

Postliberalism and Its Discontents: Assessing the Postliberal Critique of Liberalism

Jacob Williams

Green Templeton College

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford

December 2025

(99,995 words)

Postliberalism and Its Discontents: Assessing the Postliberal Critique of Liberalism

Jacob Williams, Green Templeton College

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in Politics

December 2025

Abstract

This thesis concerns the *postliberal critique of liberalism*. It does not assess the overall value of liberalism as a theory of political morality, or of constructive ‘postliberal’ proposals in political theory. Rather, I ask: have thinkers labelled (by themselves or by others) ‘postliberal’ propounded a novel and distinct critique of liberalism; and is this critique true or false?

I argue that there *is* a novel and distinct postliberal critique. This critique is what I call, drawing on Kevin Vallier, the No Alternatives Argument. This argument claims that it is impossible to sustainably realise the protection of the basic rights of citizens holding both progressive and traditionalist conceptions of human flourishing, at the same time.

The *conceptual* No Alternatives Argument claims that any theory of political morality purporting to endorse protecting basic rights for both progressive and traditionalists is *conceptually incoherent*. The *empirical* Argument argues that, as a matter of fact, mutual rights protections for progressive and traditionalists are *unrealisable* because of structural dynamics that cause real-world liberal states to decay into progressive-authoritarian ones.

I show that the conceptual No Alternatives Argument is unsound; liberalism is not conceptually incoherent. I then show that the empirical No Alternatives Argument does not show that the decay of liberal states into progressive-authoritarianism is *inevitable*. However, it does show that actually-existing liberal states *probably* have a significant structural *tendency* towards such decay. This tendency poses a risk that traditionalists may lose their basic liberties.

I argue, however, that traditionalists concerned about this risk should regard real-world liberalism more favourably than postliberals recommend. This is for two reasons: first, the two most salient constructive postliberal proposals (state financial support for marriage and for religion) are compatible with central versions of liberalism; second, through promoting religion, the state can weaken the secular progressive-authoritarianism that postliberals fear. Postliberals can mitigate liberalism’s dangers without abandoning liberalism altogether.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
I: Literature Review	12
II: Methodology	15
II.i: Towards a Characterisation of Liberalism	15
II.ii: Morphological Analysis	16
II.iii: Liberal Regimes	17
II.iv: Traditionalism and Progressivism	19
Part 1: Understanding the Postliberal Critique	26
Chapter 1: Liberalism in Theory and Practice	27
I: The Content of Liberal Ideology	27
II: Minimal Liberalism	34
III: Liberalism's Many Faces	39
Chapter 2: The Postliberal Challenge to Liberalism	45
I: The Universe of 'Postliberal' Arguments	46
I.i: Constructive Positions	50
I.i.a: Liberalism-compatible positions	50
I.i.b: Incomplete and Indeterminate Positions	55
I.i.c: Anti-liberal positions	59
I.ii: Critical Arguments	62
II: The No Alternatives Argument	64
III: The Genealogy of Postliberalism	71
III.i: From Proto-postliberalism to the No Alternatives Argument	76
Conclusion	79
Chapter 3: Why the Postliberal Critique of Liberal Regimes Has Not Been Refuted	81
I: Deneen's Critique of Liberalism	82
I.i: Two theses of liberalism	83
I.i.a: Structural Radicalization	84
I.i.b: Coercive Liberalism	85
I.ii: Straussian Undercurrents	87
II: Koppelman's Flawed Response to Deneen	94
III: Sunstein's Flawed Response to Hazony	97
III.i: Hazony's initial claims	97
III.ii: Sunstein's response	99
III.iii: Understanding Hazony's claims and Sunstein's mistake	101
Conclusion: An Enduring Burden	104
Part 2: Evaluating The Postliberal Critique of Liberalism	105
Introduction to Part 2	106

Chapter 4: The Conceptual No Alternatives Argument	107
I: The Conceptual No Alternatives Argument	108
II: The Liberal Incoherence Thesis	110
II.i: Originalism and Incoherence	112
III: The Common Good, Revisited	119
Conclusion	127
Chapter 5: The Empirical No Alternatives Argument	128
I: Coercive Liberalism in Existing Liberal Regimes	130
I.i: Trends in Progressive-Authoritarianism	131
I.i.a: Social Sanctioning and Preferential Weighting	133
I.i.b: Legal Restriction	137
I.ii: Are the Trends Structural?	139
I.ii.a: Rationales	139
I.ii.b: Causation	147
II: Historic Regimes: Social Order as Sacred Order?	157
Conclusion	159
Part 3: Responding to the Postliberal Critique of Liberalism	161
Introduction to Part 3	162
Chapter 6: ‘Orderly Reproduction’: Can a Liberal State Support Marriage?	166
I: Postliberalism and Marriage Subsidies	168
II: Rawlsian Legitimacy	171
III: Liberal Arguments for Marriage Subsidies	174
III.i: Thinking of the Children: The Child Welfare Argument	179
III.ii: The Plausibility of the Child Welfare Argument	180
Conclusion	188
Chapter 7: Establishment Without Perfection: The Liberal Case for Promoting Religion	191
I: Postliberalism and Promoting Religion	192
II: Public Reason and Promoting Religion	199
III: Arguments for promoting religion	208
III.I Biggar’s Anti-Woke Containment Argument	211
IV: The Plausibility of the Containment Argument	216
Conclusion	225
Final Conclusion	227
Bibliography	233

Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my supervisor, Paul Billingham, without whose advice and guidance at every stage this thesis would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the scholars who have commented on parts of this thesis. Tom Simpson and Gideon Elford read earlier drafts of the Introduction and Chapters 3 and 5 for my Confirmation of Status and provided invaluable comments. Tom, and Cécile Laborde, also read and provided extremely helpful feedback on an earlier draft of Chapter 6 after my Transfer of Status, and Cécile also separately read an earlier draft of Chapter 7 and provided valuable guidance. I am also grateful to Andrew Koppelman for his meticulous engagement with earlier drafts of Chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis (and especially for his detailed responses to an earlier version of Chapter 3's criticisms of his arguments).

I am also grateful to all the scholars and students (liberal, postliberal, or otherwise) with whom I have informally discussed the ideas of the thesis and whose comments have helped me to develop my arguments. Special thanks to John Milbank, Jonathan Price, Mehmet Ciftci, Philip Pilkington, and Liam Gearon for the opportunities to present my work on postliberalism that they have provided. I am also grateful to Matt Sleat, Paul Kelly, and Stefan Borg for sharing their work with me prior to publication, and to Christopher Eberle and Paul Weithman for sharing as-yet unpublished work on postliberalism.

I presented earlier versions of 6 and 7 at the Oxford Works In Progress workshop in Political Theory and of Chapter 2 at the Research in Progress Seminar at the Department of Politics and International Relations; I also presented the overall argument of the thesis at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. I am grateful to all who attended these events and engaged with my work.

Introduction

Liberalism, the dominant ideology of the world's major democratic polities, is widely perceived by both its defenders and its detractors to be experiencing some kind of crisis. Closely bound up with this feeling of crisis is the idea that the world is, or ought to be, in some sense moving beyond liberalism, entering a phase of history 'after' its dominance. While for some critics of liberalism, its flaws demand more inclusive or consistent application of liberal values,¹ many of the ideologies referred to (by their own adherents or by others) as 'postliberal' purport to offer a root-and-branch rejection of liberal commitments and to propose their wholesale substitution by an actively anti-liberal political morality. With US Vice-President J.D. Vance identifying with the "postliberal right"² and some postliberal public intellectuals expressing admiration for Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán's "illiberal democracy",³ it is unsurprising that many popular commentators consider postliberalism a "dangerous",⁴ "ominous philosophy",⁵ "more radical than MAGA"⁶ and "far worse".⁷ There are also self-identified postliberals who deplore populism, nationalism, and illiberalism;⁸ but there is nevertheless a widespread perception that at least some postliberal ideas are threatening and dangerous to the liberal order by virtue of their radical illiberalism.

Given this climate of anxiety, calmly sifting through postliberal writings to identify and evaluate the precise claims that postliberals are actually making will pay dividends. This thesis aims to evaluate *the postliberal critique of liberalism*, not postliberalism itself. To evaluate the all-things-considered merits of liberal or postliberal accounts of political morality would be far too ambitious for this project.

Part 1 of this thesis (Chapters 1-3) introduces the postliberal critique of liberalism. **Chapter 1** will perform the preliminary task of identifying precisely what the 'liberalism' that postliberalism critiques actually is, arguing that liberalism is an ideology manifest in both academic political theory and the real-world practices of contemporary liberal democracies.⁹ As I will then show in **Chapter 2**, many of the thinkers labelled (by themselves or by others) 'postliberals' converge on a novel and distinctive critique of liberalism, which holds that an authoritarian violation of basic rights of either progressive or traditionally-minded citizens is in some sense inevitable (I call the argument for this claim the "No Alternatives Argument").¹⁰ It is this critique that I will discuss in subsequent chapters. Some readers might think there are strong independent reasons for

¹ See (Laborde 2017, 18) on the implicit value commitment of critical theory, which "usually turns out to be some version of liberal equality, freedom, or pluralism".

² (Intercollegiate Studies Institute 2023, 48:58–49:30:)

³ (Orbán 2014). See (Patterson 2024) on postliberal ties to Orbán's Hungary.

⁴ (Wright 2023)

⁵ (Ward 2024)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ (Nelson 2024)

⁸ (Pabst and Milbank 2024)

⁹ I use "ideology" in a non-pejorative sense.

¹⁰ Cf. (Vallier 2024a)

affirming liberalism as sound even if some or all of the postliberal critique is correct; conversely, some other readers might think there are strong independent reasons for rejecting liberalism even if all of the postliberal critique is wrong. I take no position on this issue in this thesis but adopt an agnostic stance regarding the overall value of both liberalism and postliberalism.

Chapter 2 will also provide a systematic taxonomy of both constructive theories of political morality, and critiques of liberalism, that have been labelled (by their own proponents or by others) ‘postliberal’. In this chapter I will analyse the precise relationship between each such constructive theory and liberalism, identifying which theories are compatible with at least some versions of liberalism and which are not. I will also analyse, in this chapter, precisely which ‘postliberal’ critiques of liberalism are genuinely novel and distinct, and which are not. No other scholars have, at the time of writing, conducted this kind of systematic taxonomy of ‘postliberal’ theories and arguments.¹¹

Methodologically, I will aim to chart a course between uncritical acceptance of postliberal claims and the hasty dismissal of any ideas perceived as ‘illiberal’. My guiding epistemic assumption is shared by Kevin Vallier’s work on ‘integralism’ (a sub-species of postliberalism to be discussed later): we should treat postliberal ideas “not as lurid oddities but as though they might be true”.¹² Unlike Vallier, however, my aim is not to provide an ‘internal’ critique of substantive postliberal theories of political morality that assesses these theories’ internal coherence and whether they follow from their own premises. Neither, on the other hand, am I aiming to evaluate postliberalism by the normative standards of liberalism in a manner that does not call those standards into question.¹³ I will instead simply aim to elucidate the distinctive critical claims—whether conceptual or empirical—that postliberals make about liberalism, and to determine whether they are true or false.

An important respect in which this thesis’s contribution will be original will lie in my engagement with postliberal claims about both academic liberal theory and the practices of real-world liberal ‘regimes’.¹⁴ Postliberals frequently emphasise that their critique is targeted at least as much at purportedly ‘structural’ features of real-world liberal states as it is at academic liberal political theory.¹⁵ Existing academic responses to the postliberal critique of liberalism, however (as I will demonstrate in **Chapter 3**), have focused mainly on refuting postliberal claims about liberal *theory*, which is a very significant limitation.¹⁶ My thesis will instead take seriously the possibility that real-world liberal states could exhibit ‘structural’ tendencies towards practices even if most versions of academic liberal theory reject these practices, and that these practices could

¹¹ (Sleat 2025, 10; Kelly 2025a, 11–12) provide lists of ‘postliberal’ arguments but no such analytic taxonomy.

¹² (Vallier 2023a, front matter)

¹³ As in e.g. (Schwartzman and Wilson 2019) on integralism.

¹⁴ Postliberals (e.g. (Deneen 2023b)) often refer to the liberal ‘regime’; this usage has deliberate Straussian resonances (see (Strauss 1957, 362)).

¹⁵ E.g. (Vermeule 2024)

¹⁶ E.g. (Sunstein 2020; Koppelman 2022). This is also largely true of (Sleat 2025; Kelly 2025a; Borg 2025; Eberle 2024).

therefore be predictable consequences of attempting to apply liberal theory in real-world conditions despite their rejection by theorists.

I will argue in **Chapter 2** that the core and distinct postliberal critique of liberalism is the claim that authoritarianism (i.e. the denial by the state of basic negative liberties) is inevitable, and that social and religious conservatives ('traditionalists') should therefore embrace the authoritarian imposition of their values on others, because the only alternative is the authoritarian imposition of the progressive values of self-expression and radical autonomy on traditionalists. I will then identify both conceptual and empirical arguments for this "No Alternative Objection" made by postliberals: conceptual arguments aim to show that it is impossible to *conceive* of a regime that does not impose either progressive or traditionalist values in an authoritarian manner, while empirical arguments accept that a non-authoritarian regime is conceivable, but aim to infer inductively that it is impossible or near-impossible to achieve in the real world.¹⁷

In **Part 2 (Chapters 4 and 5)**, I proceed to an explicit evaluation of the postliberal critique of liberalism. **Chapter 4** will show that the conceptual arguments fail. The empirical arguments, which I evaluate in **Chapter 5**, fail to demonstrate that authoritarianism is *inevitable* (or *overwhelmingly probable*) but do show that real-world liberal regimes exhibit a structural tendency, linked to their liberalism, towards the authoritarian imposition of progressive values. Given this tendency, the final part of the thesis (**Part 3**, comprising **Chapters 6 and 7**) will assess how social and religious conservatives, who are the intended audience of the "No Alternatives Objection", should, by their own standards, respond. If the likelihood of liberal regimes decaying into progressive-authoritarian ones is sufficiently high that social and religious conservatives should, by their own standards, respond by embracing traditionalist-authoritarianism, the postliberal critique of liberalism would be *practically* vindicated. The question of how traditionalists should respond to this risk should be of interest to readers who are not traditionalists but who care about the stability of liberal regimes; such readers may consider Part 3 an exercise in "reasoning from conjecture".¹⁸

In the introduction to **Part 3**, I argue that despite the real structural tendency of liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarian ones, social and religious conservatives should regard these regimes more positively than they typically do. I will argue that social and religious conservatives also have a better chance than they typically assume of realising some of their most important substantive, positive commitments in political morality (specifically, commitments to the state promotion of marriage (addressed in **Chapter 6**) and religion (addressed in **Chapter 7**)) by making arguments compatible with liberal 'public reason'.¹⁹ For this reason, the postliberal critique of liberalism is *not* practically vindicated for its intended audience of social and religious conservatives.

¹⁷ See (Vallier 2024a) on the "No Alternative Objection"

¹⁸ See (Rawls 1997, 783)

¹⁹ Obviously, this will only work for state promotion of religion and marriage that does not use coercive means.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I will first review the existing literature on postliberalism (including literature that is in progress at the time of writing), before explaining the methodology I will use to evaluate postliberalism. Finally, I will explain two concepts—‘traditionalism’ and ‘progressivism’—which will be central to my analysis of postliberal claims.

I: Literature Review

Sustained academic attention to the ideologies described (by either their own adherents or by others) as ‘postliberal’ is a new phenomenon. Three books analysing these ideas have been released in 2025, by Matt Sleat,²⁰ Paul Kelly,²¹ and Stefan Borg.²² Another book, by James Patterson and Thomas Howes, is in progress and due to be published soon.²³ A small number of scholars, including Kelly²⁴ as well as Stefan Borg,²⁵ Laura Field,²⁶ and self-identified postliberal Adrian Pabst,²⁷ have published descriptive articles or book chapters analysing postliberalism, all of which are naturally limited in scope. There is a modest amount of academic literature analysing two significant sub-types of postliberalism, namely Catholic ‘integralism’²⁸ and National Conservatism.²⁹ I have also published a recent article on postliberal thought, distinguishing postliberalism’s constructive views of political morality from those of fascism,³⁰ and co-authored, with João Pinheiro da Silva, an account of the genealogy of postliberal ideas.³¹ Neither of these articles evaluates the postliberal critique of liberalism, however.

All the current work on postliberalism suffers from distinct limitations, and the forthcoming book projects are also likely to be limited in some important respects. Patterson & Howes’s forthcoming book on Roman Catholic postliberalism is divided between an ‘internal’ critique of this postliberalism from theological premises and a historical analysis of the failure of twentieth-century authoritarian Catholic movements; thus, their work does not evaluate the novel and distinct *critique of liberalism* that I believe postliberalism offers but focuses on constructive postliberal claims about political morality.³² Borg’s article is much broader in scope, tackling many non-Catholic postliberal thinkers. However, he addresses only postliberal critique of liberal *theory*, not of real-world liberal ‘regimes’, concluding that postliberal criticism of liberalism “hinges on a particular reading of social contract theory”.³³ I will argue later (in Chapter 3) that the postliberal critique of liberal ‘regimes’ might be descriptively correct (or

²⁰ (Sleat 2025). I have read a review copy of this work.

²¹ (Kelly 2025a)

²² (Borg 2025)

²³ (Patterson and Howes 2024a). At the time of writing, review copies of this work are not available.

²⁴ (Kelly 2024)

²⁵ (Borg 2024)

²⁶ (Field 2024)

²⁷ (Pabst 2023)

²⁸ ‘Integralism’ is the doctrine that the Catholic Church should authorise the state to use coercive means to promote the supernatural common good of its citizens. See e.g. (Vallier 2023a; Pink 2024b; Schwartzman and Wilson 2019; Copulsky 2024, 243–65)

²⁹ (Varacalli 2023; Quast-Neulinger 2021; Copulsky 2024, 265–83). .

³⁰ (Williams 2025a)

³¹ (Williams and da Silva 2025)

³² (Patterson and Howes 2024b, 04:38–06:20).

³³ (Borg 2024, 8)

partially correct) even if postliberals rely upon a flawed reading of social contract theory, or indeed of any aspect of liberal theory, when criticising that theory.

Pabst's intervention blends normative and descriptive claims in a manner that tends to confuse the conceptual field, a limitation plausibly related to Pabst's own commitment to (what he considers to be) a particular version of postliberalism. Pabst identifies four prescriptive features of postliberalism, none of which facially rule out authoritarianism or illiberalism.³⁴ However, he later asserts that the "antiliberal" character of versions of postliberalism other than his own preferred strand renders these ideologies inauthentically postliberal, declaring that National Conservatism is "anything but postliberal" due to its statist social conservatism.³⁵ Since Pabst provides no argument for thinking postliberalism is *per se* incompatible with authoritarianism, but does provide an argument (albeit sometimes an implicit one) for thinking his preferred version of postliberalism (which he calls "personalist pluralism") is incompatible with authoritarianism,³⁶ it is fair to detect a sleight of hand whereby personalist pluralist postliberalism is implicitly equated with postliberalism *simpliciter*, without any argument for this equation being offered. One might think Pabst is correct in his normative claim that personalist pluralism is the *best* version of postliberalism without accepting his descriptive claim that it is the *only* true postliberalism. Confusing the conceptual analysis of postliberalism with its normative evaluation is not a promising beginning.

