

After Autonomy

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Liberal Pluralism The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice by William A. Galston Cambridge University Press, 152 pp., \$19 AMONG ACADEMIC LIBERALS and professional political theorists, William Galston is exemplary. In several fine books, he has undertaken extensive engagement with the work of his contemporaries. A professor at the University of Maryland, he is a good citizen of his discipline, bridging the divide between the philosophically and empirically oriented students of politics, regularly attending workshops and conferences, and commenting generously on the work of others. He has long been engaged in national politics, working as John Anderson's speechwriter in 1980, helping found the Democratic Leadership Council in the mid-1980s, and serving as deputy assistant for domestic policy during the first Clinton administration. And now, with his new book "Liberal Pluralism," he has distilled more than two decades of thinking about liberalism and its implications. But "Liberal Pluralism," it must be said, is also marked by the distinctive limitations of academic liberalism and professional political theory--and here, too, Galston is exemplary. Perhaps the best way to understand "Liberal Pluralism" is to note that it extends an approach Galston systematically laid out in 1991 with a volume called "Liberal Purposes," where he synthesized a great deal of scholarly writing by academic liberals and their critics (mostly critics of the left). His synthesis was strikingly informed by a teaching he traced back through Tocqueville to classical political philosophy: Every regime--liberal democracy no less than monarchy or aristocracy or, for that matter, the various forms of totalitarianism--inflects the beliefs, practices, and institutions that live under it. Galston's appreciation of what he called the "regime effect" gave his book an unusual edge. He wrote as an enthusiastic and partisan liberal, confident that government had an indispensable role to play in caring for the poor and vulnerable, yet concerned about the need to guard against liberal democracy's libertine and radically egalitarian tendencies. "Liberal Purposes" stood to

academic liberalism as the Democratic Leadership Council at the time stood to the rest of the Democratic party. The goal for both was to defend a more centrist vision. For more than a generation, the term "liberal" among professors of political theory has been reserved for those who toil in the paradigm established by the 1971 publication of John Rawls's "A Theory of Justice." Many a career has been made elaborating the doctrines set forth in Rawls's seminal work, which provided a highly abstract justification for a state devoted to protecting certain basic, individual rights while engaging in extensive redistribution of wealth. When Galston wrote "Liberal Purposes," the only widely available criticism of this Rawlsian liberalism was communitarian--and the communitarian critics took the Rawlsians to task for supposing that individuals are separate and self-sufficient, without intrinsic ties to other individuals or associations, and free of unchosen duties and transcendent moral principles. GALSTON BELIEVED that the communitarians brought to light genuine shortcomings in Rawlsian liberalism, but he also held that their critique was overdrawn and their conclusions misguided. Yes, the Rawlsians trivialized critical dimensions of moral and political life. Yes, they proclaimed as truths of reason what were actually tendentious views of the state's redistributive role. But, Galston argued, genuine liberalism was not limited to Rawlsian liberalism. Properly conceived, liberalism could give an account of the goods of community and purposes of the state that could meet valid communitarian criticisms while preserving liberalism's core commitments to individual freedom and human equality, which in one way or another most communitarian critics implicitly affirmed. Indeed, he argued, the liberal tradition itself teaches the importance of virtue. As one might expect from the idea of "regime effect," the virtues that Galston focused on--tolerance, self-restraint, a certain generosity of spirit--were liberal virtues, the virtues that equip liberal citizens to maintain public order, defend liberal institutions, and enjoy freedom's blessings. Because the preservation of a political society that protects individual freedom is an achievement that depends in part on its citizens' character, a liberal state could even enact laws--within limits set by the need to respect individual freedom--that promoted liberal virtues. Galston was at pains to point out that his approach was not conservative in the sense of defending virtue by appealing to tradition or transcendent authority. The virtue that it was the liberal state's responsibility to promote, he argued, was restricted--the minimum necessary for any sort of decent life in a free society, not the maximum connected to some notion of the best life for a human being. And so, on the basis of what he called "traditional functionalism"--the view that traditional institutions should in some cases be supported by the state, but not because they were traditional, but rather because experience, empirical research, and reason suggested that they served legitimate liberal purposes--Galston advocated public policies friendly to the various associations of civil society in which virtue is nourished. It was this sort of thinking that John DiIulio, the first head of President Bush's Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, brought to his task: It is legitimate for a liberal state to seek ways to help the ill, the poor, and the old, and to the extent that faith-based organizations provide such relief, the state has an interest in assisting their efforts. THE ACADEMY did not give "Liberal Purposes" the attention it deserved. By the time Galston left the White House in 1996, the discipline had moved on. The communitarian challenge had largely been overcome, either, as in Galston's case, by

