin with my understanding of the nature of liberalism, continue to an account of the nature of freedom, offer some second thoughts on rights, property, and social justice, and end by explaining very briefly why I have valued the interlocutors on whom I have concentrated. Since these topics are inextricably intertwined with one another, some repetition is inescapable. Since they are also difficult and contentious, what follows is lamentably dogmatic for lack of space to be anything else.

Liberalism as I understand it is essentially a modern creed, but not simply a nineteenth- and twentieth-century one. Its modernity lies in the fact that it is, not in logic but in fact, an offshoot of Protestant Christianity. There is no economic or political reason why liberalism could not have arisen in Athens in the fourth century BCE, but Greek religion and ethics would have had to be very different. In other words, liberalism required a particular intellectual and moral outlook and ways of conceptualizing moral and political issues that existed in no ancient society, but it did not require any particular social, economic, or political structure. The difference is perhaps best seen in the contrast between ancient and modern notions of toleration. Ancient religion was generally less concerned with questions of belief than with ritual practice, and ritual practice was largely concerned with keeping the gods favorably inclined. In the *Iliad*, when Chryses implores Apollo to visit the Greeks with misfortune because the obstinate Agamemnon will not return his daughter for an enormous ransom, he begins by reminding Apollo of all the animal sacrifices he has made. He has done favors for Apollo, and now the god should return them. Greek and Roman cities set a high value on the performance of the appropriate rituals, especially sacrifice, but little on theological orthodoxy. Blasphemy was dangerous because it would lose the good will of the gods; the concept of heresy, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out, was unknown. They were tolerant in the sense of not much minding what anyone thought so long as they behaved like good citizens; Jews and Christians notoriously would not do so, refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods or to the deified emperor, and so suffered persecution. Many ancient societies found it easy to incorporate other nations' gods into their own pantheons less because they resisted the urge to proselytize on behalf of their own cults than because they seem to have felt no urge in the first place.

This kind of tolerance is collective and unprincipled. There is no suggestion that religious belief deserves a respect that is both grounded in and the ground of respect for the personality of the believer. One should respect priests because ill-treating them makes the gods angry; others must take their chances. "Mere" religious conviction has nothing to do with it. Religious practices should be taken seriously, and we should encourage the young to take them seriously, so that we may keep the gods favorably inclined toward us and preserve social cohesion by instilling respect for our forebears. Mockery should-mostly-be stamped on, and certainly when it amounts to blasphemy rather than Aristophanic byplay. The difference between this attitude and the core of liberalism is that modern toleration is

tween this attitude and the core of liberalism is that modern toleration is focused on the individual; it rests on a commitment to the sanctity of the individual personality and the inviolability of the individual conscience. This thought lies at the heart of John Rawls's liberalism and explains a great deal both of the apparatus of *A Theory of Justice* and of the concern of *Political Liberalism* to set out a constitutional scheme that can appeal to persons of very different religious or metaphysical convictions without relying on the truth of any of them.

#### Liberalism Defensive and Principled

This is obvious enough to allow me to emphasize something different. This is that we may take two very different views of what follows from a concentration on the individual; one might say that they yield the liberalism of fear and the liberalism of individual autonomy. Hobbes was not a liberal. Nonetheless, the idea of a Hobbesian liberalism is not pleonastic. Hobbes believed that authority must be absolute. He thought the belief that subjects have rights against their rulers invited anarchy. The right to private judgment in matters of religion, which was advocated by dissenters and which William Godwin later made the centerpiece of Political Justice, was anathema. Nonetheless, Hobbes was keenly conscious that individuals who were deeply committed to a particular view of their religious obligations and felt that their salvation hung on their fidelity to those obligations were vulnerable to a particular and deep kind of anxiety. A state that scrutinized their beliefs too narrowly set them to play for their salvation at cross and pile. Where the peace was not threatened, the state would enhance the happiness and diminish the anxiety of its subjects by leaving them as much freedom as possible to practice their faith as they saw fit. It is security rather than sanctity that is doing the argumentative work.

On my reading of both Hobbes and Mill, Mill is a Hobbesian liberal to the extent that he founded the defense of intellectual and social freedom in *Liberty* not on a doctrine of individual rights but on the promotion of utility. But he really was a liberal, as Hobbes was not, because the utility in question was that of individuals eager to exercise their own autonomous judgment in formulating a plan of life; one might say that Mill built a very un-Hobbesian superstructure on Hobbesian foundations. Since I am myself skeptical about rights-based political theories, I have always thought that a Hobbesian foundation for liberalism is as secure as any. Locke, of course, provides a much more obvious starting point, but because Locke's conception of our inviolability as conscientious individuals with a life to live rests so squarely on the idea that we are the workmanship of God, sent here to fulfill his plans for us, it is vulnerable to anyone who thinks that we are not God's handiwork but an interesting biological accident. It is a further con-