Field's critical analysis of right-wing postliberalism reveals a different problem: the easy dismissal, sometimes verging on pathologisation, of anti-liberal arguments. In her chapter in an edited book on "far-right newspeak",³⁷ she purports to show that postliberals "repurpose the concept of liberty" for an "illiberal political vision".³⁸ While this judgement may turn out to be true, Field's approach problematically declines to direct symmetrical attention onto the ways some versions of progressive liberalism might also repurpose liberal political concepts for dubious and arguably authoritarian purposes, such as removing negative liberties that protect social and religious conservatives. As I will show later, the claim that liberalism is guilty of this repurposing is in fact central to postliberalism (postliberals believe that liberalism is often paradoxically "illiberal"³⁹ or "coercive").⁴⁰ By declining to take this claim seriously, Field's analysis loses any persuasiveness to readers who are not already, prior to analysing postliberal arguments, inflexibly committed to the rightness of liberalism and the wrongness of the postliberal critique; her discussion risks becoming more akin to intellectual demonology than to serious evaluation of postliberal claims that "might be true".⁴¹

³⁴ (Pabst 2023, 888). The four features are a (1) preference for a "covenantal" vision of society over a social contract and (2) for positive over negative liberty, as well as (3) combination of individual and "mutual flourishing" and (4) balancing of "duties" against rights.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 895

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 900-903

³⁷ (McAdams and Piccolo 2024)

³⁸ (Field 2024, 151)

³⁹ (Deneen 2023b, 66)

⁴⁰ (Oakes 2011a)

⁴¹ The same holds for Field's discussion of postliberalism in her new book about the 'New Right', *Furious Minds*. See (Field 2025, 77-99)

The analyses of Kelly, Borg, and Sleat avoid the parallel problems of excessive attachment to (versions of) postliberalism on the one hand (as seen in Pabst) and hasty dismissal of postliberal arguments on the other (as seen in Field). The recent books by these three authors are, in my view, the fairest and most careful analyses of postliberalism (as opposed to specific strands of postliberalism, à la Vallier and Patterson & Howes) that have been published thus far. All three of these works have the virtue of open-mindedly considering postliberal claims as though they “might be true”. All of these works, however, focus primarily on the normative evaluation of substantive postliberal claims about political morality, rather than on evaluating the merits of postliberal claims about liberalism.

Borg does not discuss the postliberal critique of liberalism at any length in his 2025 book, which is almost entirely about postliberal constructive claims. His 2024 article does discuss the postliberal critique of liberalism, but presents it as a critique of liberal *theory* and still does not explicitly evaluate the critique.⁴² Similarly, in the one chapter in which Sleat discusses the postliberal critique of liberalism, he (like Borg in his 2024 article) presents this critique as primarily a critique of liberal *theory*.⁴³ Although Sleat does acknowledge that postliberals critique the (purported) real-world effects of liberal ideology, what Sleat does not do is consider the possibility that the real-world effects could be predictable and yet untethered from the explicit recommendations of liberal theory; that liberal theory, in other words, could have predictable but unintended consequences when applied in the real world.⁴⁴ (Ideas, we might say, sometimes have *unforeseen* consequences). This possibility, as I will show in Chapter 2, is in fact essential to the most central claim of the postliberal critique of liberalism.

Moreover, although Kelly claims that postliberalism is essentially a “negative ideology”⁴⁵ aimed at the “annihilation of liberalism”,⁴⁶ the bulk of his critical argument is, like Sleat’s, devoted to evaluating constructive postliberal claims about political morality rather than the postliberal critique of liberalism. Where Kelly does discuss the postliberal critique of liberalism, it is primarily through an engagement with defenders of “national populism”, which Kelly takes to be one of postliberalism’s faces.⁴⁷ Kelly’s criticism of the national populists’ critique primarily consists in pointing out that national populists offer a critical genealogy of liberal ideology, and that such a genealogy cannot by itself justify an alternative, positive vision of political morality.⁴⁸ Kelly’s claim here is undoubtedly correct, as far as it goes, but it once again leaves unaddressed postliberal claims about the unintended consequences of applying liberal theory or ideology in the real world.

⁴² (Borg 2024, 8–11)

⁴³ (Sleat 2025, 15–30)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19–21

⁴⁵ (Kelly 2025b, 9)

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13

⁴⁷ The other two being “common good communitarianism” and “common good absolutism” (i.e. integralism and adjacent ideologies) (Kelly 2025, 15). I will argue in Chapter 2 that neither populism nor communitarianism escape the pull of liberalism, while authoritarian postliberalism is not really absolutist.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 37–42

My approach to evaluating the postliberal critique of liberalism, then, which recognises the possibility that postliberals might correctly identify ways in which attempting to apply liberal ideology in the real world has predictable consequences that are not endorsed by academic liberal theory but that are nevertheless pernicious and severe enough to count against the desirability of the real-world liberal project, remains almost entirely unexplored in the existing literature. My original contribution will consist of evaluating this claim about unintended but predictable consequences.

II: Methodology

My aim in this thesis is to evaluate the truth of the critical claims that postliberals make about liberalism. ‘Liberalism’ is a concept whose referent every reader will have at least an approximate grasp of, even in the absence of a precise definition. I will avoid any attempt to provide a complete and comprehensive conceptualisation of liberalism, since this would inevitably embroil me in normative debates about the ‘true’ nature of liberalism. In Chapter 1, however, I will provide a sufficiently precise characterisation of what we mean by ‘liberalism’ to identify the object of the postliberal critique of liberalism with clarity. In the remainder of this Introduction, I will provide an account of the *structure* of liberalism as an ideology in Michael Freedden’s sense;⁴⁹ Chapter 1 will then provide a rough account of liberalism’s *content* aimed at establishing a ‘lowest common denominator’ set of commitments for what I will call “minimal liberalism”, while deliberately abstaining from judgement as to whether some more demanding and determinate version of liberalism is nevertheless the *best* understanding of liberalism. Both here and in Chapter 1, I will be guided by criteria of internal coherence, instrumental usefulness for permitting the clear formulation of the claims in which I am interested, and approximate ‘fit’ with how both theorists and real-world political actors use these terms.⁵⁰

II.i: Towards a Characterisation of Liberalism

In this section, I will provide a characterisation of the *structure* of liberalism to clarify two types of claims made by postliberals: claims about liberalism as a *theory* and claims about liberalism as a *practice*.

Edmund Fawcett, in his historical account of the liberal tradition, argues that liberalism is in the first instance a “practice of politics”.⁵¹ Postliberals often seem to share a focus on political practice. Deneen states that his critique of liberalism is “written in imitation of the classical explorations of the ‘logic of a regime’”,⁵² rather than as a critique of academic liberal theory. Vermeule has claimed that there is such a wide divergence between the practices and the theories that are usually called ‘liberal’ that academic liberal theory “bears roughly the same

⁴⁹ (Freedden 1996, 13–46)

⁵⁰ This does not mean any actor’s use of ideological terms should be automatically taken at face value.

⁵¹ (Fawcett 2018, 1)

⁵² (Deneen 2019, vi)

relationship to any actually existing liberal political order as the novels of J. K. Rowling bear to the current United Kingdom”.⁵³ Even if Vermeule were right, however, we would still need to make sense of the claim that both the theories and the practices are ‘liberal’. As will become clear throughout this thesis, one of the sources of confusion in the debate about postliberalism is a frequent lack of clarity as to when participants are discussing ‘liberal’ theory and when they are discussing practices.

A useful conceptualisation of ‘liberalism’ should permit us to coherently formulate two questions about the postliberal critique of liberalism, namely (1) whether this critique is right about liberal theory and (2) whether it is right about the nature of real-world liberal ‘regimes’. Our conceptualisation should allow us to see that these are independent questions, but that the adjective ‘liberal’ plays a roughly similar role in each of them. The best position to take here, to make sense of the postliberal claim that liberal theory has predictable but unintended consequences when implemented in the real world, is to describe a regime as ‘liberal’ roughly insofar as its structures, leaders, and discursive practices are committed (explicitly or implicitly) to the normative values upheld by liberal theory (but not necessarily to the precise recommendations that liberal theorists think follow from that theory). To flesh out this idea, I will adopt methodological ideas from Michael Freeden and Leo Strauss.

II.ii: Morphological Analysis

From Freeden, I will borrow the ‘morphological’ approach to analysing liberalism as an ideology.⁵⁴ For Freeden, ‘ideology’ is not a pejorative term. The morphological approach views ideologies as combinations of decontested normative political concepts. Nouns like ‘liberalism’, ‘socialism’, and ‘conservatism’ are the names of clusters of such concepts with their own particular structures, characterised by distinctive sets of ‘core’, ‘adjacent’, and ‘peripheral’ concepts. The decontestation of concepts in each layer, from core to periphery, is guided by the need to make that layer’s concepts mutually coherent and reinforcing. The decontestation of ‘adjacent’ and ‘peripheral’ concepts is also guided by the need to fit these layers’ concepts with those of the layer above (but not *vice versa*); ideologies exhibit hierarchical structures in the ordering of their concepts.⁵⁵ Adjacent and peripheral concepts function to aid the precise conceptualisation of the core concepts (‘public ownership’ may help some socialists specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving ‘equality’ in an economic system), but their interpretation is ultimately subject to the need for consistency with the prior interpretation of the core concepts.⁵⁶

The morphological approach provides us with much-needed clarity on how both academic theories and real-world political practices can be considered ‘liberal’. An academic theory is ‘liberal’ inasmuch as it constitutes an account of a particular (approximately coherent)

⁵³ (Vermeule 2024)

⁵⁴ (Freeden 1996)

⁵⁵ (Freeden 2013, 115). Cf. (Gallie 2019 [1955]) on “essentially contested concepts”. I take no position as to whether the contestation over normative political concepts is really “essential”.

⁵⁶ (Freeden 1996, 68)

interpretation of the core liberal concepts (I assume that a *specific* set of adjacent and peripheral concepts need not be present in every version of liberalism, though any *determinate* version of liberalism will have at least some decontested concepts in the adjacent and peripheral categories).⁵⁷ A political practice is ‘liberal’ inasmuch as the rationale(s) for the practice are derived from a particular interpretation of the core liberal concepts rather than those of other ideologies. For instance, if we suppose (for the sake of argument) that the only coherent rationale for recognising the right of same-sex couples to marry would appeal to an interpretation of core liberal concepts, recognising this right would be a paradigmatic liberal practice. If, however, we imagine that this policy could have coherent rationales that appeal to other ideologies—for instance, in a particular interpretation of core conservative concepts—then our judgement may differ. In such cases, the degree to which we judge the actual practice of recognising same-sex marriage in a particular regime to be liberal will depend on the degree to which we judge that the persons carrying out this practice (legal officials, bureaucrats, registrars, politicians) appeal to (implicitly or explicitly), and/or are motivated by, the liberal rationale as opposed to the conservative one. Judging the liberalism of a practice with coherent rationales that appeal to multiple ideologies will always be a scalar judgement with a degree of fuzziness.

‘Liberalism’, then, is an ideology that can be instantiated both in academic theories and real-world practices and discourses. Liberal theories and practices are liberal in an analogous sense: a liberal theory *constitutes* an interpretation of a set, X, of core liberal concepts; a liberal practice is *grounded* (explicitly or implicitly) in a rationale that depends on an interpretation of the core concepts in X. Nevertheless, there is a univocal conceptual core to ‘liberalism’: the *same* set X of core concepts is always referred to; and in the case of a given *version* of liberalism, the same *interpretation* of set X is referred to, in discussion of both theory and practice.

II.iii: Liberal Regimes

If a practice can be liberal if grounded in a rationale that depends on an interpretation of the core liberal concepts, then an entire political ‘regime’ (i.e. a state or polity) can be liberal if the preponderance of the practices that comprise it are liberal. I noted earlier that postliberals frequently refer to the ‘regime’ as a unit of political analysis.⁵⁸ Often, this usage deliberately resonates with and/or alludes to Strauss’s use of the term, so I will elucidate the Straussian concept of the ‘regime’ and how it will function as a unit of analysis in this thesis.

A “regime”, for Strauss, identifies a distinct type of society and state with a specific political, social, and cultural ethos, subject to the rule of “human beings of a certain type”, which “raises a claim” about the appropriate collective ends of human sociality. The specific laws or political

⁵⁷ Though the range of observed concepts at the adjacency and periphery of versions of liberalism will not be indefinitely broad, since these concepts (especially adjacent ones) will need to help conceptualise the core concepts in a precise way.

⁵⁸ Most obviously in Patrick Deneen’s *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* (2023)).

decisions of a state are “derivative” of the regime.⁵⁹ Strauss’s idea of the ‘regime’ thus captures the overall, large-scale pattern of ideological practice in a polity. Across a polity, political practices might be predominantly and systematically *grounded in* a particular ideology or version of an ideology, such as liberalism or socialism. This pattern of ideological grounding produces a ‘structural’ tendency for the regime to yield particular political outcomes (specific outcomes, I take it, are not inevitable, at least over a short time horizon, but are made systematically more probable by the regime’s structural commitments).⁶⁰

The liberalism of a regime is a scalar concept: in few (if any) regimes will *every* political practice be liberal, or non-liberal. This scalarity has a ‘horizontal’ dimension, measuring the *prevalence* of liberal rationales across different practices (how many of the regime’s practices are grounded in liberal rationales?), and a ‘vertical’ dimension, measuring the ‘intensity’ of the liberalism of different practices. We may helpfully say a practice is more ‘intensely’ liberal if the rationale on which it is grounded gives more *weight* to liberal concepts vis-a-vis concepts found in other ideologies. For instance, a regime’s practice of marriage registration might, over time, progressively come to rely on rationales that accord more weight to liberty (a core liberal concept) than family togetherness (plausibly, a conservative concept), and thereby become more intensely liberal over time.

To complete this gloss on Strauss’s idea of the ‘regime’, then, we can assess the liberalism of political practices and (non-theoretical) discourses, which across a whole polity comprise a ‘regime’, by their implicit or explicit commitment to rationales that appeal to the core values of liberalism, assessing this commitment in terms of how horizontally widespread its embrace is across the range of political actors that constitute the regime and how vertically ‘intense’ that embrace tends to be.

When deploying this concept to assess the liberalism of real-world regimes, there will, of course, be some degree of two-way interaction between our interpretation of the criteria for a regime being ‘liberal’ and our application of these criteria to real-world regimes. Among other desiderata, our concept of liberalism and the criteria for judging the liberalism of regimes should roughly ‘fit’ standard descriptions of real-world regime practice. Since this is only one among several desiderata, however, once we have established the content of ‘liberalism’, it will remain an open question whether any given regime is a liberal one, to be settled by an empirical analysis of the regime’s features.

I will use this Straussian framework (primarily in Chapters 3 and 5) to clarify and to evaluate the specific claims made by postliberals about the liberal character of particular regimes. I will show in Chapter 3 how Strauss’s concept permits us to make sense of the claim that liberal regimes might have a ‘structural’ tendency to yield a certain type of political outcome even when liberal theorists do not recommend that outcome. Specific laws and practices might be influenced by

⁵⁹ (Strauss 1957, 362). This should not be taken to imply that the ‘claim’ about human ends must be ‘comprehensive’ in character (Strauss may have thought this, but it would beg an important question in favour of the postliberals and against political liberals).

⁶⁰ Deneen describes this position as a “soft inevitablist” one. See (American Compass 2025, 10:31)

liberal background assumptions that ground (most of) a regime's practices, and these assumptions may deviate from liberal theory in systematic ways while still appealing to the same normative concepts. For instance, as I will argue in Chapter 3, these assumptions might often be simplified and vulgarised versions of the principles of liberal theory. Chapter 5 will assess the empirical claim that these background assumptions in real-world liberal regimes exhibit a structural tendency to embrace more radical and demanding interpretations of liberal concepts over time, thereby providing implicit rationales for limiting the basic rights of traditionalists.

II.iv: Traditionalism and Progressivism

As Chapter 2 will show in more detail, the central postliberal concern about liberalism lies in an interpretation of the attitude of both liberal theory and liberal regimes towards citizens holding what I will call 'traditionalist' conceptions of human flourishing, which are associated with socially and religiously conservative views of personal morality. To identify the set of these conceptions, I will propose here a scalar concept of traditionalism with two dimensions.

The first dimension measures the degree to which a conception of flourishing rejects what Clare Chambers calls "first-order" autonomy. Rejecting first-order autonomy does not imply a rejection of all forms of autonomy, and is in fact compatible with ascribing very high value to what Chambers calls "second-order" autonomy, as I will explain below.⁶¹

First-order autonomy is exercised by a person when she sees sufficient reason to endorse every *individual* constraint imposed by any "norms or rules" (such as the rules of an institution or of a religious or philosophical code) to which she is directly subject as "part of a way of life", even when bracketing any reasons deriving from the identity of the rule-maker. Second-order autonomy consists of endorsing the *overall* way of life autonomously, which *may* (depending on the way of life) involve endorsing a particular person or institution's standing to set rules and norms for one's life that one does *not* see sufficient *independent* reason (when bracketing the person or institution's identity) to endorse.⁶²

First-order and second-order autonomy do not necessarily conflict, for a person can endorse both an overall way of life and the individual constraints imposed by it. However, in some cases a conflict will arise between the orders of autonomy, such as when an individual autonomously chooses a way of life, such as serving in the military or living in a convent, without seeing sufficient reason to endorse (when bracketing any reasons deriving from the identity of the rule-maker) every individual constraint these ways of life require, but viewing them (when bracketing such rule-maker-identity-based reasons) as a cost of an overall way of life that one nevertheless sees sufficient reason to endorse on the whole.

⁶¹ (Chambers 2004)

⁶² (Chambers 2004, 4)

Many conceptions of the good exhibit a structure in which some kind of principle of *epistemic deference* demands the sacrifice of first-order autonomy. Persons affirming conceptions of the good sometimes endorse norms or rules despite (when bracketing reasons arising from the rule-maker's identity) not seeing sufficient reason to endorse them; persons subordinate their judgement about the good to what they take to be *epistemic authorities*. They thus reject first-order autonomy in domains where *epistemic deference* applies, but do not necessarily reject second-order autonomy.

For instance, conservative Catholics believe in sometimes subordinating their judgement to Papal teaching, Orthodox Jews to Rabbinical law, and conservative Sunni Muslims to the consensus of the scholars of a particular school of *sharia*.⁶³ Non-religious examples also exist: an orthodox Marxist-Leninist might believe in subordinating her judgement to the democratic-centralist decisions of the Party. I will identify one dimension of “traditionalist” conceptions of the good with the degree to which they prescribe epistemic deference of this type, and thereby endorse resolving (at least some) trade-offs between orders of autonomy in favour of the second-order kind.