trimming its excesses and incorporating its insights, or by sidestepping and ridiculing it. Meanwhile, new challenges to academic liberalism's hegemony had arisen. Chief among them was multiculturalism, which insisted that in the United States separate and distinct cultures are the fundamental constituents of political society, and that the state has an obligation to show equal respect and concern toward each. Typically, multiculturalists were obscure concerning just what the moral bases of this equal respect and concern were. And just what were its moral limits. In fact, as with the communitarians before them, what was valid in the multiculturalists' critique--understanding and respecting an individual involves understanding the culture in which he lives--had its roots in the liberalism they wished to repudiate. THE RISE of the multicultural critique coincided with a resurgence of liberal theory. In 1993 John Rawls published "Political Liberalism," which introduced the "idea of public reason." It was a bit unclear whether the purpose of this public reason was to set ground rules for public debate or to furnish the premises from which all legitimate perspectives allowed into the public debate must be derived. Either way, it was enthusiastically embraced by many academic liberals--who, to suggest that they were not theorists from on high but rather devoted to give and take with their fellow citizens, began to call themselves "deliberative democrats." Seen as offering a route from theory to the nitty-gritty of public policy, the idea of public reason inspired enthusiasts to flood the discipline with scholarly efforts to hone it and apply it and prove that professors of political theory could be practical. In what was viewed by its proponents as confirmation of its universality--and by its critics as a thoroughly predictable refutation of its pretensions to impartiality--the idea of public reason almost always seemed to come down on the side of left-liberal policy preferences. Caught between the moralistic relativism of the multiculturalists and the authoritarian liberalism of the deliberative democrats, academic liberalism by the late 1990s was once again in need of a sympathetic and synthesizing perspective, one that could counter its excesses as well as those of its critics. To a significant extent, William Galston's book succeeds in providing it. IN THE DECADE that separated the publication of his old "Liberal Purposes" and his new "Liberal Pluralism," Galston seems to have discovered Isaiah Berlin. Indeed, though slim, schematic, and suggestive rather than systematic, "Liberal Pluralism" goes beyond the argument of the earlier book by defending and elaborating the implications for contemporary liberalism of two of Berlin's master-ideas: "value pluralism" and "negative liberty." Value pluralism, the first pillar of Galston's liberalism, describes "a world in which fundamental values are plural, conflicting, incommensurable in theory, and uncombinable in practice." It opposes monism, the claim that values are subject to a common measure or can be ranked in a hierarchy. But value pluralism, Galston insists, is not relativism: While it affirms that fundamental values conflict, it also maintains that which values are fundamental can be determined objectively. This is a big claim. In fact, Galston rejects half-hearted and mealy-mouthed interpretations of value pluralism, insisting that it gives expression to "the basic structure of the moral world we actually inhabit." As such, it "is an assertion of philosophical truth." Like Berlin, Galston invokes value pluralism against both the liberals and the critics of liberalism who believe the purpose of politics is to promote a best form of human existence. On the one hand, Berlin opposed value pluralism to the liberal