My concept of traditionalism is intended to correspond roughly to, but with much greater clarity and precision, the cluster of views of the good life often referred to as ‘social and religious conservatism’ in everyday parlance. Thus, in using the term “traditionalist”, I deliberately echo James Davison Hunter’s classic study of America’s “culture wars”, which identified a cultural struggle between “progressivist” and “traditionalist” conceptions of flourishing.⁶⁴ For Hunter, a “traditionalist” vision of flourishing “seeks deliberate continuity” with what it sees as the “noblest ideals and achievements of civilization”,⁶⁵ while progressives seek “the emancipation of the human spirit”.⁶⁶ The “emancipation of the human spirit” seems to capture first-order autonomy;⁶⁷ conversely, “seek[ing]... continuity” with tradition seems to imply subordination of one’s judgement to (traditional) epistemic authorities, but doing so in a “deliberate” way may imply that one does so (second-order) autonomously. I do not intend to ignore the existence of traditionalist conceptions of the good that reject even second-order autonomy; instead, I emphasise the distinction to show that one can be a traditionalist without rejecting the value—even the decisive value—of every form of autonomy. Indeed, it is clear that, while some traditionalists who endorse subordinating one’s judgement to epistemic authorities (like those

⁶³ Persons affirming these doctrines might see *some* reason for the rules irrespective of the rule-makers’ identities, but rely on epistemic deference to conclude that the rules are all-things-considered justified in at least some cases.

⁶⁴ (Hunter 1991, 14)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 15

⁶⁷ Though I am not engaged in exegesis of Hunter, I intend my conception of ‘traditionalism’ to make contact with sociological understandings of cultural conflict.

Robert P. George calls “rationalist believers”)⁶⁸ value second-order autonomy very highly, others (like, perhaps, the ‘fundamentalist’ parents of the US Supreme Court *Mozert* case) do not.⁶⁹

The second dimension of a conception of the good’s ‘traditionalism’ pertains to its commitment to what Charles Taylor calls “strong evaluation”. This is the practice of subjecting even one’s deepest and most ‘ultimate’, highest-order preferences to philosophical evaluation based on a conception of value that transcends one’s preferences altogether.⁷⁰ Some conceptions of the good, for which Robert Bellah coined the term “expressive individualism”, seem to reject the value of strong evaluation. In expressive individualism, the ‘expression’ of one’s deeply felt intuitions and intimations is the ultimate criterion of normative value—albeit subject, at least in egalitarian versions, to some kind of compossibility requirement⁷¹—and there is therefore no criterion standing altogether outside of *anyone’s* preferences or desires that can form the basis for a strong evaluation of those desires.⁷² Expressive individualism is crudely captured by the ethos of pop culture slogans like ‘you do you’, ‘live your best life’, and so on. Allan Bloom described a similar ethos in his discussion of “value-positing” personalities, who arbitrarily “create values for themselves”.⁷³

Conceptions of the good, whether religious or secular, that hold that there is a mind-independent moral order to which humans should conform at least some of their desires, and that the content of this moral order does not ultimately collapse into fulfilling the desires or protecting the autonomy (of either order) of other humans, are thereby committed to strong evaluation and to rejecting expressive individualism in at least some domains of life.⁷⁴ Paradigmatically, these conceptions of the good include religious doctrines that advocate the subjection of one’s desires to forms of spiritual discipline such as prescribed forms of prayer or fasting, the Platonic idea of the well-ordered soul, and doctrines of abstention such as that exemplified by Augustine’s horror of concupiscence. Commitment to strong evaluation is another dimension of ‘traditionalism’, so a conception of the good is also traditionalist to the degree to which it embraces this form of evaluation.

Endorsing strong evaluation cannot be simply equated with socially conservative personal values such as the beliefs about bioethics or sexuality associated with conservative forms of

⁶⁸ (George 2001, 203). The argument for free faith in Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae* may be interpreted as grounded in the value of second-order autonomously deciding to embrace teachings that restrain one’s first-order autonomy. See (Paul VI 1965).

⁶⁹ See (Tomasí 2002) on the *Mozert* case. ‘Fundamentalist’ parents objected to their children being exposed in school to religious beliefs other than their parents’ in what they considered an excessively sympathetic framing.

⁷⁰ (Taylor 1992, 14–16)

⁷¹ In egalitarian expressive individualism, there may be normative side-constraints that protect the equal liberty of others to engage in self-expression, or self-expression that is not compossible with the equal self-expression of others may have no value at all, but in either case self-expression remains the ultimate currency of value. Non-egalitarian expressive individualism may be close to a kind of Nietzschean vitalism.

⁷² (Bellah 1985, 333)

⁷³ (Bloom 2008 [1987], 144)

⁷⁴ A pure utilitarian view of morality rejects strong evaluation insofar as its conception of utility is preference-based.

Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. It is possible to endorse strong evaluation without endorsing these specific values, but conversely, it is *not* possible to endorse these values without endorsing at least some strong evaluation because they necessarily make reference to standards of evaluation that transcend individual preferences. These doctrines, as part of the broader religious worldviews of conservative interpretations of the Abrahamic religions, seem to be the most numerically prominent doctrines in the contemporary English-speaking democracies that are traditionalist on both dimensions. My concept of ‘traditionalism’ therefore captures this Abrahamic social and religious conservatism, in addition to encompassing other doctrines that endorse strong evaluation and epistemic deference but hold very different substantive views about the human good.

Although there are deep congruences between the two dimensions of traditionalism I have been discussing, they are nevertheless conceptually orthogonal in a strict sense. A person can coherently embrace strong evaluation while rejecting epistemic deference or *vice versa*. Thus, the set of possible positions is mapped in Figure (1) below:

Figure (1): varieties of traditionalism and progressivism	Strong evaluation	No strong evaluation	
Epistemic deference	Individuals to follow the true epistemic authorities, who identify the standards for strong evaluation. E.g. conservative Catholicism <i>Paradigmatic traditionalism</i>	Individuals to follow mentors/guides as a means to live in authentic connection with their deepest preferences/intimations. E.g. forms of New Age spirituality.	
No epistemic deference	Individuals to identify the standards for strong evaluation for themselves. E.g. radical forms of Protestantism.	Individuals to posit their own values through finding, without relying on epistemic authorities, an authentic connection with their deepest preferences/intimations. E.g. Bloom’s “value-positing”. <i>Paradigmatic progressivism</i>	

Postliberals, as I will show in Chapter 2, think that liberalism has a structural tendency to decay into a form of progressive-authoritarianism, in which the basic negative liberties of traditionalists are systematically violated, and postliberals believe this tendency occurs primarily in the domain of beliefs about sexuality, family, and beginning/end-of-life bioethics.⁷⁵ In this domain, traditionalism and progressivism are collectively exhaustive categories, because the presence or absence of strong evaluation exhausts the possible ways of evaluating moral beliefs about these topics, and the presence or absence of epistemic deference exhausts the possible ways of forming one's *second-order* beliefs about how to evaluate beliefs about these topics.

Traditionalism has no necessary connection to the cluster of right-of-centre views about national identity (including views on migration, historical memorialisation, and cultural diversity), that are often associated with socially conservative views on sexuality, family, and bioethics in popular discourse.⁷⁶ I will call this cluster of right-of-centre views 'nationalism'.

As should be clear, traditionalism is a set of views about human flourishing and nationalism is primarily a set of views about political justice. Nationalism, of course, is often based on particular views about human flourishing, such as the belief that people tend to flourish most in culturally homogenous communities.⁷⁷ However, there is no *necessary* connection between traditionalism and the kind of beliefs about human flourishing on which nationalism is usually based. There is no contradiction involved in believing, for example, that flourishing involves obedience to God, abstinence, and chastity, but is not facilitated by cultural homogeneity within one's state.

Admittedly, there is a degree of *congruence* between traditionalism and the kind of particularist beliefs about flourishing that often underlie nationalism. The belief that flourishing consists in following a particular religious or moral code that transcends individual preference is highly congruent with the belief that one will flourish best by following this code in community with others. Traditionalism thus lends itself to a kind of communitarianism but does not entail it: the solitary Anchorite or Greek Cynic is still a traditionalist. This congruence may be why empirical work such as Jonathan Haidt's research on the 'moral foundations' of political ideologies shows that traditionalist beliefs about, for instance, sexual purity and familial authority are strongly correlated with nationalist beliefs in Western democracies.⁷⁸ However, even setting aside relatively unusual examples of anti-communitarian forms of traditionalism, there is no necessary reason that the *locus* of the community affirmed by traditionalists should correspond to the geographically contiguous nation-state. One might, for example, think that the spiritual unity of a global community such as the Church or *umma* is important to flourishing but that the cultural homogeneity of one's geographical surroundings or of one's state is not.

⁷⁵ See e.g. (Vermeule 2017c; Deneen 2023b, 63, 179, 252).

⁷⁶ For a work that seemingly fails to recognise the conceptual distinction between traditionalism and nationalism, see (Goodwin 2023).

⁷⁷ Such as Walzer's "communities of character". See (Walzer 2008 [1983], 62)

⁷⁸ (Haidt 2012, 159)

Thus, there are clear empirical examples of cases where the usual congruence between traditionalism and nationalism in Western societies does not hold, typically relating to traditionalist doctrines associated with minority religious communities. Many scholars have observed that Western populist movements often criticise Muslim communities by claiming these communities' (purported) traditionalism makes them disloyal or alien to the wider national community, illustrating a kind of nationalism that appears to reject traditionalist views about gender, sexuality, etc.⁷⁹ Conversely, Muslims in Western countries tend to have more traditionalist attitudes to gender, sexuality, and family than the general population,⁸⁰ while also being more likely than the general population to consider their religious identity more important than their national identity.⁸¹ These complexities are emphatically highlighted by Tobias Cremer's recent work on populist parties, which argues that the increasing salience of the cluster of issues these parties highlight (many of which relate to concerns about Muslim communities) has led to a sharp separation between an "identity cleavage", tracking beliefs about nationalism, and a "religious/moral cleavage", tracking beliefs about traditionalism with respect to family, sexuality, bioethics, etc., in the major Western democracies.⁸² Regardless of whether we accept all of Cremer's thesis about the degree to which these cleavages are empirically independent of each other, it is clear that traditionalism and nationalism are distinct phenomena that can be analysed separately.

Moreover, because traditionalism is a set of beliefs about human flourishing, not in itself a political doctrine, there is no necessary link between traditionalism and *any* particular political ideology or position. Some traditionalists are socially and morally conservative perfectionists who think that the state should in some way promote their traditionalist doctrines, but others are not. Traditionalists might, instead, coherently be Rawlsian 'political' liberals and think that the state should take a neutral position on the moral questions that constitute their traditionalism. Traditionalists might take this view for many reasons, such as the belief that respect for non-traditionalists requires policies to pass some form of 'public justification' test, or the belief that statist perfectionism might undermine authentic and freely chosen virtue.⁸³ For traditionalists to endorse the authoritarian suppression of their *own* views, i.e. to endorse progressive-authoritarianism, would seem to involve a performative contradiction. However, traditionalists can certainly coherently endorse any position with respect to state perfectionism from radical theocracy to Rawlsian political liberalism.⁸⁴

The concepts of traditionalism and progressivism will be central to my elucidation and evaluation of the postliberal critique of liberalism. In Chapter 2, I will show that the central postliberal claim about liberalism is the claim that liberal regimes will inevitably decay into progressive-authoritarian ones that systematically violate the basic negative liberties of

⁷⁹ E.g. (Brubaker 2017)

⁸⁰ (Frampton et al. 2016, 7)

⁸¹ (DeHanas 2016, 54–80)

⁸² (Cremer 2023)

⁸³ (Meyer 1962) defends something like this virtue-based anti-perfectionism.

⁸⁴ Conceivably, traditionalists could even think there are sometimes strong 'political' reasons for the state to *non-coercively* promote progressive conceptions of the good among the population (reasons which do not appeal to the doctrines' purported truth, which of course traditionalists deny).

traditionalists to express and act on their views about gender, sexuality, family, etc. From this claim, postliberals conclude that there is “no alternative” to either progressive or traditionalist authoritarianism in this domain, and that, given the truth of traditionalism, traditionalist-authoritarianism is preferable to the progressive kind.⁸⁵ Chapter 3 will then show that liberals have not yet refuted this claim, and Chapters 4 and 5 will evaluate the strength of both conceptual (Chapter 4) and empirical (Chapter 5) arguments for its truth.

Before proceeding to elucidate the postliberal claim about liberalism’s relationship to progressive-authoritarianism, however, I will first identify the conceptual *content* of liberalism as an ideology in order to clarify the object of the postliberal critique. This will be the task of Chapter 1.

⁸⁵ (Vallier 2024a)

Part 1: Understanding the Postliberal Critique

Chapter 1: Liberalism in Theory and Practice

I: The Content of Liberal Ideology

The Introduction to this thesis has outlined the morphological approach to analysing liberalism, according to which liberalism is an ideology, i.e. a cluster of decontested political concepts that can be instantiated in both academic theory and political practice. In particular, I outlined different degrees to which liberalism might be instantiated in what Strauss called political ‘regimes’, by providing the normative concepts on which political practices across the state or polity are implicitly or explicitly grounded. In this Chapter, I will now specify the content of at least the core of the cluster of decontested political concepts that comprises liberalism, so that we can identify the content of the account of political morality that postliberals critique.

After working out the core political concepts that comprise liberalism, I will then work out, in Part II of this chapter, a list of minimum conditions for a theory or regime to be considered liberal, which will permit me (in Chapter 2) to work out which constructive proposals made by postliberals are fully anti-liberal and which are not fully anti-liberal because they propose a political morality compatible with minimal liberalism. Finally, Part III of this chapter will discuss the various versions of liberal theory and show that these versions of liberal theory do not imply that traditionalists’ basic rights ought to be denied.

I aim in this chapter to work out an account of liberalism that both postliberals and their critics would broadly recognise. Thus, my approach will be similar to what Duncan Bell calls a “comprehensive” approach, which aims to use the concept of ‘liberalism’ to approximately ‘fit’ the use of the term in both academic and real-world discourse, rather than a “prescriptive” approach that seeks to identify a true or correct conception of liberalism.⁸⁶ I also share Bell’s “contextualist” assumption that liberalism is to be identified by analysing a pattern of thought and practice, rather than stipulating a set of exemplary works or ideas.⁸⁷ Bell, deploying this comprehensive and contextualist analysis, concludes that liberalism is “the sum of arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognised as such by other self-proclaimed liberals”.⁸⁸ However, unlike Bell, my approach is not entirely “comprehensive” in that I am not in the first instance interested in capturing *all* arguments that have been acknowledged as liberal, but rather in capturing two particular phenomena, namely ‘liberal’ theories of political morality and ‘liberal’ political practices. Also unlike Bell, my interest extends beyond explicitly articulated *arguments* to implicit *rationales* for political practices of ‘regimes’. A final respect in which my approach differs from Bell’s is that I intend my concept of liberalism to be recognised, as far as

⁸⁶ (Bell 2014, 685)

⁸⁷ Ibid., 686-9

⁸⁸ Ibid., 689-90

possible, not just by liberals but also by their postliberal critics as roughly ‘fitting’ what they mean by ‘liberalism’.

Thus, our concept of ‘liberalism’ should roughly ‘fit’ both the conceptual content of academic liberal theories—such as those of Mill, Raz, Dworkin, Rawls, and their followers—and the ideological rationales that ground actually existing ‘liberal’ practices in real-world regimes. Facially, it appears that liberal practices, including discursive practices, are quite ubiquitous in the major liberal democracies, where most mainstream political actors typically appeal to values such as freedom, equality, and fairness that plausibly seem related to liberalism.⁸⁹ An account of the content of the set of core liberal concepts, then, should, for my purposes, successfully account for the sense in which both the theories of Mill, Raz, etc. and the practices, including discursive practices, of many mainstream political actors in major liberal democracies are ‘liberal’. This kind of comprehensiveness will be particularly important given that postliberals frequently aim their critique, as I have said, at both liberal political theory and the political practices and discourse of liberal regimes.

The need to account for the liberalism of these diverse theories and practices will render untenable approaches that attempt to identify liberalism wholly or primarily with any one specific characteristically liberal concept or attitude. For instance, some analysts, including some postliberals, identify the core of liberalism with the ascription of high value to a thick and demanding conception of personal autonomy as part of a broader conception of human flourishing.⁹⁰ This approach will, however, fail to identify the liberalism of fairly paradigmatic liberal theories that are not committed to valuing such a conception of autonomy, such as those of Rawls⁹¹ or Judith Shklar.⁹² Identifying liberalism with a demanding conception of autonomy would also risk begging important questions in favour of the postliberals, who commonly claim, as part of their critique, that liberalism is committed to an ideal of radical autonomy,⁹³ a claim which liberal responses to the postliberal critique typically deny.⁹⁴

Also among approaches that place excessive weight on a single characteristic concept are those that identify liberalism with a commitment to respecting pluralism in beliefs about human flourishing among citizens. These approaches typically identify liberalism with a pluralistic respect for a wide range of conceptions of human flourishing, including traditionalist ones.⁹⁵ Such approaches are also untenable, for a reason analogous to that which makes it untenable to identify liberalism with radical autonomy. At least one plausible reading of a paradigmatic

⁸⁹ Cf. (Nagel 2002, 62) Lest the perceived rise of the political right distract us from this point, consider that arguments for (say) banning abortion typically appeal to the purported individual rights of the foetus, while arguments for draconian migration restrictions typically claim that immigration to a country will “undermine the fair system of cooperation *its own* citizens have built up” (Lefebvre 2024, 237 (emphasis original)). The mainstream right is firmly committed to a version of liberalism.

⁹⁰ E.g. (Deneen 2019, 37–8)

⁹¹ (Rawls 1997, 778)

⁹² (Shklar 1989, 27–31)

⁹³ (Deneen 2018, 31) calls this radical autonomy “the idea of voluntarism”.

⁹⁴ E.g. (Field 2020b)

⁹⁵ E.g. (Fukuyama 2023, 16, 124) identifies liberalism with “peacefully managing diversity in pluralistic societies” and explicitly includes traditionalist doctrines in this diversity (ibid., 124)

liberal theorist, namely J. S. Mill, argues that he in fact rejects any conception of pluralism that would include traditionalists. The reading is that of the noted conservative intellectual historian Maurice Cowling, who argued that, despite Mill's call for respect for a wide diversity of "experiments in living" that do not directly harm others,⁹⁶ Mill also envisaged the creation of a national "clerisy", with a role analogous to that of religious establishments in pre-Enlightenment confessional states, which would promote "homogeneity of opinion" on the nature of and means to realise human flourishing.⁹⁷ For Cowling's Mill, this would still permit some diversity of views as to the specific forms of life that can realise flourishing. However, it would severely limit pluralism about meta-level interpretations of flourishing and its conditions to those that accept a broadly progressive view of the nature of flourishing itself, i.e. that it is realised through individual self-expression rather than conformity to a standard identified by strong evaluation.

Postliberals often deploy something like Cowling's reading of Mill to argue that liberalism is far less pluralistic, especially in terms of respect for traditional religious believers, than it is typically thought to be.⁹⁸ Whether Cowling's interpretation of Mill is all-things-considered correct is not the issue here. The fact that at least one paradigmatic liberal theory can be *plausibly* interpreted as a form of progressive anti-pluralism renders it untenable to identify liberalism *as such* with respect for a kind of pluralism that includes both progressive and traditionalist views. Moreover, since (as I will later show), the claim that liberalism is *anti*-pluralist in this sense is fundamental to postliberal thought, to place excessive weight on pluralism about the good in our concept of liberalism would be to risk begging important questions *against* the postliberals, just as placing undue weight on a demanding conception of autonomy risks begging questions in the postliberals' favour.⁹⁹

Of course, the above rejection of concepts of liberalism that equate it with demanding conceptions of autonomy or broad conceptions of pluralism does not mean that liberalism has *nothing* to do with autonomy or pluralism. The concept of liberalism I will shortly work up, in fact, implies a degree of concern with both. My claim is merely that neither demanding conceptions of personal autonomy that traditionalists would reject, nor broad conceptions of pluralism that entail respect for traditionalist views, are central—still less essential—to liberalism as such.

Other attempts to identify liberalism with a single dominant value, such as Dworkin's "certain conception of equality",¹⁰⁰ may avoid begging important questions in favour of or against the postliberals,¹⁰¹ but will still fail to 'fit' the academic and real-world phenomena I am interested in. It will prove easily possible to find examples of arguments and rationales for policies, widely

⁹⁶ (Mill 2012 [1859], 134)

⁹⁷ (Cowling 2011 [1963], 14–15). Cowling cites especially Mill's *Coleridge* (1840) and *Three Essays on Religion* (1874)

⁹⁸ (Deneen 2023a). (Vermeule 2018b) explicitly appeals to Cowling.

⁹⁹ Cowling's Mill is not the only liberal theorist to evince this kind of anti-pluralism. See e.g. (Chambers 2018)

¹⁰⁰ (Dworkin 1985, 183)

¹⁰¹ Such attempts are usually "prescriptive" in Bell's sense: they seek to prescribe how we ought to use the term 'liberal' on the basis of a first-order normative argument.

recognised by their own proponents and by others as ‘liberal’, in which the purportedly dominant value does not play a central role.

My “comprehensive” and “contextualist” analysis, then, will start by reviewing concepts of liberalism that involve a distinctive balance or synthesis between several distinct values. I will develop an account of liberalism based on the elements common to the analyses of three thinkers: Michael Freeden, John Gray, and Edmund Fawcett. Freeden’s work is plausibly the most systematic attempt, by any scholar, to conceptualise liberalism as an ideology that spans both academic theory and political practice. Gray is among the most prominent and sophisticated scholars to argue for the rejection of liberalism as a universal theory of political morality.¹⁰² Fawcett’s history of liberalism, which is also a defence of the ideology, is notable for giving at least as much weight to liberal practice as to academic theory. Thus, collectively, the work of these three thinkers comprises three significant attempts to develop analyses of liberalism that account for both theory and practice in a balanced manner. Between them, these three thinkers also cover a broad spectrum of attitudes towards liberalism: detached and analytical for Freeden, critical for Gray, and favourable for Fawcett. This diversity of normative perspectives will reduce the risk that my interpretation will evince a bias in favour of or against the substantive political morality of liberalism. I will now demonstrate that these three thinkers converge on identifying substantially the same set of normative concepts at the core of liberalism (despite their use of different terminology for these concepts).

Freeden identifies “liberty, individualism, progress, rationality, the general interest, sociability, [and] limited and responsible power” as the conceptual core of liberalism.¹⁰³ Gray identifies a liberal “syndrome”—by which he means a set of mutually congruent ideas that usually occur together—consisting of individualism, moral universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism (a belief in the possibility of society’s “indefinite improvement”).¹⁰⁴ Fawcett lists “four broad ideas” comprising “acknowledgment of conflict’s inescapability”, “distrust of power”, “faith in human progress”, and equal “civic respect” under the law.¹⁰⁵ To see how the lists of each of these three thinkers converge, I have set them out in Figure (2) below:

¹⁰² Gray has even identified his view as a kind of “Post-liberalism” (Gray 2014), but Gray’s view, which is really a kind of *modus vivendi* liberalism, has little in common with that of the prominent postliberals I discuss in Chapter 2.

¹⁰³ (Freeden 1996, 178)

¹⁰⁴ (Gray 2014, 286)

¹⁰⁵ (Fawcett 2018, 2–3)

Figure (2): The core liberal values			
	Freeden	Gray	Fawcett
Individualism	“Individualism”, “Liberty”	“Individualism”	“Civic respect”
Egalitarianism	“General interest”, “Sociability”	“Moral universalism”, “Egalitarianism”	“Civic respect”
Optimism	“Progress”, “Rationality”	“Meliorism”	“Progress”
Dispersal of power	“Limited/responsible power”		“Inevitability of conflict”, “Mistrust of power”

I will now work up a general concept of liberalism by abstracting from the formulations of these three thinkers. I do not claim here that these three thinkers’ formulations are extensionally identical; instead, I deliberately elide subtle differences between their conceptions in order to work up a concept of liberalism that I think all three thinkers would recognise, and which would also be recognised by other defenders of liberalism and their postliberal critics. As seen in Figure (2), I think that four basic values can roughly encapsulate the content of the three thinkers’ formulations of the core liberal values.

The first of these I call *individualism*, which is respect for some kind of individual autonomy (but not necessarily for radical or first-order autonomy). Freeden’s “individualism” and “liberty” capture this idea of *individualism*. For Freeden, “individualism” and “liberty” figure in a “dual decontesting”, such that liberty is valuable because it permits individual personalities to flourish, and individuality is valuable because it involves freely expressing one’s personality.¹⁰⁶ Valuing individualism will always involve giving individuals a significant sphere of liberty, so liberty is a necessary correlate of individuality. Therefore, little if any irreducibly distinctive content is lost by collapsing both Freeden’s “liberty” and “individualism” into my broader concept of *individualism*. Gray’s “individualism” expresses a similar thought to Freeden’s, namely that “ultimate value” is found in “aspects of the lives of individuals”, so I will also collapse this into my *individualism*.¹⁰⁷ Finally, Fawcett’s “civic respect” also encompasses the basic idea of *individualism*. His “civic respect” entails respect for “people’s privacy”, as well as their “intrinsic worth” and “moral responsibility”, implying an injunction “not to intrude on their aims” and to tolerate “unorthodoxy”. “Civic respect” thus clearly involves a commitment to respecting aspects of individual autonomy (not necessarily radical or first-order autonomy).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ (Freeden 1996, 144–45)

¹⁰⁷ (Gray 2014, 286). The belief that ultimate value is found in the lives of individuals does not rule out traditionalism, because the relevant value-bearing feature of such lives could be their conformity to standards set by strong evaluation. See e.g. (Moschella 2025) for an example of such a traditionalist theory.

¹⁰⁸ (Fawcett 1996, 3)

My second concept is *egalitarianism*, which denotes the equal intrinsic value of individuals' dignity and interests. Gray's "universalism" and "egalitarianism" both collapse into *egalitarianism*. Gray identifies "universalism" with the belief that "weighty duties and/or rights... are owed to all human beings", while his "egalitarianism" consists of "denial of any natural... hierarchy".¹⁰⁹ Both these values, for Gray, clearly express the idea that humans are equal in their basic dignity. Also encompassing *egalitarianism* (as well as *individualism*, as mentioned above) is Fawcett's "civic respect... for people and their projects", which "has roots in... people's [equal] intrinsic worth".¹¹⁰ Finally, Freedén's "general interest" involves an equal concern for "all individuals" and their harmonious interests.¹¹¹ At the same time, his "sociability" construes individuals' voluntary "mutual regard" for each other's interests as "inevitable", thus rendering the satisfaction of individuals' equally-weighted claims compossible. Both these concepts of Freedén's, therefore, map onto *egalitarianism*.¹¹²

An objection here might claim that *egalitarianism* conflates belief in equality as an intrinsic value, which presumably entails at least a belief in equal basic formal rights, with a concern for promoting shared interests. Plausibly, classical liberals who support a heavily market-based economy endorse the former but not the latter, while modern or egalitarian liberals endorse both. Shared interests, however, can be construed in a thin manner, such that, for classical liberals, people have a primary shared interest in protecting everyone's basic rights, rights which, properly understood, place severe deontic limits on what else *the state* can do to advance *other* shared interests.¹¹³ The difference between classical and modern liberal views of *egalitarianism* and shared interests, then, lies not in the core concepts of the ideologies—both accept my concept of *egalitarianism*—but in how those concepts are interpreted, e.g. whether *egalitarianism* implies a duty on the state to promote more than a thin set of shared interests, or a much thicker one.

Moving on to *optimism*, Gray's "meliorism" and Fawcett's "progress" are nearly equivalent. Fawcett identifies this "faith in human progress" with an "urge to improve" human society,¹¹⁴ while Gray's "meliorism" holds that "human institutions" are "open to indefinite improvement" through the use of "critical reason".¹¹⁵ Freedén's "progress" also maps onto *optimism* since it is "adjacent" to a "meliorist worldview", involving indefinite (but not "teleological") improvement.¹¹⁶ Freedén's "rationality", which I have grouped with his "progress", could have been subsumed under *egalitarianism* or *individualism* instead, since it "hovers in the background, buttressing... other core concepts" rather than serving a clearly identifiable and distinct substantive role.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ (Fawcett 2018, 3)

¹¹¹ (Freedén 1996, 151)

¹¹² Versions of liberalism may differ in the 'thickness' of their conceptions of sociability, i.e. how thick the interests are for which people have mutual regard.

¹¹³ (Kahan 2023, 242–3)

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ (Gray 2014, 286)

¹¹⁶ (Freedén 1996, 147)

¹¹⁷ (Ibid., 150)

Freeden's "rationality" thus does not correspond tightly to *optimism* and contains residual content that influences the interpretation of all the core liberal concepts, so it may as fruitfully be grouped with *optimism* as with any of the other core concepts.

My final core liberal value, the *dispersal of power*, consists of a suspicion of political power and a belief that it must be in some way constrained. Freedon's concept of "responsible power" involves a drive to "control" political power, as the "chief institutional corollary of liberty",¹¹⁸ in order to protect liberty and individuality. Similarly, Fawcett identifies two mutually reinforcing core liberal attitudes towards power: an "acknowledgement of conflict's inescapability", informed by the modern experience of cultural, religious, and economic "fragmentation", and a "distrust of power", especially "undivided authorities", as unable to appropriately "command complex societies".¹¹⁹ Both these thinkers, then, identify the *dispersal of power* as a core liberal value. Gray's lack of reference to the *dispersal of power* is easily explainable, for Gray immediately explains that a "liberal civil society", meaning roughly the familiar liberal-democratic political institutions, will constitute the institutional instantiation of the four core concepts he identifies. Clearly, the *dispersal of power* is central to these institutions. Gray's choice not to present this dispersal as a core concept appears to be linked more to a desire to identify only the concepts that, for liberals, have intrinsic value, rather than instrumental, rather than to a rejection of the centrality of the *dispersal of power* to liberalism's core.¹²⁰

I am confident, therefore, in characterising the content of liberalism as constituted by the basic core values of *individualism*, *egalitarianism*, *optimism*, and the *dispersal of power*. Other ideologies may incorporate one or more of these concepts within their own conceptual cores; for instance, *egalitarianism* is plausibly also a core socialist concept. Instead, it is the distinctive configuration of the four concepts that distinguishes the conceptual core of liberalism; no other ideology may have the same set of concepts as its conceptual core. Because this permits overlap between sets of core concepts, there will be grey areas when dealing with ideologies like liberal socialism or liberal conservatism, which may include several, but not all, of the core liberal concepts within their own cores. This should not prevent both liberals and their postliberal critics from recognising the theories, practices, and discourses encompassed by my concept of liberalism as liberal.

I will treat this concept of liberalism as providing the common 'liberal' element in liberal academic theories of political morality and liberal political practices and regimes, when evaluating postliberal claims about liberal theory and practice. However, this concept of liberalism will not permit us to assess conceptual claims about liberalism with a binary possible truth-value, such as "X is (in)compatible with liberalism" or "liberalism implies Y". Before proceeding further, therefore, I will first develop a concept of what I call "minimal liberalism", grounded in the schematic concept of liberalism I have just outlined, that will permit us to

¹¹⁸ (Ibid., 152-3)

¹¹⁹ (Fawcett 2018, 2-3)

¹²⁰ (We should note that this distinction is in no way identical to Freedon's distinction between core, adjacent, and peripheral values.)

evaluate this kind of claim by giving liberalism as such a minimum degree of determinate content.

II: Minimal Liberalism

To permit us to assess this class of claims about liberalism that have a binary truth-value, I will now posit a set of necessary conditions for the overall liberalism of a theory of political morality or a regime. My aim here is to provide a 'lowest common denominator' set of necessary conditions for liberalism that represents the most minimally demanding interpretation of the constructive political implications of the core liberal values that is possible. Thus, a reader committed to a particular version of liberalism that is more demanding than minimal liberalism may view a theory or regime that meets *only* the conditions of minimal liberalism as inadequate to the requirements of the *best* interpretation of the core liberal values concepts, or of the best configuration of these values with adjacent and peripheral values. However, I intend that this reader should still be able to recognise that such a theory or regime is a liberal one because it still represents a possible interpretation of the core liberal values, even if it is a flawed interpretation.

In addition to representing a possible interpretation of the core liberal values, I also intend my list to simply capture intuitions about what the necessary conditions are for a theory or practice to be considered liberal. The intuitions in question here are not evaluative intuitions about what is good or bad but merely conceptual intuitions about what is liberal or non-liberal, so a committed anti-liberal should be just as able to accept my conception of the liberal minimum as a committed liberal. Therefore, my intuitions should, in their rough outline, be shared with the reader, since they do not presuppose a specific evaluative standard, merely shared possession of a concept.

The most sophisticated extant attempt to work out a list of necessary institutional and policy commitments for a liberal theory or regime is that of Samuel Freeman.¹²¹ Freeman appeals, when grounding his list, to a rough sketch of core liberal values that I find (at least in the rough

¹²¹ (Freeman 2001, 108–23). Neither Freeman nor Fawcett nor Gray provide such a list of necessary conditions for liberalism. Bell's comprehensive contextualism means he expands 'liberalism' to encompass every ideology recognised as 'liberal' at the expense of any common element that could give rise to such a list of conditions. (Gaus 2010, 341–359) attempts to work out a minimal set of "agency" rights, but does so on the basis of an idiosyncratic version of liberalism. (Laborde 2017, 151–2) sets out a list of minimal conditions for liberal-egalitarianism, but this is limited in scope to state-religion interaction, and includes an ideal of public justifiability that not all versions of liberalism accept.

form he presents it) contestable.¹²² However, his list of institutions and policy commitments is, in itself, intuitively plausible and represents a plausible interpretation of the four core values I outlined above. My list, therefore, will be derived from Freeman's, with some simplification and clarification.

Freeman identifies six necessary "institutional features of liberal political systems". I assume that this list also applies to theory, in that *endorsement* of these six "institutional features" is a necessary condition for a theory of political morality to be considered liberal. Freeman's features are (1) enforcement of equal "basic rights and liberties... for all citizens", (2) "some account of equality of opportunity", (3) "a central role" for "markets in allocating productive resources", (4) government duties to ensure provision of "public goods" and (5) a "social minimum", and (6) "the public nature of political authority" (as opposed to viewing this authority as, say, a private feudal fief).¹²³ Freeman acknowledges that all of these principles have different interpretations that are compatible with liberalism, so in what follows, I will state only what Freeman claims is the most minimally demanding possible interpretation of each principle.

Principle (1), of equal basic rights and liberties, means at minimum that all citizens have rights including freedom of conscience, discussion, association, and other rights necessary to pursue a life that accords with their conception of the good, as well as rights necessary for "physical and psychological integrity" and to "maintain the rule of law";¹²⁴ and that these rights can only be infringed to protect the basic rights of others, not to achieve other goals.¹²⁵ Principle (2), equality of opportunity, implies at least formal openness of positions to talent and "the absence of political restrictions on entry" into positions, jobs, and offices. Principle (3), granting a central *allocative* role to markets, "does not commit liberalism to using markets... for *distribution* of income and wealth", so it seems to rule out only a command economy.¹²⁶ Principle (4), requiring the government to assure the provision of public goods, requires that the government ensure provision of goods that are not adequately provided by markets due to their indivisibility (including "national defense, public health and sanitation,... street lighting" among other goods), and is compatible with an otherwise non-interventionist economic policy.¹²⁷ Similarly, principle (5), requiring the guarantee of a "social minimum", is compatible with undemanding conceptions of this minimum that view it as merely "public charity so that people will not starve".¹²⁸

¹²² He claims that liberalism affirms (1) "a plurality of intrinsic goods", that (2) "freedom to... pursue their conceptions of the good is essential to [individuals'] living a good life", and that a good life for an individual requires (3) "freely adopted conceptions of the good be consistent with justice". I am sceptical of (3), on the grounds that a liberal could still think that individuals with 'unreasonable' conceptions of the good can live flourishing lives, just that they do so in a way that is unjust to others. (1) seems equivocal between a strong doctrine of value-pluralism like Berlin's (which I would deny is essential to liberalism) and a more chastened claim that many diverse lifeplans can be good (for a defence of the chastened claim, see (Moschella 2025, 59–62)).

¹²³ (Freeman 2001, 123)

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117. This principle would also permit a "liberal socialism" which combines public ownership with market allocations of resources.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 119–20

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 118

I differ from Freeman's view of the minimal requirements of these principles primarily concerning principle (6), concerning "the public nature of political authority." Freeman argues that this principle requires that public power be "*institutional* and not personal" (emphasis original), "continuous" (i.e. the authority's identity "survives the demise" of individuals exercising it), and that it be "held in trust" for the benefit of the population, from whom its power is delegated.¹²⁹ From this, he infers that "open democratic rule" is required by this principle, since "assuming that adults... understand and advance their own interests", the best way to ensure the effective exercise of this public fiduciary authority is by giving each person "a share of political authority".¹³⁰

However, Freeman immediately then acknowledges that "the combination of liberalism and democratic government" is absent from "the classical liberalism of Hume, Smith, or Constant".¹³¹ Since Freeman continuously emphasises that his concept of liberalism includes classical liberalism, and even explicitly mentions Smith as one of the "major proponents of classical liberalism",¹³² making *democratic* rule a necessary condition of a theory or regime's being liberal seems inconsistent with Freeman's attempt to make his concept of liberalism 'fit' data that includes classical liberalism. It also seems intuitive that 'undemocratic liberalism' is at least conceivable, just as 'illiberal democracy' is.¹³³ Moreover, it is not apparent that the *dispersal of power*, as such, requires the most important office-holders in a state to be elected by universal suffrage. We should therefore claim only that principle (6) requires institutional mechanisms to ensure that public office-holders exercise their fiduciary authority for the common good effectively and honestly, while acknowledging that it is at least conceivable that realising these mechanisms would not require bringing about full democracy and universal suffrage.