Enlightenment monism that held there is a right way to live which reason can know and the state should enforce. On the other hand, Berlin also opposed value pluralism to the anti-liberal counter-Enlightenment forms of monism that were, according to Berlin, no less eager to set the power of the state behind a single conception of a fitting human life. Though his targets are much less grand and his critical tone not at all grandiose, Galston largely agrees with Berlin that monisms of all sorts--liberal as well as non-liberal--menace human liberty. The doctrine of negative liberty is the second pillar of Galston's liberalism. Following Berlin, he defines it as "the capacity of individuals, unimpeded by external coercion or constraint, to choose for themselves among competing conceptions of good or valuable lives." The chief threats to liberty, in this sense, are basic and nearly universally understood: physical imprisonment, material shackles, and exercises of force that directly threaten life and limb. Berlin set the idea of negative liberty in opposition not so much to tyranny, or tyranny pure and simple, as to the idea of positive liberty. This alternative interpretation of liberty--which Berlin found in highly developed and fateful form in Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx--proclaimed that freedom could be achieved only in and through a particular kind of life. From the point of view of positive liberty, individuals whose lives are rooted in ignorance, prejudice, or distorted desire are really unfree and must be emancipated by the state. Berlin did not deny that human beings can become slaves to ignorance or prejudice or desire. But enduring such harm was preferable to the monstrous evils committed since the Enlightenment by states in the effort to force individuals to be free. In "Liberal Pluralism," Galston insists that value pluralism and negative liberty are complementary--and that the liberal pluralism they combine to form has definite consequences for political theory (on which he focuses in the first part of his book) and public policy (to which he turns in the second part). Among the most striking features of "Liberal Pluralism" is the rejection of autonomy as the guiding principle of liberalism. Galston defines autonomy as the quest for "liberation through reason from externally imposed authority." As such, it is a form of liberal monism. Encouraged by popular culture and the educational establishment, an autonomous life is one in which the individual submits all questions to his own reason and regards the moral framework under which he lives as deriving its legitimacy from the fact of his having chosen it. Many academic liberals believe that the liberal state has a duty to form children, particularly through public education, into autonomous individuals. GALSTON DEMURS. It's not that he fails to register the appeal of autonomy. It's rather that he denies--as a value pluralist--that there is a single choice-worthy way of life, even the one that elevates autonomous choosing. And he recognizes the appeal of other ways of life, including those of devotion and duty. Moreover, making it a matter of educational policy to force all children to meet the requirements of autonomy, as many academic liberals do, violates the doctrine of negative liberty by putting the coercive power of the state behind a single conception of human flourishing. Instead of promoting autonomy through public policy, Galston would have academic liberals return to an older liberal purpose: the protection of diversity, which has its historical roots in what Galston calls the "post-Reformation project." Observing that liberalism arose in the seventeenth century as a response to the devastating European wars of religion, he suggests that early liberalism represented a theoretical justification for people to stop killing one

another over religious differences. The aim was to find a way to live together in peace, not to install an alternative ideal to rule over all. This liberalism suggested sturdy principles--individual freedom and human equality, toleration, separation of church and state--for the achievement of that peace. Only later, in the extraordinary self-assurance of the Enlightenment, did the protection of autonomous choice supplant the protection of diverse beliefs and ways of life as the guiding purpose of liberal politics. We are the heirs of both purposes. INDEED, many of our current public-policy debates can be seen as a contest between the "post-Reformation project" and the "Enlightenment impulse." This is particularly true of our debates about public education. Nonetheless, Galston argues, certain assumptions have nearly universal support in this country and define the terms in which debate about education actually takes place. They are: "The government has the right (and perhaps the duty) to require the education of all children up through the midteens and to regulate some basic features of their education. Parents bear principal responsibility for seeing to it that their children meet this requirement, but they have the right to choose among a wide range of options for meeting it. While government has the right to tax all its citizens to finance and operate a system of public schools open to all, it cannot create a public school monopoly that prevents parents from sending their children to nonpublic schools." In these nearly universally accepted assumptions are three sets of competing interests: the child's interest in normal development; the state's interest in forming citizens who can function within and maintain its core institutions; and parents' interest in rearing their children in a manner that gives expression to the parents' fundamental beliefs. And the question is how to reconcile them. Galston frames his discussion in terms of two Supreme Court cases that have stimulated much commentary by academic liberals. In 1971 in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the Supreme Court ruled that Amish parents may, consistent with their beliefs about the requirements of a devout life, remove their children from high school at age fourteen, two years before Wisconsin law permitted. More recently, in 1987 in *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*, the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals held that fundamentalist Christian parents could not have their children exempted from using textbooks that conflicted with the parents' views about creation and evolution. According to the strand of academic liberalism that believes that it is the state's purpose to promote autonomy, *Yoder* was wrongly decided and *Mozert* was rightly decided. Galston thinks exactly the reverse: *Yoder* was right and *Mozert* wrong. Because one of its chief purposes is to protect diversity, a liberal state, he argues, should give the widest scope to individuals to live in accordance with their beliefs. This "expressive liberty" includes the liberty of parents to rear their children by the beliefs they hold dear. Of course, children are not their parents' property, and so Galston's liberal pluralism, like other liberalisms, requires the state to protect children against parental abuse. But neither are children creatures of the state, a truth that Galston's liberal pluralism, more alive to the diversity of moral authority, emphasizes against the tendency of liberalisms that want the state to wrest control from parents and force children to be free. Galston is acutely aware that public schools help prepare students for citizenship. But he holds a less sweeping view of what schools should seek to accomplish, and a thinner conception of citizenship, than that espoused by the