In addition to my modification of principle (6), I will also slightly modify principle (2), requiring equality of opportunity. Freeman states that this principle requires formal openness of positions to all citizens and that "discrimination in allocating positions... would then be legally prohibitable".¹³⁴ This comment appears to imply that not only may the state not discriminate between citizens in this manner, but also that private businesses and associations should be prohibited from engaging in such discrimination. However, Freeman also states that equality of opportunity does not have "absolute priority" when it conflicts with "freedom of association".¹³⁵ Freeman makes this point only about the family and the inequality of opportunity that differences between families create. However, there is no apparent reason why freedom of association should not have at least some weight in other settings in which it can conflict with equality of opportunity. Moreover, intuitively, it does not seem evident that a society in which private businesses and associations were allowed to discriminate would automatically be non-liberal, especially if we imagine that the pattern of discrimination that emerged was essentially random and non-systematic between historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. I will therefore

¹²⁹ Ibid., 121-2

¹³⁰ Ibid., 122

¹³¹ Ibid., 123

¹³² Ibid., 106

¹³³ See e.g. (Kallmer 2017)

¹³⁴ (Freeman 2001, 116)

¹³⁵ Ibid., 117

modify principle (2) to require only that the state *itself* not practice discrimination between citizens, allowing that some versions of liberalism might give more weight to freedom of association than equality of opportunity when making rules for private businesses and associations.

In the following list, I will modify principles (2) and (6) as explained above, and combine principles (3-5)—requiring market-based allocation of resources, state concern for public goods, and a social minimum—into one principle stating a minimally liberal view of economic life. I will also separate the protection of freedom of speech and expression from the other liberties protected by principle (1). I will make this separation because postliberal claims about progressive-authoritarianism typically (as we will see in Chapter 2) address purported infringements on both the rights of traditionalists important to their ability to live in accordance with their conceptions of the good and the rights of traditionalists to *express* their conceptions of the good. Keeping in mind these two related but distinct ways in which progressive-authoritarianism could violate the rights of traditionalists will give us greater clarity about postliberal claims.

Thus, my list of the necessary conditions of minimal liberalism is as follows:

- 1) Minimal agency rights: citizens must be free from direct, violent coercion in choices that plausibly express their deepest values, including choices about religious practice and choices about intimate, sexual and romantic relationships, except insofar as such coercion is necessary to ensure the compossible protection of this freedom for all citizens. This condition reflects (in part) Freeman's principle (1) and the value of *individualism*.
- 2) Minimal free discussion: citizens must be free from direct, violent coercion to discuss, and seek to persuade one another about, philosophical, religious, and political ideas, except insofar as curtailing this liberty is reasonably and proportionately judged necessary to 'contain' risks of the overthrow of minimal liberalism itself.¹³⁶ This condition also reflects (in part) Freeman's principle (1) and the value of *individualism*, while also helping secure the value of the *dispersal of power* through protecting free political debate.
- 3) Minimal egalitarianism: all citizens must be formally equal in their legal rights and liabilities, and actual legal practices must approximately realise this formal equality. This condition reflects Freeman's principle (2) and the value of *egalitarianism*.
- 4) Minimal economic provision: citizens must be entitled to public guarantee of the means to avoid absolute poverty, homelessness, easily-preventable early death, and illiteracy, at least when a society has sufficient resources to guarantee these entitlements for all citizens; and the state must provide public goods as part of a mixed or market-based economy. This condition reflects Freeman's principles (3) through (5) and the value of *egalitarianism*.

¹³⁶ I use the adjective "minimal" because, although this principle secures very extensive free discussion, it is compatible with restrictions on hate speech, blasphemy, or obscenity that regulate the 'time, manner, and place' of speech rather than its content.

- 5) Minimal accountable government: laws must be made and executed through a defined constitutional process that aims to ensure public power is accountable for fulfilling its duty to the public interest. This condition reflects Freeman's principle (6) and the value of the *dispersal of power*.

All of the above conditions collectively reflect the value of *optimism*, insofar as viewing fulfilling these conditions as a duty that all states can and should fulfil implies at least a minimal degree of optimism, i.e. the optimistic conviction that a minimally decent politics (as conceptualised by minimal liberalism) is possible.

Conditions (1-5) permit a wide degree of variation within minimal liberalism. (1) permits states to promote a particular religion (or atheism) with financial subsidies and non-violent exhortation, or to similarly promote a particular conception of family or of sexual morality.¹³⁷ (2) permits states to curtail hate speech, blasphemy, or pornography so long as the prohibited speech is defined in terms of manner of expression and not propositional content.¹³⁸ For instance, a state could ban desecration of a religious symbol but could not ban criticism of the claims or values of a religion—it could ban the public burning of a religious text, but it could not ban criticism of the claims made by the religion about the text.¹³⁹ (3) does not require that the state prohibit discrimination by private businesses or civil society organisations, only that it refrain from practising discrimination itself. (4) does not require entitlement to higher education or to more than a very minimal standard of living, far lower than that of persons earning minimum-wage incomes in contemporary developed countries (but still some way above the living standard of most people in the world's poorest countries.) (5) does not require that the state hold free and fair elections with universal suffrage for its major offices, only that it have some kind of formal mechanism whereby its major office-holders can be held accountable for their exercise of public power.

Minimal liberalism is, however, still a moderately demanding ideal. It is very far from satisfied by a great many actually existing states today, and probably the vast majority of states in human history. It prohibits states from coercive censorship of criticism of their political leaders; from banning apostasy or religious proselytisation; from criminalising homosexual sex, or other often-stigmatised sexual acts, between consenting adults in private; from failing to provide basic social security of some kind; or from organising themselves through the despotic and arbitrary rule of an individual, clique, or military cabal.

¹³⁷ Minimal liberalism, unlike Laborde's minimal secularism (2017, 151-2), has no public justification requirement, so permits a wider range of perfectionist policies than Laborde's principle would permit. For instance, minimal liberalism permits the state to non-coercively support the proselytising efforts of a religion on the grounds that the state judges the religion's claim to Divine revelation to be true.

¹³⁸ I take no firm position here as to whether extant hate speech laws are consistent with minimal liberalism, but I suspect that many such laws could be interpreted in such a way as not to criminalise the expression of any propositional ideas.

¹³⁹ Citizens would be permitted to express any view they wished about the religious text in question but would be limited in their ability to act on this view by publicly burning it.

I will deploy this conception of minimal liberalism in Chapter 2 to identify which strands of thought, among those that are labelled 'postliberal' by their own supporters or by others, actually propose the replacement of liberal regimes by non-liberal ones, and which merely propose to modify prevailing and influential versions of liberalism in the direction of a desired regime that would still be minimally liberal.¹⁴⁰ While it is true that all actual versions of liberal theory thicken one or more of the above conditions to some extent, minimal liberalism is still moderately demanding, so it is still a significant result if a theory of political morality is compatible with the conditions of minimal liberalism. I will not consider theories that are compatible with minimal liberalism to be fully anti-liberal, and I will focus my attention on 'postliberal' theories that propose a fully anti-liberal political morality. I will also use my conception of minimal liberalism when discussing postliberal claims about the purported decay of liberalism into progressive-authoritarianism in chapters 4 and 5.

However, in chapters 6 and 7, in which I will discuss the extent to which postliberals can achieve some of their important constructive goals within liberal regimes, I will deploy a more demanding conception of liberalism. Most actors in real-world political regimes seem to be committed to more demanding conceptions of liberalism than minimal liberalism. For the purpose of chapters 6 and 7, therefore, I will need a conception of liberalism such that, if postliberals can make plausible arguments for their preferred constructive policies that are consistent with this conception, this will show that they can potentially appeal to a wide range of actors within contemporary liberal regimes and therefore have a non-negligible chance of realising their desired constructive policies.

In the final section of this Chapter, therefore, I will briefly review some of the major versions of liberal theory, and explain why Rawlsian 'political liberalism' is the best version to deploy for my purposes in Chapters 6 and 7.

III: Liberalism's Many Faces

As I will show more fully in Chapter 2, the focus of the postliberal critique of liberal theory lies in liberalism's purported implications for the basic liberties of traditionalists—specifically their agency rights (protected by condition (1) of minimal liberalism) and free discussion rights (protected by condition (2)). In other words, postliberals are concerned about the implications of liberal theory for the rights of traditionalists to follow (agency rights) and to express (free discussion rights) their distinctive conceptions of the good. I will show in Chapter 3 that postliberals direct this critique primarily at liberal *regimes*, not liberal *theory*. They argue, in other words, that actually-existing liberal regimes have some kind of 'structural' *tendency* to increasingly deny traditionalists' basic rights, not that liberal theory *implies* that traditionalists' basic rights ought to be denied.

¹⁴⁰ As we will see in Chapter 2, many postliberal thinkers do indeed vigorously reject even minimal liberalism.

Nevertheless, it will be helpful to conduct a brief and approximate assessment of the implications of some of the major versions of liberal theory for traditionalists' agency and free discussion rights, in order to confirm that the liberal critics of postliberalism are correct to say that liberalism does not entail that traditionalists' basic rights ought to be denied.

In what follows, I will review the major versions of liberal theory as typically categorised in scholarship on the topic. I will identify the degree to which, facially, each major version of liberalism implies that the traditionalists' rights ought to be protected. Of course, the precise implications for traditionalists will generally depend on fine-grained distinctions between sub-types of liberalism, and on subordinate or factual judgements about which versions of liberalism, *per se*, do not imply a specific view. Space does not permit me to analyse these fine-grained and subordinate judgements here, so I will instead, as a rough proxy for this analysis, identify the degree to which each major version of liberalism envisions presence of traditionalist doctrines as a permanent and non-regrettable feature of a liberal society.

I begin with John Gray's notion of the "two faces" of liberalism, which is an interesting attempt by a writer with some postliberal sympathies to capture two divergent ways that liberal theory might regard traditionalism. Gray's analysis of liberalism has at least some affinities with the novel and distinctive postliberal critique on which I will focus in Chapter 2, in that Gray, like the postliberals on which I will focus, argues that actually existing liberal regimes are decaying into a form of progressive-authoritarianism.¹⁴¹ Gray, as I noted above, is also the author of probably the most systematic descriptive analysis of liberal ideology to be produced by an opponent of liberalism.¹⁴² All of these reasons make his analysis a helpful starting point.

Gray's *Two Faces of Liberalism* identifies "two philosophies" within the liberal tradition: an anti-pluralist, perfectionist liberalism in which "diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear", and a *modus vivendi* liberalism in which "toleration is valued as a condition of peace".¹⁴³ Gray's anti-pluralist perfectionist liberalism resembles what I earlier identified as Cowling's interpretation of Mill, in which Mill is thought to envisage only temporary toleration of conceptions of flourishing that are not broadly progressive before society reaches a desirable uniformity of opinion on progressivism.

Gray's concept of *modus vivendi* liberalism appears to be equivocal between two distinct views. Some versions of liberalism hold that justice requires toleration for a diverse set of both progressive and traditionalist views, with no expectation that this diversity will disappear.¹⁴⁴ This view is not genuinely based on a *modus vivendi*, because it expects citizens to endorse liberal conceptions of justice as ideals, rather than as pragmatic *modus vivendi* compromises.¹⁴⁵ Other versions of liberal theory, however, regard liberal conceptions of justice as valuable but only

¹⁴¹ (Gray 2018, 2024, 2)

¹⁴² Gray is an opponent of liberalism as a universal theory of political morality, but unlike the postliberals on which I focus, he endorses a *modus vivendi* liberalism as appropriate for contemporary liberal polities. (see (Gray 2014, 284)

¹⁴³ (Gray 2002, 105)

¹⁴⁴ This is, of course, the view of Rawls in *Political Liberalism*, as well as that of other liberal theorists.

¹⁴⁵ See (Rawls 1997, 780)

expect *citizens* to regard these conceptions of justice as pragmatic compromises.¹⁴⁶ It would be more precise to reserve the term *modus vivendi* for this second group of theories. Anti-pluralist perfectionist liberalism and *modus vivendi* liberalism, then, do not exhaust the possible versions of liberalism, so we will have to modify Gray's position and accept that liberal theory has more than two faces with respect to its attitude to traditionalist conceptions of flourishing.

There are two other important distinctions that Gray's analysis does not capture. First, versions of liberal theory are typically divided between types of 'political' liberalism, which purport not to be grounded in any particular conception of human flourishing,¹⁴⁷ and types of 'comprehensive' liberalism, which are explicitly grounded in particular conceptions of flourishing.¹⁴⁸ Political liberalism typically regards "the fact of reasonable pluralism" about the good, where this pluralism includes traditionalist views, as a permanent and unproblematic condition of liberal societies.¹⁴⁹ Political liberalism is therefore typically opposed to the anti-pluralism of Cowling's Mill, which regards social consensus on progressivism as a desirable goal of a liberal regime.

Moreover, many of the most prominent versions of comprehensive liberalism are also opposed to the anti-pluralism of Cowling's Mill, because they are grounded on 'thin' and pluralistic conceptions of flourishing that allow for at least some traditionalist doctrines to yield flourishing lives, and therefore do not regard the disappearance of these traditionalist doctrines as desirable. For instance, Joseph Raz's comprehensive liberalism is grounded in a doctrine of value-pluralism, in which many diverse and incompatible ways of life can yield human flourishing¹⁵⁰ and a commitment to the value of autonomy, conceptualised as the capacity to choose between valuable options.¹⁵¹ Raz's commitment to the value of autonomy does not imply that traditionalist individuals who reject the value of *first-order* autonomy cannot live flourishing lives, as long as they also exercise *second-order* autonomy.¹⁵² Raz also does not claim that persons who reject his doctrine of value-pluralism cannot live flourishing lives.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ E.g. (McCabe 2014; Kukathas 2007)

¹⁴⁷ E.g. (Rawls 2005; Gaus 2010). Theorists usually further distinguish between Rawlsian 'consensus' and Gaussian 'convergence' versions of political liberalism (see (Billingham 2016, 135–9))

¹⁴⁸ (Dworkin 1985; Raz 1986)

¹⁴⁹ (Rawls 1997, 765).

¹⁵⁰ (Raz 1987, 158–161)

¹⁵¹ (Ibid., 165–169)

¹⁵² As I showed in the Introduction, traditionalists can endorse the decisive value of second-order, but not first-order, autonomy. Some (but not all) traditionalist doctrines will endorse a conception of autonomy compatible with Raz's.

¹⁵³ The question of the extent to which traditionalists can endorse value-pluralism is complex. The traditionalist commitment to strong evaluation is in at least some tension with the value-pluralist idea that many incompatible ways of life are good. Briefly, traditionalist doctrines will be more congruent with value-pluralism insofar as they endorse the possibility of realising value within forms of life based on *false* evaluative standards (perhaps by appealing to a doctrine of non-culpable error) or the belief that multiple forms of life comprise diverse *instantiations* of conformity to the true evaluative standards. An example of a traditionalist doctrine that holds multiple forms of life can instantiate the true evaluative standards would be Perennialism, which holds that all major world religions are effective means of accessing a single spiritual truth (see e.g. (Guénon 2002 [1927])).

Similarly, Ronald Dworkin's version of comprehensive liberalism is also grounded in a conception of flourishing according to which traditionalists can live flourishing lives. Dworkin grounds his liberalism on his "challenge model" of the good life, in which activities can only contribute to human flourishing if constituting an authentic individual response to the challenge of deciding how to live.¹⁵⁴ This view about the human good implies, for Dworkin, that a necessary condition of flourishing is "ethical independence", meaning absence of state-imposed burdens intended to affect ethical judgements about how to live. To respect this ethical independence, Dworkin argues that the state should adopt a stance of neutrality about at least "foundational" aspects of the human good.¹⁵⁵ Some traditionalist doctrines will be able to affirm Dworkin's conception of ethical independence. They might do this by holding that the absence of state-imposed burdens helps individuals exercise their second-order autonomy in a way likely to lead to true judgments about the good. Dworkin also explicitly affirmed that living in accordance with doctrines that accept strong evaluation and reject first-order autonomy can yield flourishing lives, as long as the doctrines are adopted on the basis of independent reflection on life's moral challenges.¹⁵⁶ Thus, versions of comprehensive liberalism like those of Raz and Dworkin, unlike the liberalism of Cowling's Mill, are pluralistic insofar as they do not envisage the disappearance of all traditionalist doctrines or regard this as desirable. These pluralist versions of comprehensive liberalism are similar to political liberalism in that they envision at least some forms of traditionalism being a permanent and morally unproblematic presence in liberal societies.

Second, in addition to the distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism, and within comprehensive liberalism between pluralistic and anti-pluralistic versions thereof, Gray also fails to draw attention to the distinction between perfectionist and anti-perfectionist versions of liberalism. Perfectionist versions of liberalism hold that the state should in some way encourage citizens to live lives that are all-things-considered good by the standards of some comprehensive doctrine, while anti-perfectionist versions reject this idea. This distinction is orthogonal to the distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism.¹⁵⁷ Comprehensive liberalism might be thought naturally congruent with perfectionism. In this version of liberalism, the state may hold that, on the basis of a particular conception of the good, citizens should be encouraged to live good lives as judged by the standards of that conception.¹⁵⁸ However, comprehensive liberalism can also be anti-perfectionist if it holds that the particular conception of the good that grounds the state's commitment to liberalism also grounds a commitment *not* to encourage citizens to live good lives as judged by that conception. Dworkin's position, that acknowledging the comprehensive value of ethical independence forbids certain kinds of

¹⁵⁴ (Dworkin 2000, 269)

¹⁵⁵ (Dworkin 2014, 131–133)

¹⁵⁶ (Dworkin 2000, 269) derives this judgement from his "challenge model" of the good life in which responding to life's challenges second-order autonomously is a necessary condition of living a good life, but rejecting strong evaluation is not. Of course, some traditionalist doctrines reject a conception of autonomy compatible with Dworkin's ideal of independent reflection, but other traditionalist doctrines do not.

¹⁵⁷ See the table in (Quong 2011, 16).

¹⁵⁸ Or perhaps even by the standards of some other conception, though this would be an incongruous position.

perfectionist policy on the grounds that state burdens on bad choices would undermine ethical independence and therefore be self-defeating as a means of promoting citizens' flourishing, is an example of a comprehensive argument for anti-perfectionism. On the other hand, political liberalism seems most congruent with anti-perfectionism because it holds that the state's liberalism is not grounded in overall judgements about the human good. Yet political liberalism can be perfectionist if it holds that the state can legitimately promote certain aspects of citizens' flourishing (like avoiding drug addiction) that can be judged to constitute flourishing *independently* of a broader, overall conception of flourishing.¹⁵⁹ It will not be possible, however, for perfectionist political liberalism to be anti-pluralist in the sense in which Cowling's Mill is anti-pluralist because the perfectionist version of political liberalism is still based on rationales that are neutral between progressivism and traditionalism.

Putting all these distinctions together, we can see that Gray has really identified two ideal-types of liberalism, and that many versions of liberalism, including both perfectionist and anti-perfectionist versions of pluralist comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism, are intermediate between Gray's *modus vivendi* liberalism and his anti-pluralist comprehensive liberalism in the degree to which they envisage permanent toleration of traditionalists as unproblematic. In *modus vivendi* liberalism, the state does not regard it as a problem if traditionalists would ideally like to institute a form of traditionalist-authoritarianism as long as they accept the liberal regime as a pragmatic compromise. In political liberalism and pluralist comprehensive liberalism, it is a potential problem, possibly warranting 'containment',¹⁶⁰ if traditionalists would ideally like to institute traditionalist-authoritarianism, but the disappearance of traditionalist conceptions of flourishing is not regarded as a desirable or expected outcome of liberal practices. In anti-pluralist comprehensive liberalism, however, traditionalist conceptions of the good are tolerated only in the expectation that liberal practices will cause them to eventually disappear.

From among the versions of liberalism I have just canvassed, Chapters 6 and 7 will adopt Rawlsian political liberalism as the version of liberalism against which to test postliberal claims about constructive political morality for their compatibility with liberalism, and thereby to test the degree to which postliberals have a realistic chance of realising their constructive goals within contemporary liberal regimes.

Rawlsian political liberalism is perhaps the most prominent and influential version of liberal theory; it contains many sophisticated resources for thinking about the rights of traditionalists in a liberal society; and it is plausibly (as we will see in Chapter 2) what postliberals have in mind when they accuse *liberalism* of making specious claims to neutrality about human flourishing. As I will argue in more detail in the introduction to Part 3 of this thesis, Rawlsian political liberalism also plausibly captures something like a set of loose commitments held by mainstream actors in contemporary liberal regimes. Therefore, if postliberals can make plausible arguments for their constructive political goals that are consistent with Rawlsian liberalism, this

¹⁵⁹ (Chan 2000) defends this view. See also (Tahzib 2022)

¹⁶⁰ See (Rawls 2005, 491) on 'containment' of doctrines deemed threatening to liberalism.

will show that they have a realistic chance of appealing to these mainstream actors and persuading them to support these measures.

This concludes the present chapter. In the next chapter, I will identify the distinctive and novel postliberal critique of liberalism, before, in Chapter 3, showing that liberal theorists have thus far failed to refute this critique

Chapter 2: The Postliberal Challenge to Liberalism

This chapter aims to outline and elucidate the novel and distinctive postliberal critique of liberalism. The previous chapter provided an outline of liberalism's core values, of the minimal conditions for an ideology or regime to qualify as liberal, and of the various versions of liberal theory. The aim of this chapter is to characterise *postliberalism* and to identify the core claims that postliberalism makes about both liberal ideology and liberal regimes, so that we can understand the content of the postliberal critique of liberalism.

Part I of this chapter will conduct a thorough review of versions of postliberalism, i.e., of arguments that have been identified (by their own proponents or by others) as 'postliberal'. I will taxonomise these versions on the basis of their relationship to what the previous chapter identified as 'minimal liberalism'. While Sleat and Kelly have also provided comprehensive reviews of versions of postliberalism, these authors have not attempted to systematically taxonomise all of these versions on the basis of their relationship to liberalism.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, readers who wish to move directly to my identification and analysis of the novel and distinct postliberal critique of liberalism may skip this part of the chapter and move directly to Part II.

My goal in this chapter is not to analyse in depth all critiques of liberalism that have been described as 'postliberal', still less is it to analyse all arguments of any kind that have been thus described. My goal is to identify, from within the universe of such arguments, those which make (i) a critique of liberalism that is both (ii) novel and (iii) genuinely anti-liberal. Novelty means that the idea or argument was not already well-known prior to its promotion in a postliberal context. Genuine anti-liberalism means that the argument purports to show that liberalism should be replaced wholesale by an alternative ideology and regime type, not just that liberalism should be modified. To count as genuinely anti-liberal, an argument should purport to show that liberalism should be replaced by an ideology or version of an ideology that does *not* meet the conditions for minimal liberalism outlined in the previous chapter. Otherwise, the argument would only purport to show that the currently purportedly dominant version(s) of liberalism should be replaced by a different version of liberalism. In the course of making the argument of this chapter, I will also respond to the alternative accounts of the significant postliberal critique of liberalism offered by Sleat¹⁶² and Kelly.¹⁶³

Bell's "comprehensive" approach to analysing liberalism suggests, *mutatis mutandis* as applied to *postliberalism*, that we start with "the sum of arguments that have been classified as [post]liberal".¹⁶⁴ My goal, however, is not to be comprehensive but to be highly specific: to identify, within this "sum of arguments", those which are (i) critiques of liberalism that are (ii) novel and (iii) genuinely anti-liberal critiques of liberalism. Nevertheless, we should *begin* with

¹⁶¹ (Sleat 2025, 10; Kelly 2025a, 11–12)

¹⁶² (Sleat 2025, 6–14)

¹⁶³ (Kelly 2025b, 9–17)

¹⁶⁴ (Bell 2014, 689–90)

identifying the universe of arguments that have been classified as postliberal, and then select the relevant arguments out of this universe of arguments.

This chapter will first (part I) outline the universe of postliberal arguments. It will then (part II) identify from within this universe the novel and genuinely anti-liberal postliberal critique of liberalism. I will argue that this critique is a version of what Vallier calls the “No Alternative Objection”, which claims that there is *no alternative* to coercively “imposing a substantive value system... on the populace”.¹⁶⁵

Having identified this argument, and demonstrated that other ‘postliberal’ arguments are either not novel, not genuinely anti-liberal, or not relevant to the critique of liberalism, I will (part III) explain the emergence of this novel postliberal critique of liberalism by outlining its intellectual genealogy, and showing that this argument is a discursive move in an ideological debate that makes sense only in a post-1960s (and especially post-2010s) context.¹⁶⁶

This genealogical analysis of the novel postliberal critique of liberalism will also constitute an important contribution to the scholarly understanding of postliberalism in its own right. Where other scholars have attempted to explain the origins of the distinctive and novel postliberal critique of liberalism, they have typically appealed to the frustration and dissatisfaction with the prevailing political and economic order caused by globalisation, neoliberalism, and the 2008 recession.¹⁶⁷ While these are real, proximate causes of the anti-establishment and anti-liberal mood into which postliberal thinkers tap, they do not explain the distinctive structure of the novel postliberal critique. No other scholars of postliberalism have thus far grounded their genealogical narratives in the deep changes and transmutations that both liberalism and traditionalist anti-liberalism underwent in the mid-to-late-twentieth-century. Doing so will place in sharp relief the ways in which postliberalism differs from earlier forms of traditionalist anti-liberalism, and the central role that a particular attempt to ‘unmask’ the purported covert progressive-authoritarianism of liberal ideology and regimes plays in the postliberal critique.

I: The Universe of ‘Postliberal’ Arguments

What, then, are the contents of the universe of arguments classified as postliberal by their own proponents or by others? Due to the recency of serious scholarly analysis of postliberalism, the ideology’s boundaries are fuzzy. Sleat provides a helpful starting point by listing the “individuals [who] have consistently labelled themselves or their ideas as post-liberal”:

“This list includes (in alphabetical order): Sohrab Ahmari, columnist, founding editor of Compact, and currently US editor of UnHerd; Philip Blond, political philosopher, Anglican

¹⁶⁵ (Vallier 2024a)

¹⁶⁶ I draw in part on my previously published co-authored genealogy of postliberalism (Williams and da Silva 2025)

¹⁶⁷ (Sleat 2025, 7–9; Kelly 2025b, 22–31)

theologian, and director of the UK-based think tank ResPublica; Patrick Deneen, professor of political theory at the University of Notre Dame; John Milbank, Anglo-Catholic theologian and emeritus professor at the University of Nottingham; Adrian Pabst, political economist and theorist at the University of Kent and Deputy Director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research; Gladden Pappin, political theorist at the University of Dallas and co-founder and deputy editor of conservative journal American Affairs; Chad Pecknold, theologian at The Catholic University of America; and Adrian Vermeule, Ralph S. Tyler, Jr. Professor of Constitutional Law at Harvard Law School.

Others may choose to cast the post-liberal net a little wider. More inclusive lists might include, for instance, Maurice Glasman, Matthew Goodwin, David Goodhart, John Gray, Mary Harrington, Michael Lind, Eric Kaufmann, Danny Kruger, Louise Perry, Aris Roussinos, Nick Timothy, and Rowan Williams.”¹⁶⁸

Kelly substantively agrees with Sleat’s wider-net enumeration, and includes in his list of postliberal thinkers those in both Sleat’s first and second list.¹⁶⁹

To this list, I would make two additions that Sleat appears to have overlooked, perhaps because he focuses on individuals’ self-identification whereas I also seek to identify individuals consistently identified as postliberal by others. The first addition is the broadly anti-modernist ideology associated with the Catholic magazine *New Polity*, and previously with the theological journal *Communio*. This ideology has also been widely labelled ‘postliberal’. Many commentators and analysts have used the term ‘postliberal’ to describe the work of the major thinkers associated with this project, specifically the philosophers D. C. Schindler,¹⁷⁰ and Michael Hanby¹⁷¹ and the theologians Marc Barnes¹⁷² and Andrew Willard Jones.¹⁷³

The second addition is the ideology promoted by the National Conservative movement associated with the Israeli-American Biblical scholar Yoram Hazony and other thinkers linked to Hazony’s Edmund Burke Foundation.¹⁷⁴ Although Hazony rarely describes his own ideas as postliberal, Kelly and Borg both identify Hazony as a central postliberal thinker,¹⁷⁵ as does Christopher Eberle in an unpublished paper on postliberalism.¹⁷⁶

Thus, aggregating all of the arguments offered by these figures, we find that the label ‘postliberal’ has been widely applied to *constructive* arguments for:

¹⁶⁸ (Sleat 2025, 10).

¹⁶⁹ (Kelly 2025b, 11–12)

¹⁷⁰ (Bednarz 2023)

¹⁷¹ (Dreher 2022)

¹⁷² (Postmodernity 2022)

¹⁷³ (Farmer 2025)

¹⁷⁴ E.g. (Littlejohn 2017)

¹⁷⁵ (Kelly 2025, 44–6; Borg 2025, 41–43)

¹⁷⁶ (Eberle 2024)

1. The theological doctrine of Catholic ‘integralism’ in which the Church should exercise an “indirect power” over the state, including the power to direct the civil authority to punish canon crimes like heresy and apostasy;¹⁷⁷
2. Self-proclaimed Calvinist “Christian Nationalism”;¹⁷⁸
3. A form of Catholic-inflected anti-liberalism, sometimes called “common good conservatism”, and associated with the blog *Postliberal Order* and especially with Patrick Deneen;¹⁷⁹
4. The official positions of the National Conservative ideology of the Edmund Burke Foundation, chaired by Yoram Hazony, and the ‘covenantal’ account of public religion, nationality, and family on which those positions rest;¹⁸⁰
5. John Gray’s rejection of the universal validity of liberal political morality, combined with pragmatic acceptance of liberal institutions as the best means of *modus vivendi* in contemporary liberal democracies.¹⁸¹
6. Eric Kaufmann’s “post-progressivism” or “liberal postliberalism”, which calls for a renewed form of classical liberalism opposed to “woke” cultural politics.¹⁸²
7. An ideology inspired by John Milbank called “personalist pluralism”¹⁸³ or “common good communitarianism”,¹⁸⁴ which has heavily influenced Britain’s centre-right Red Tory and centre-left Blue Labour movements;¹⁸⁵
8. The anti-modern, and arguably neo-medievalist, political thought of the Catholic thinkers at *New Polity*.
9. A socially conservative version of economically centre-left “social democracy” associated with Sohrab Ahmari and Michael Lind;¹⁸⁶
10. The version of “West Coast” Straussian political thought promoted by the Claremont Institute;¹⁸⁷
11. The jurisprudential theory of “common good constitutionalism” promoted by Adrian Vermeule, among other legal scholars;¹⁸⁸
12. A “postliberal feminism” promoted by Mary Harrington and Louise Perry, based on the claim that women’s flourishing is best achieved through the embrace of, rather than the attempt to transcend, purported biological limitations;¹⁸⁹
13. The ideologies promoted—with whatever degree of internal coherence they may have—by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán’s Fidesz party, in office at time of

¹⁷⁷ (Walzer 2024)

¹⁷⁸ (Baker 2024)

¹⁷⁹ See (Sleat 2025, 47-60).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 61-2. (Kruger 2024) articulates a similar ‘covenantal’ vision to Hazony’s.

¹⁸¹ (Gray 2014, 283–328)

¹⁸² (Kaufmann 2024c). (Timothy 2021) similarly seeks to preserve an “essential” liberalism that avoids purported “ultra-liberal” excesses.

¹⁸³ (Pabst 2023, 899–903)

¹⁸⁴ (Kelly 2025, 43-67)

¹⁸⁵ (Sleat 2025, 11-12). Cf. (Dallmayr 2019) for a close American analogue to this ideology.

¹⁸⁶ (Sleat 2025, 11)

¹⁸⁷ (Holm 2025, 22)

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 61-76

¹⁸⁹ (Harrington 2024; Perry 2022). See also (Borg 2024, 14–15)

writing,¹⁹⁰ and Poland's Law and Justice party, which controlled the government until 2023.¹⁹¹

14. Generic populist nationalism of the kind represented—in different forms—by parties Reform UK or France's National Rally;¹⁹²
15. The descriptive theses, advanced by Aris Roussinos, Philip Pilkington, and other thinkers, that the hegemony of liberal ideology and/or the global liberal international order, are in the process of collapse.¹⁹³

We also find *critiques* of liberalism that claim the following:

1. Liberalism atomises society and undermines intermediary institutions, including the family;¹⁹⁴
2. Liberalism corrupts personal morality, especially sexual morality;¹⁹⁵
3. Liberalism encourages the growth of inequality in income, wealth, and opportunity;¹⁹⁶
4. Liberalism undermines the virtues needed for democratic self-government;¹⁹⁷
5. Liberalism corrupts and debases both 'high' and 'popular' culture;¹⁹⁸
6. Liberalism wrongly valorises radical individual autonomy;¹⁹⁹
7. Liberalism undermines loyalty to the nation-state;²⁰⁰
8. Liberalism strengthens the bureaucratic state as the only umpire able to reign in the conflictual desires of liberated individuals;²⁰¹
9. Liberalism leads inexorably to the denial of basic liberties to traditionalists.²⁰²

The above lists are intended to be exhaustive, but the fuzziness of postliberalism's boundaries means they cannot be completely so. Arguments could also be distinguished from each other in different, similarly useful, ways. My aim is to identify, within the universe of postliberal arguments, a novel critique of liberalism that purports to justify a genuinely anti-liberal political morality. As such, I will first identify, from within the universe of postliberal arguments outlined above, the *constructive* accounts of political morality that are genuinely anti-liberal. I will then identify the *critiques* of liberalism that are genuinely novel.

¹⁹⁰ (Sleat 2025, 33)

¹⁹¹ (Holm 2025, 24)

¹⁹² (Kelly 2025, 19–42)

¹⁹³ (Roussinos 2019; Pinkoski 2024; Pilkington 2025, 9–98)).

¹⁹⁴ (Hazony 2019a)

¹⁹⁵ (Vermeule 2017a)

¹⁹⁶ (Deneen 2019, 131–53)

¹⁹⁷ (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 209–11)

¹⁹⁸ (Deneen 2019, 65–90)

¹⁹⁹ (Timothy 2021, 39–47)

²⁰⁰ (Hazony 2018, 29–37)

²⁰¹ (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 40–2)

²⁰² (Vermeule 2019; Deneen 2024)

I.i: Constructive Positions

I.i.a: Liberalism-Compatible positions

Among the constructive accounts of political morality associated with postliberalism, some are clearly compatible with minimal liberalism, while others are too ambiguous to clearly identify as compatible or incompatible.

I will begin by identifying the positive arguments that are compatible with minimal liberalism because they do not purport to justify a genuinely anti-liberal political morality that would contradict this minimal liberalism, and showing why they are not genuinely anti-liberal. These are the arguments for positions (5-10): namely Gray's *modus vivendi* (5), Kaufmann's post-progressivism (6), Milbankian personalist pluralism (7), *New Polity* postliberalism (8), socially conservative social democracy (9), and West Coast Straussianism (10).

I will then perform the same task for the arguments for positions that are either too vague, or insufficiently complete and comprehensive, to clearly identify as liberal or anti-liberal. These are the arguments for positions (11-14): namely common good constitutionalism (11), postliberal feminism (12), the ideologies of Fidesz and Law and Justice (13), and populist nationalism (14). I will then identify arguments for positions that are either clearly anti-liberal or could plausibly be interpreted as such, namely Catholic integralism (1), Christian Nationalism (2), common good conservatism (3), and National Conservatism (4). I will explain why they are genuinely anti-liberal or could be interpreted as such. I will dismiss argument (15), the descriptive theses that liberal hegemony and/or international order are collapsing. These descriptive theses about global politics are irrelevant to my project of evaluating *normative* postliberal claims about liberalism, so this thesis will not discuss or evaluate them further.

Gray's postliberalism (5) does not advocate for the abandonment of liberalism in the polities in which it is entrenched. Although Gray rejects the claim that "doctrinal liberalism" offers a universally valid account of political morality, he still maintains that a "liberal civil society... is the only sort of regime in which we... can live well". By "we", Gray means, roughly, the citizens of contemporary liberal democracies. Thus, Gray's postliberalism does not reject liberal regimes or call for their replacement. His positive account of political morality implies that liberalism should be maintained and preserved where it is currently entrenched.²⁰³ It is thus not a genuinely anti-liberal alternative to liberalism.