deliberative democrats. It is not that Galston underestimates what schooling can provide, but rather that he appreciates that the preponderance of virtue is learned in the family. Similarly, it is not because he takes politics lightly that he circumscribes the claims of citizenship, but because he takes seriously the claims made on us by non-political life. GALSTON'S LIBERAL PLURALISM will prove unsatisfying to moralists on the left and the right. How could it not? It emphasizes the necessity in politics for trade-offs and compromises. It counsels caution and restraint wherever a question is raised of government action infringing on individual liberty. And it is committed to "afford maximum feasible space for the enactment of individual and group differences." These moralists may well ask Galston why he is so sure that there is no greatest good or authoritative path to salvation. But they will not find answers in Liberal Pluralism. Although he aims to make a contribution to political theory, Galston suppresses the question of metaphysics by appealing to our sentiments about moral diversity and our "concrete experience" of the "moral world." He offers, however, little in the way of philosophical argument that connects the rest of the world to what he claims to know is true about the "moral world." The observation that people hold conflicting values does little to establish the validity of what they hold--and nothing to dispense with the claims of the monists who champion a single greatest good. Nor does it dispose of the challenge of the nihilists, who believe that behind all values lies the human lust for mastery. Moreover, Galston downplays liberalism's internal tensions. He insists, for example, that value pluralism is not relativism and is thus capable of ranking some goods and ways of life. But he provides no principled way of doing so. So, too, in the effort to give diversity its due, he slights the claims of autonomy within the liberal tradition. He suggests that the principle of autonomy and the principle of diversity within the liberal tradition can be neatly separated. But this is not so. Both are rooted in the political implications of liberalism's fundamental moral premise, the natural freedom and equality of all. As Locke, Kant, and Mill all saw, education for liberty involves both learning to think for oneself (which pushes us to promote the ideal of autonomy for everyone) and learning to be tolerant (which forces us to resist the state's establishment of autonomy as an ideal for everybody). Similarly, Galston never comes to grips with the relation between value pluralism and the special status that liberalism assigns to individual freedom and human equality. In fact, nothing follows for politics from value pluralism. It is only when value pluralism is combined with some other idea--like individual rights or the dignity of the individual--that one person has a moral reason to refrain from pursuing his own ends by trampling over other people's. But if, as value pluralism teaches, there is no common measure or comprehensive hierarchy, then what grounds do we have for believing in the primacy which all liberalism, liberal pluralism not excepting, must give to individual rights or the dignity of the individual? Finally, Galston all but ignores the self-subverting forces unleashed by liberalism. The nub of the problem, and an implication of the "regime effect" that he overlooks, is that freedom is a fertile breeding ground for some of the vices--relativism, narcissism, license--that undermine free institutions. To address these sorts of questions, one must go beyond the confines of current academic liberalism and study the greatest students of the liberal tradition, those who have explored it from a perspective that was not entirely exhausted or defined by the liberal

tradition. These were thinkers who undertook profound explorations of liberalism's dependence on metaphysics, its internal tensions, and its weaknesses and unwise tendencies. Although Galston does not display an interest in it, the necessity of such study was also one of Berlin's master ideas. Indeed, Berlin devoted a large portion of his career to recovering and sympathetically expounding the thought of liberalism's counter-Enlightenment critics. For everyone today, liberalism colors what we say and do, feel and think, detest and desire. It does not determine our politics, but it does furnish--for both the right and the left--moral premises, orienting principles, and governing aspirations. It may not represent the whole truth about us but it does embody a weighty and indispensable truth. Like all great traditions of political thought and practice, it is prone to overreaching. The challenge, however, is not to escape it or overthrow it but to reform it and conserve it. Peter Berkowitz, author of "Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism," teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.