Kaufmann's post-progressivism (6) is also clearly a version of liberalism rather than a genuinely anti-liberal alternative to it. The goal of post-progressivism is to question, and ultimately to reject, the "left-liberal *weltenschaung*".²⁰⁴ This does not entail rejecting every version of

²⁰³ (Gray 2014, 287–8)

²⁰⁴ (Kaufmann 2025, 139)

liberalism, only the versions associated with contemporary left-of-centre politics, and particularly with identity politics and the set of socio-political attitudes popularly known as “woke”.²⁰⁵ Elsewhere, Kaufmann has described his preferred account of political morality as “liberal postliberalism” which would preserve “the negative-liberal baby without the positive-liberal bathwater”. “Liberal postliberalism”, then, involves moving beyond and rejecting more demanding varieties of liberalism while embracing some kind of classical liberalism that would place greater relative weight on negative liberty than the more demanding varieties that Kaufmann rejects.²⁰⁶

The ideologies associated with Milbank (7), and with *New Polity* (8), are also compatible with minimal liberalism. Milbank’s constructive project involves, at the most abstract level, an overcoming of the “dualisms of modernity”: market and state, freedom and authority, individual and community.²⁰⁷ The overcoming of these dualisms, which all, for Milbank, stem from and manifest the oppositional logic of liberal anthropology, involves a prioritisation of a “politics of virtue” and “shared aspiration” over both individual self-interest and the corrective power of state intervention in a field of conflictual relationships.²⁰⁸ In Milbank’s later work, this implies calls, drawing on the Italian ‘civil economy’ tradition, for an economy embedded in social norms and culture (as opposed to what Milbank sees as the commodificatory logic of abstract utility and rootless capital),²⁰⁹ a renewal of the ‘mixed constitution’ and plural sovereignty as against a centralising bureaucratic state;²¹⁰ and orienting education and culture towards participation in the “transcendent Good”.²¹¹

All these idealistic ends and perfectionist ends, however, issue in a somewhat mundane agenda when translated into concrete policy proposals, with Milbank typically proposing reforms to various institutions to include greater representation of corporate groups and communities, and to introduce more self-conscious and deliberate inculcation of a particular *ethos* supposed to instantiate virtuous practice.²¹² The policy proposals of both left (Blue Labour) and right (Red Tory) Milbankians in Britain are relatively mundane and clearly compatible with minimal liberalism. Blond’s Red Tory proposals involve primarily changes to the administration of public services and to economic regulations, such as greater parental and local control over schools,²¹³ and greater encouragement for the third sector.²¹⁴ Similarly, though praising “family life” and “faith groups”,²¹⁵ Blue Labour’s postliberalism amounts, in practice, to measures like “the

²⁰⁵ (Kaufmann 2024a, 12) defines “woke” as the “sacralization of historically disadvantaged race, gender, and sexual identity groups”. See also (Williams 2024c)

²⁰⁶ (Kaufmann 2024c, 178)

²⁰⁷ (Nicholas 2015)

²⁰⁸ Articulated in (Milbank and Pabst 2016).

²⁰⁹ On ‘civil economy’ see (Bruni and Zamagni 2016)

²¹⁰ (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 208–245)

²¹¹ (Ibid., 283–310)

²¹² E.g. op. cit., 227, 300–306.

²¹³ (Blond 2010, 166)

²¹⁴ Ibid., 177

²¹⁵ (Glasman 2010, 16, 20)

introduction of growth warrants in addition to ordinary national and corporate bonds” and “expanding the living wage”.²¹⁶

Moreover, Milbank’s postliberalism contains a clear rationale for avoiding anti-liberal forms of coercion. Milbank views coercive attempts to impose virtue or metaphysical values as exhibiting a misguided reliance on a concept of “pure nature”, un-transformed by grace,²¹⁷ which he believes a reduction of “authority to power”, and to “baptising” a mere “mechanical forcing” of “external” virtue.²¹⁸ Consequently, despite opposing same-sex marriage²¹⁹ and supporting a renewed role for established religion in public life,²²⁰ Milbank and his followers reject any coercive measures to promote virtue. Milbankian postliberalism contains a core commitment to opposing the coercive promotion of virtue, a commitment derived from Milbank’s theological views of grace and nature. Milbankian positive proposals, therefore, are compatible with respecting the minimal agency and free speech rights of all citizens, and Milbankian political morality should be viewed more as a variation within liberalism than a fundamental repudiation of it.

The same is true of *New Polity* postliberalism (8). The contemporary *New Polity* thinkers embrace a form of pessimistic political quietism, in which the errors of liberalism are thought to be irreparable (in the foreseeable future) by any political programme. The critical position of the *New Polity* thinkers is substantially similar to that of Milbank: both hold that liberalism is based on a defective and atomising ontology that implicitly valorises only the individual and the impersonal state, at the expense of organic and intermediary institutions. *New Polity* thinkers differ from Milbank in more often expressing this argument in the terms of an ongoing debate about the nature of the American regime and the commitments of its Constitutional order.²²¹

Where *New Polity* thinkers differ from Milbank more substantively is in their proposed alternative to liberalism. Whereas Milbankian personality pluralism, as I argued above, proposes, both directly and through the Blue Labour and Red Tory movements that Milbank inspired, a range of technocratic reforms that ultimately amount to a variation within liberalism rather than an alternative to it, the *New Polity* thinkers speak of constructive proposals only in the vaguest and most obscure terms. Willard Jones, for instance, hints at a “missionary insurgency” to subvert liberal society from within, but offers no elaboration on what this entails.²²²

More often, *New Polity* thinkers merely criticise alternatives to liberalism that they perceive as overly coercive, and this habit reveals their implicit commitment to a clear rationale for the agency and free speech rights of minimal liberalism. Drawing on de Lubac²²³ and Balthasar’s²²⁴

²¹⁶ (Pabst 2015, 278–9)

²¹⁷ (Milbank 2022, 4)

²¹⁸ (*Ibid.*, 5)

²¹⁹ (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 236–7)

²²⁰ (*Ibid.*, 230–36)

²²¹ See (Keating 2023) on this debate.

²²² (Jones 2017, 410)

²²³ (de Lubac 1989a, 1989b)

²²⁴ (von Balthasar, 2022 [1963])

aversion to an ‘extrinsic’ approach to Church-state interaction, the *New Polity* thinkers criticise coercive models of Christian politics for rigidly splitting nature and grace (and thence the temporal and spiritual domains), and reducing Church-state relations to a mechanical kind of coercion in which the Church commands the state, in contrast to the harmonious and organic Church-state integration purportedly exhibited in societies like 13th-century France.²²⁵ D.C. Schindler thus insists that the entire political order (spiritual and temporal) is a *societas perfecta*, inherently ordered to man’s ultimate end, but shaped by the Church’s truth-bearing *persuasive* presence, not its *coercive* power.²²⁶ As with Milbankianism then, it is clear that *New Polity* postliberalism contains within itself a strong rationale for respecting minimal agency and free speech rights; thus, like Milbankianism, it is not genuinely anti-liberal.

The same judgement will hold for the socially conservative variety of social democracy supported by Lind, Ahmari, and other thinkers (9). Since it is obvious that centre-left, social democratic policies are compatible with at least some versions of liberalism, any potential incompatibility between liberalism and these thinkers must lie in their social conservatism. Here, neither Lind nor Ahmari have articulated a political morality that contradicts any of the conditions of minimal liberalism.

Lind often rhetorically defends the virtue of religion and of ‘traditional’ family values, but does not advocate coercive means of advancing these values. Lind presents religious communities as important pillars of a “pluralist” social order in which intermediary institutions would have a greater role in policy making, weakening both statism and individualism. He does not, however, argue for the state to deliberately promote religion as such, let alone for it to do so through coercive and anti-liberal means.²²⁷

Ahmari’s views can appear, superficially, to be quite radically anti-liberal, but this appearance is misleading. In a widely read 2019 article in *First Things*, Ahmari called for the “public square” to be “oriented toward the good, and ultimately the Highest Good”. Yet despite this apparently anti-liberal positioning, Ahmari did not endorse coercive measures to promote traditional morality through means that would violate minimal agency rights, and he claimed that “charters for the protection of rights” are often “rooted... in the classical and Christian tradition”.²²⁸ Ahmari’s position, then, is a form of non-coercive traditionalist perfectionism, holding that public institutions should promote traditionalist values but that individuals should be free from coercion in their private lives. Despite his loud rhetorical condemnation of liberalism, Ahmari’s position is consistent with minimal liberalism (though not, of course, with many specific, more demanding versions of liberalism).

West Coast Straussianism (10) is, for the most part, best construed as a conservative interpretation of liberalism rather than a genuinely anti-liberal alternative. Leo Strauss’s views on political morality were complex and are the subject of deep ongoing contestation, in part

²²⁵ (D. C. Schindler 2021, 287-91)

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 241-93

²²⁷ (Lind 2021)

²²⁸ (Mounk 2023)

because of the ambiguity in his writings, ambiguity which some Straussians believe to have been intentional.²²⁹ However, Strauss's various writings contain statements that appear sufficiently critical of liberalism to warrant, for instance, his inclusion in Stephen Holmes's notable survey of twentieth-century authoritarian anti-liberalism.²³⁰

The point of departure for the 'West Coast' interpretation of Strauss lies in the philosopher's views on the distinctive character of modern political thought. Strauss famously criticised an early modern "Machiavellian turn" in which political thought turned away from the promotion of virtue and towards the mere procuring of physical safety and material comfort by harnessing individual self-interest.²³¹ In Strauss's terms, this involved a declension from a polity concerned with "the high" to one built on the "low but solid" ground of self-interest.²³² In the course of making this argument, Strauss appeared to affirm three incompatible propositions: that modernity is bad; that America (as the archetypical post-Machiavellian regime) is modern; and that America is nevertheless good.²³³ The group of scholars who became known as the 'West Coast' Straussians (due to their association with the Claremont, California-based philosopher Harry V. Jaffa) resolved this trilemma by arguing that America was not, in fact, truly modern.²³⁴

For Jaffa and his followers, denying the modernity of America meant denying that its classical liberal founding principles really embodied the post-Machiavellian declension to concern with the 'low' project of harnessing self-interest. Jaffa's intellectual project constituted an "Aristotelianization of the regime",²³⁵ which viewed the post-Revolutionary state as committed to promoting the classical virtues among the citizenry. Rather than seeing the Constitution as devoted to protecting negative liberties instead of promoting virtue, Jaffa argued that a certain, qualified kind of classically liberal constitutionalism was the best means of realising Aristotelian principles in the modern circumstances of a large, continent-wide federal state, going so far as to suggest that Locke's proto-liberalism represented the updating of Aristotelian political morality for modern circumstances.²³⁶

Because the West Coast Straussian position views the ideal regime as one that promotes virtue rather than merely protecting liberty, the view can appear to have anti-liberal implications. Jaffa held that the Aristotelian perfectionism of the American regime implied the legitimacy of coercive paternalism in at least some policy domains. Most (in)famously for Jaffa, this coercive paternalism implied a vigorous defence of anti-sodomy laws, on the grounds that recognising a "moral and a legal right" to "sodomy" would undermine the teleological conception of human nature on which "all morality" is based,²³⁷ constituting "the most complete repudiation... of all

²²⁹ See e.g. (Kristol 2015)

²³⁰ (Holmes 1996)

²³¹ (Zuckert and Zuckert 2014, 66)

²³² (Strauss 1995, 296–7)

²³³ (Zuckert and Zuckert 2008, 198)

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 201

²³⁵ (Zuckert and Zuckert 2014, 329)

²³⁶ (Jaffa 1987)

²³⁷ (Jaffa 2018b, 50)

objective standards of human conduct.”²³⁸ More recent West Coast Straussians seem to have defended Jaffa’s taking of this position.²³⁹

Despite this, I still consider West Coast Straussianism to contain—like Milbankian or *New Polity* postliberalism, or the views of Lind and Ahmari—a rationale for respecting minimal agency rights, even if Jaffa and some of his followers did not explicitly draw out the implications of this rationale.

This rationale can be found in Jaffa’s views on the relationship between freedom and virtue. Although Jaffa did not articulate the claim in a fully explicit way, it is arguable that he affirmed something close to Frank Meyer’s principle that coerced acts cannot be genuinely virtuous. Jaffa did affirm explicitly, for instance, that “freedom is the ability to be determined by the truth”.²⁴⁰ This can plausibly be read as affirming a moralised conception of freedom in which valuable liberty requires individuals’ actions to be determined by genuine recognition of moral truth and not by the fear of punishment produced by coercion. Since freedom was one of Jaffa’s central political values, it is plausible to think that his affirmation of this moralised conception of freedom would imply that direct, coercive legal moralism has considerable disvalue.

Partly for this reason, Jaffa’s specific views on anti-sodomy laws do not follow directly from his basic normative premises, and indeed are in *prima facie* tension with them. As far as I am aware, Jaffa never explicitly tried to show, in detail, how his views on anti-sodomy laws were consistent with his views on freedom and virtue. The fact that Jaffa and some other central West Coast Straussians affirmed some genuinely anti-liberal positions does not mean that the constructive ideology of West Coast Straussianism is itself genuinely anti-liberal. Rather, West Coast Straussianism seems to contain a *prima facie* rationale for respecting minimal agency rights. I therefore judge West Coast Straussianism to be compatible with a conservative version of minimal liberalism for the same reason (the central presence of a rationale for affirming minimal liberalism) that Milbankian or *New Polity* postliberalism are compatible with minimal liberalism.

I will now move on to discuss accounts of political morality that are too vague or incomplete to be judged as clearly anti-liberal or not.

I.i.b: Incomplete and Indeterminate Positions

Common good constitutionalism (11) is not sufficiently complete and determinate to permit a clear assessment of its (in)compatibility with minimal liberalism. Vermeule’s jurisprudential theory is intended to be compatible with Catholic integralism, but is also clearly separable from it. Vermeule limits his account to “the ends of natural or temporal happiness”,²⁴¹ so the legal

²³⁸ (Jaffa 2018, 50)

²³⁹ (Masugi 2015)

²⁴⁰ (Jaffa 2018a)

²⁴¹ (Vermeule 2022b, 59)

theory of common good constitutionalism is deliberately silent about the role of religion in public life. Some common good constitutionalists hold Catholic integralist views of this role, but many do not.²⁴² The core claim of common good constitutionalism is simply that constitutional jurisprudence and legal interpretation should be oriented towards some conception or other of the ‘common good’, such that law is interpreted, where possible, as consistent with some kind of notion of the political community’s overall, holistic good.²⁴³

Vermeule seems to think that this orientation towards the common good would have anti-liberal implications, and he often writes fairly stridently about the desirability of overturning or qualifying liberal rights protections, sometimes in ambiguous language that could plausibly be interpreted as including minimal agency and free speech rights. For instance, he identifies the US Supreme Court’s “jurisprudence on free speech” as one of the legal doctrines that should “prove vulnerable under a regime of common good constitutionalism”.²⁴⁴ Yet Vermeule does not, in *Common Good Constitutionalism*, provide specific examples of *minimal* agency or free speech rights that he thinks should be qualified or limited. The only examples in this book of concrete jurisprudential conclusions bearing on agency or free speech rights that Vermeule thinks should be revised concern laws regarding false testimony and virtual child pornography, neither of which are protected by minimal agency or free speech rights.²⁴⁵ Vermeule argues in his discussion of rights that the protection of individual rights needs to be “balanced” against the collective interests of the community, but—as Vermeule himself points out—this is not particularly controversial and does not necessarily entail that there are not good reasons to think the balancing will turn out favourable to the protection of minimal agency rights.²⁴⁶

It seems to me, therefore, that common good constitutionalism as such does not entail a determinate answer to the question of minimal agency or free speech rights (or, for that matter, to minimal formal equality). Vermeule may think that common good constitutionalism—independently of integralism—has this implication, but if so he has not spelt this out; but other common good constitutionalists could come to different conclusions. Common good constitutionalism is a formal doctrine that directs us to balance rights against the common good of the political community, but it does not contain any content directing us to ascribe any particular weight to the balancing of these rights. It needs to be supplemented with further principles of political and/or legal morality to yield determinate conclusions with respect to this weighting. I conclude, therefore, that common good constitutionalism is too vague to be clearly identified as compatible or incompatible with minimal liberalism.

“Postliberal feminism” (12) is concerned only with offering an account of how women’s rights and interests should be regarded in a postliberal dispensation, not with offering an overall account of political morality. Mary Harrington’s *Feminism Against Progress* consists primarily of

²⁴² Many non-integralist legal scholars have expressed sympathy for common good constitutionalism, e.g. (Tasioulas 2024)

²⁴³ (Vermeule 2022a, 11-41). As I will show in Chapter 4, Vermeule is somewhat vague as to how the common good should be conceptualised.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 75

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 264

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 266. Vermeule is vague as to whether he thinks there are such reasons.

arguments for the view that affirming purported dimorphic sexual differences, and the biological constraints to which they gave rise, is conducive to human flourishing rather than oppressive.²⁴⁷ Harrington does not, however, propose any detailed policy prescriptions even in the domain of women's rights and interests. Her criticisms of abortion and contraception could have anti-liberal implications, but she does not draw out any such implications.²⁴⁸ Postliberal feminism, therefore, is neither complete nor clear enough to be identified as a clearly anti-liberal view of political morality.

The ideologies of real-world political parties—notably the Fidesz party in Hungary and the Law and Justice party in Poland (13)—are also too vague to be clearly identified as either genuinely anti-liberal or not.

Whether these parties have introduced or advocated policies incompatible with minimal liberalism is contested. For instance, a significant amount of academic literature argues that reforms introduced by these parties to their respective countries' constitutions, such as purported limitations on judicial independence, undermine these countries' status as liberal democracies.²⁴⁹ If this is an accurate description of these parties' actions, their actions would seemingly constitute attempts to undermine minimal accountable government. Other scholars, however, have argued that much of this literature fails to place the relevant constitutional reforms in comparative context, and that, when placed in this context, many of the new institutional structures introduced by these parties are shared by other countries whose status as liberal democracies is rarely questioned.²⁵⁰

In any case, the (in)compatibility of these parties' *ideology* with minimal liberalism can not necessarily be inferred from the (in)compatibility of their *actions*. Poland's Law and Justice has not published any long-form ideological texts or directly sponsored organisations that do so. Fidesz, however, has invested substantial effort and resources in publicising and promoting its ideology among right-of-centre public intellectuals both within Hungary across the Western world, through an infrastructure of think tanks and research institutes like the Danube Institute, the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, and through English-language publications like *The Hungarian Conservative* and the *The European Conservative*.²⁵¹ To my knowledge, none of these think tanks or publications have specifically called for policies that are evidently incompatible with minimal liberalism, or articulated a rationale for evident violations of minimal agency or free speech rights.

The final category of postliberal arguments for positive accounts of political morality that are too vague or incomplete to judge to be compatible or incompatible with minimal liberalism are arguments for (14) "populist nationalism". Populism is typically interpreted by scholars as a "thin-centred" ideology, which pits a sacralised "people" against both foreign outsiders and

²⁴⁷ (Harrington 2024, 15–16)

²⁴⁸ E.g. Ibid., 31-5

²⁴⁹ E.g. (Pogány 2013)

²⁵⁰ See (Gomez and Leunig 2022, 666–7; 669)

²⁵¹ (Enyedi 2024)

disloyal elites who collaborate with these outsiders.²⁵² This leaves open-ended the precise conceptualisation of, and rationale for, the distinction between the people and the outsiders, so different varieties of populism can have enormously different content. Even if we take populist *nationalism* to limit the domain of postliberal populism to right-wing varieties of populism that interpret the “people” as a nation and the outsiders as ethnic, racial, or religious outsiders, there is still tremendous room for variation on most substantive questions of political morality. Different versions of populist nationalism differ, for instance, about whether (and if so, how) members minority ethnic groups that assimilate to majority norms can become part of the nation and thus cease being outsiders, or whether unassimilated minorities should be subject to formally discriminatory laws or merely non-coercively encouraged to either assimilate or leave the national state.²⁵³ On issues other than the core populist concept of the “people” against the outsiders, even greater variation exists: some European populists are socially conservative, while others deploy progressive stances on LGBT rights and feminism to demarcate the nation against purportedly homophobic and misogynistic Muslims.²⁵⁴ Populist nationalism, then, is too open-ended and incomplete to represent an account of political morality sufficiently determinate to be judged as either genuinely anti-liberal or compatible with liberalism.²⁵⁵

Kelly, however, argues that arguments for populist nationalism must be considered in any evaluation of the postliberal critique of liberalism because of populist nationalism’s structural relationship to other forms of postliberalism. Kelly claims that populist nationalism stands in a “trinitarian” relationship to the varieties of postliberalism that contain more determinate content. These other varieties Kelly identifies as “common good communitarianism” and “common good absolutism”. For Kelly, each of these three “faces” of postliberalism “represents a reason for incorporating the position of the other”.²⁵⁶ Specifically, Kelly claims that “without national populism there would be no postliberal movement... it would collapse into a series of obscure philosophical debates at the margins of the academy”.²⁵⁷

I agree with these claims of Kelly’s, but I do not think they provide sufficient reason for my analysis of the novel, distinct postliberal critique of liberalism to include arguments for populist nationalism. They do, however, provide sufficient reason for *Kelly* to include populist nationalism in his analysis, which has a different goal to mine. Kelly aims to understand postliberalism as a real-world political *movement*, while I aim to evaluate whether its distinct and novel *critique of liberalism* is correct. The fact that there would be no real world postliberal movement without populist nationalism does not mean that the arguments for populist nationalism, as such, are relevant to evaluating the novel and distinctive postliberal critique of liberalism. Indeed, as Kelly shows, populist nationalism’s open-endedness and thin-centred character means it is “not self-sufficient” as an account of political morality.²⁵⁸ A rationale for a distinct and substantive

²⁵² (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013)

²⁵³ See e.g. (Escritt and Rinke 2024) on the internal divisions of German populist nationalists.

²⁵⁴ See (Williams 2025b; Masri 2022)),

²⁵⁵ Of course, some specific versions of populist nationalism could be genuinely anti-liberal, but even these tend to have little detailed and articulated ideology.

²⁵⁶ (Kelly 2025b, 16)

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 19

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 37

postliberal vision of political morality cannot rely on the arguments that purport only to justify national populism. As Kelly also shows, the arguments for national populism as such consist mainly of a purported genealogical exposure of liberalism as the rationalisation of the self-interest of the metropolitan elite.²⁵⁹ Such arguments, on their own, do not constitute a novel and distinct critique of liberalism with genuinely anti-liberal implications, because they cannot, on their own, get us to a genuinely anti-liberal account of political morality, only to the incomplete and thin-centred ideology of populist nationalism.

I.i.c: Anti-Liberal Positions

Having identified and eliminated the accounts of political morality, described as postliberal, that are either compatible with minimal liberalism or too indeterminate to judge as compatible or incompatible, we are left with Catholic integralism (1), Christian Nationalism (2), common good conservatism (3), and National Conservatism (4). Of these, the most evidently and unambiguously anti-liberal are Catholic integralism and Christian Nationalism.

The central claim of Catholic integralism (1) is that the Church still possesses the legitimate authority to exercise an “indirect power” over the state for spiritual ends. This includes directing the state to exercise its coercive power in order to enforce canon laws, such as those against heresy or apostasy, on baptised Christians (including nominal and non-Catholic Christians, and baptised people who have since repudiated Christianity). There is some disagreement between integralists and their critics over the extent to which this would entail widespread religious coercion in practice. Vallier argues that an integralist state would require “mass surveillance”,²⁶⁰ “modern heresy trials”,²⁶¹ and “secret police”.²⁶² Some integralists, like the philosopher Thomas Pink, have argued that this would be tempered in practice by the consideration that many baptised Christians are “so detached” from the Church that their disbelief is “very plausibly not culpable”.²⁶³ Nevertheless, Vallier is still correct that an integralist state has no reason to rule out heresy trials in principle, and that it “must decide whether to declare... Protestant churches criminal organisations”.²⁶⁴ Catholic integralism, then, clearly and explicitly endorses measures that violate minimal agency and free speech rights, so it is clearly anti-liberal.

The same is true of self-professed Christian Nationalism (2). Stephen Wolfe, the most systematic theorist of Christian Nationalism, argues that “the magistrate” may “use coercive power to suppress external false religion”.²⁶⁵ Wolfe endorses what we might helpfully call a ‘moral ecology’ argument for religious coercion, justifying the suppression of what he judges to be false religious speech or practice if and when it prevents “injury to the souls of the people of

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 38-42

²⁶⁰ (Vallier 2023a, 150)

²⁶¹ Ibid., 149

²⁶² Ibid., 151

²⁶³ (Pink 2024c, 17)

²⁶⁴ (Vallier 2023, 153)

²⁶⁵ (Wolfe 2022, 355)

God” or “subversion of Christian government... culture, or spiritual discipline”.²⁶⁶ The state, for Wolfe, may not only suppress false religion but enforce the practice of true religion by “requir[ing] people to attend church”, so that they have the opportunity to hear the Christian message and a greater chance of coming to true faith.²⁶⁷ Christian Nationalism, then, clearly advocates restrictions on basic agency and free speech rights, and is therefore genuinely anti-liberal.

The cases of common good conservatism (3) and National Conservatism (4) are slightly more complex. The “common good conservatism” of Patrick Deneen and *Postliberal Order* stands in an ambiguous relationship to Catholic integralism.²⁶⁸ The blog is, at the time of writing, edited by Chad Pecknold, Gladden Pappin, and Patrick Deneen, with Vermeule also having been an editor until 2024. Pecknold,²⁶⁹ Pappin,²⁷⁰ and Vermeule²⁷¹ have all endorsed integralism, though Deneen has not, and has even (in a passing comment) described the full implementation of integralism as “crazy”.²⁷² Elsewhere, other contributors to the blog, like the postliberal philosopher Edward Feser, rhetorically endorse integralism but do not discuss controversial specifics like directing the state to punish canon crimes.²⁷³ Similarly, despite Deneen’s association with integralism, his 2023 *Regime Change* is not an integralist work. While endorsing the suggestive idea of “*postliberal integration*”,²⁷⁴ and identifying the provision of “the conditions for the enjoyment” of prayer and spirituality as part of the “common good”,²⁷⁵ he does not specifically endorse coercive means of promoting this good, or discuss the specific Church-state relationship that defines integralism. Sleat has therefore argued, plausibly, that nothing Deneen has endorsed is unambiguously illiberal.²⁷⁶

Despite this hesitation to endorse coercion, neither Deneen nor other contributors to *Postliberal Order* have articulated a deep rationale for *avoiding* coercion or indeed for rejecting schematic integralism—in stark contrast to other ideologies like West Coast Straussianism, whose proponents have endorsed some genuinely anti-liberal views. To my knowledge, Deneen has not, at any point, articulated any kind of rationale that would explain why the coercive imposition of religion or of traditionalist personal values in a manner that violates minimal agency rights should be rejected. He has, however, articulated many arguments that *appear* to provide rationales *for* this coercive imposition, such as the argument (similar in structure to Wolfe’s) that the state should concern itself with the moral-ecological promotion of religion.²⁷⁷ I therefore conclude, despite Sleat’s correct observation that Deneen has not explicitly endorsed anti-liberal

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 359

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 474

²⁶⁸ For more detail, see (Williams 2025a), esp. 102

²⁶⁹ (Pecknold 2022a)

²⁷⁰ (Pappin 2023)

²⁷¹ (Vermeule 2018b)

²⁷² (Dreher 2018)

²⁷³ (Feser 2024)

²⁷⁴ (Deneen 2023b, 207)

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 255. Emphasis original.

²⁷⁶ (Sleat 2025, 47-60).

²⁷⁷ (Deneen 2023, 250-262)

policies, that (as far as we can tell), his common good conservatism is anti-liberal at the level of ideological premises.

This leaves us, finally, with National Conservatism (4). The National Conservative ‘Statement of Principles’ calls for “public life” to be “rooted in Christianity and its moral vision”, and for “support from public policy” for “the traditional family”. This is qualified, however, by an insistence that “religious minorities are to be protected in the observance of their own traditions”, and that adult citizens “should be protected from religious or ideological coercion in their private lives...”²⁷⁸ Facially, the Statement appears to endorse a traditionalist perfectionism, but to insist it should be pursued through non-coercive means. This would entail respect for minimal agency and free speech rights, and therefore make National Conservatism compatible with minimal liberalism.

However, National Conservatism, like Deneen’s common good conservatism, also does not seem to contain a clear rationale for a principled commitment to minimal agency and free speech rights. The relevant text here is Hazony’s *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, in which the Chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation, the institution that issued the ‘Statement’, systematically lays out his vision of political morality, which he terms “conservative democracy”.²⁷⁹ Hazony’s foundational belief is that the norms of political morality that apply to each nation or community are derived from that community’s collective reflection upon its historical experience.²⁸⁰ Hazony’s commitment to “individual freedoms” is derived from the historical experience of Anglo-American political communities, but this rationale for upholding these freedoms suggests two severe qualifications to his commitment to them. First, if the commitment to these freedoms derives from the experience of particular nations, it is possible that Hazony would endorse limiting these freedoms in other nations, including in nations that are presently liberal democracies but which perhaps did not develop towards a respect for freedom in the same gradual, evolutionary fashion that Britain did. Second, the content of the freedoms that Hazony chooses to emphasise in his book is “the security of the individual’s life and property... against arbitrary actions of the state”.²⁸¹ This does not appear to include a right against religious and ideological coercion that violates minimal agency and free speech rights: even forced church attendance on pain of fines or imprisonment, for instance, would not necessarily limit an individual’s right to life and property in an *arbitrary* way, provided the law mandating attendance is duly enacted and the individual accused of recusancy is given a fair trial.

Elsewhere in his book, Hazony further qualifies his commitment to freedom, arguing that freedom and “constraint” are in fact of equivalent importance: “individuals need constraint as much as they need freedom”.²⁸² Hazony thus appears to take the view that individual freedoms are not to be prioritised above the constraints needed to secure other values, leaving it unclear

²⁷⁸ (Will Chamberlain, Christopher DeMuth, Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Daniel McCarthy, Joshua Mitchell, N.S. Lyons, John O’Sullivan, and R.R. Reno 2022)

²⁷⁹ (Hazony 2022, 358–71)

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 57

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 190

why protections against religious and ideological coercion in people's private lives could not be abandoned if the threat to values like public religion and family were very great.

The National Conservative 'Statement' was deliberately calibrated to be accepted by a broad constituency of conservatives, including core National Conservative-aligned members of the Edmund Burke Foundation as well as various Catholic anti-liberals, West Coast Straussians, traditionalists, paleoconservatives, Christian nationalists, and mainstream conservatives.²⁸³ This means we cannot impute the anti-liberalism I have attributed to Hazony to all of the 'Statement' signatories, let alone all the participants in the National Conservatism conferences. Nevertheless, Hazony's work represents the central articulation of National Conservatism as a distinct ideology, so it is fair to impute his anti-liberalism at least to his close associates and to the Foundation that he chairs.

Overall, then, I consider National Conservatism an instance of genuine anti-liberalism because its core values do not imply a clear rationale for respecting minimal agency and free speech rights, but do imply a potential rationale for restricting them.

To recap the argument thus far, out of the universe of arguments for constructive accounts of political morality that have been described, by their own advocates or by others, as 'postliberal', only arguments for Catholic integralism, Christian nationalism, and National Conservatism can be clearly identified as genuinely anti-liberal. I will now move on to discuss critiques of liberalism that have been described as 'postliberal', to identify those which are (a) novel and (b) purport to justify either Catholic integralism, Christian nationalism, National Conservatism, or some generic or indeterminate form of traditionalist anti-liberalism.

I.ii: Critical Arguments

My aim is to identify a *novel* postliberal critique of liberalism, so I will first review the list of postliberal critiques of liberalism to identify which, if any, exhibit genuine novelty.

It is, I think, quite easy to demonstrate that critiques (1-8) are anything but novel. Recall that critiques (1-8) claim that liberalism (1) undermines intermediary institutions, (2) corrupts personal morality, (3) encourages inequality, (4) undermines republican virtues, (5) debases culture, (6) valorises radical autonomy, (7) undermines national loyalty, and (8) strengthens bureaucratic states. All of these claims have been made by various traditionalist anti-liberal thinkers over the last two centuries.

The idea that liberalism undermines the family (1) and corrupts sexual morality (2) was articulated around the turn of the nineteenth century by reactionary opponents of the French Revolution like Louis Bonald and Joseph de Maistre.²⁸⁴ Bonald also developed a broader

²⁸³ (Hugger 2023)

²⁸⁴ (Bonald 1997 [1801])

account of liberalism's atomising effect on other intermediary institutions (1),²⁸⁵ and this claim was further articulated in the mid-twentieth-century by neoconservative thinkers like Daniel Bell,²⁸⁶ Irving Kristol,²⁸⁷ and Richard John Neuhaus.²⁸⁸

Even if we ignore left-of-centre and Marxist critics of liberalism, we find many traditionalist critics claiming that liberalism (3) encourages the growth of inequality and lamenting this purported fact. This claim is prominent in the work of late twentieth-century and contemporary thinkers like the historian Christopher Lasch²⁸⁹ and the novelist Wendell Berry.²⁹⁰ Lasch also developed the claim that liberalism (4) undermines the virtues needed for self-government.²⁹¹

Conservatives like Roger Scruton have written extensively on the purported (5) cultural decay produced by liberalism.²⁹² The claim that liberalism (6) wrongly valorises radical autonomy is central to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.²⁹³ Liberalism's (7) purported undermining of national loyalty was the subject of extensive discussion by early twentieth-century reactionaries like Charles Maurras²⁹⁴ as well as more recent conservative defenders of the nation-state like Scruton.²⁹⁵ Finally, MacIntyre developed a theoretically sophisticated account of liberalism's (8) purported tendency to strengthen the bureaucratic state.²⁹⁶ This claim was also made by mid-twentieth-century 'fusionist' conservatives, who sought to combine traditionalism with a moderately anti-statist approach to public policy, like Robert Nisbet.²⁹⁷

This leaves us, then, with only one postliberal critique of liberalism that is truly original: the argument (9) that liberalism leads unavoidably to the violation of traditionalists' basic agency and free speech rights.

In the following part (II) of this chapter, I will unpack this argument and elucidate the way it is presented by three prominent postliberal thinkers. These three thinkers are Patrick Deneen, Adrian Vermeule, and Yoram Hazony. I have chosen these three not only because they are the three most prominent postliberal public intellectuals, but also because they each—as we will see—make the argument that liberalism inevitably oppresses traditionalists in particularly clear terms. Together, these three thinkers cover proponents of three of the four genuinely anti-liberal kinds of postliberalism (common good conservatism for Deneen, Catholic integralism for Vermeule, National Conservatism for Hazony) identified in part I.i.c of this chapter. I have not included a proponent of Christian Nationalism because Stephen Wolfe, by far the most

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 124

²⁸⁶ (Bell 1996, 33–4; 85; 220)

²⁸⁷ (Kristol 1995, 54–66)

²⁸⁸ (Neuhaus and Berger 1997, 378)

²⁸⁹ (Lasch 1995, 21–3)

²⁹⁰ (Berry 2018 [1993], 122–3)

²⁹¹ (Lasch 1991), esp 10–11.

²⁹² E.g. in (Scruton 2018)

²⁹³ See (MacIntyre 1988, 338–341)

²⁹⁴ (Maurras 1970 [1922], 250–1)

²⁹⁵ (Scruton 2013, 33–8)

²⁹⁶ (MacIntyre 2022 [1981], 99–103; 111–113)

²⁹⁷ (Nisbet 1953, 75–152)

systematic defender of this position, places very little, if any, emphasis on the claim that liberalism unavoidably violates traditionalists' basic rights, and instead focuses on first-order theological arguments for his substantive, constructive vision.²⁹⁸

Because it is difficult to prove that an argument has *not* been made previously, I will then, in part (III) of this chapter, demonstrate the novelty of this argument by means of a short genealogy of postliberalism. In the course of this genealogy, I will explain why this argument could not have been articulated prior to around the 1970s, and how proto- versions of the argument began to emerge in the mid-1980s, developing into a full-fledged version of the argument in the 2010s.

II: The No Alternatives Argument

Vallier has described something close to the argument that liberalism undermines the liberties of traditionalists as the “No Alternative Objection”. As Vallier explains the argument, postliberals claim there is no practically-realizable alternative to some kind of “establishment” of a controversial “religion” or philosophy purporting to define the human good. For postliberals, Vallier explains, “impositions seem morally unobjectionable if they’re unavoidable”, making the No Alternative Objection an attractive means of justifying traditionalist-authoritarianism.²⁹⁹

Vallier then specifies what he calls the “No Alternative Formula” as the claim that “there is no alternative to {x} establishment of {y} religion”. As he correctly points out, the argument requires “*tremendous* specification” of both x and y to be cogent, let alone plausible.³⁰⁰ Nevertheless, I believe it can quite easily be repaired to form a coherent argument that is worth examining very seriously. What I will call the No Alternatives Argument captures Vallier’s observation that postliberals claim that there is no alternative to the imposition (“establishment”) of some kind of controversial, comprehensive value system (“religion”).

I will specify x as *coercive imposition in a manner that violates minimal agency and/or free speech rights* (and is therefore anti-liberal), and y as *either traditionalist or progressive views of gender, sexuality, family, end-of-life ethics, and other ethical questions about personal lifestyle*. Thus specified, the No Alternatives Argument claims that the coercive imposition, through anti-liberal means, of either progressive or traditionalist views of personal ethics, is unavoidable.³⁰¹ If true, this would certainly make the coercion involved in views of political morality that advocate the coercive imposition of traditionalist views (I will call these views traditionalist-authoritarian) appear much less morally problematic to traditionalists.

²⁹⁸ See (Wolfe 2022)

²⁹⁹ (Vallier 2024a). There could, of course, be better or worse forms of imposition, assessed either on the basis of the substantive content of *what* is imposed or on the basis of *how* it is imposed. I will address these issues later when presenting the argument in more detail.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. Emphasis original.

³⁰¹ Based on the concepts of traditionalism and progressivism I explained in this thesis’s Introduction, these two broad stances are collectively exhaustive of possible views of personal ethics.

To further specify the claim to which postliberals who support the No Alternatives Argument are committed, postliberals must hold that the realisation of liberalism, which (by definition) protects the minimal agency and free speech rights of both progressives and traditionalists, is impossible. They must therefore hold that the *attempt* to realise liberalism is necessarily self-defeating, and that the only realisable political moralities are either traditionalist-authoritarian ones, which impose traditionalist beliefs about personal morality through coercive means, or progressive-authoritarian ones, which do the same for progressive views.

There are two possible ways in which this claim can be understood. Some postliberals argue that realising liberalism is *conceptually* impossible. These postliberals are committed to the claim that the idea of protecting the minimal agency rights of both progressives and traditionalists is conceptually impossible.³⁰² Attempts to implement liberalism are, for these postliberals, doomed to fail because liberalism, defined as anti-authoritarianism, is an incoherent ideal. Only progressive-authoritarianism and traditionalist-authoritarianism are, for these postliberals, coherent ideals. These postliberals are committed to the further claim that progressivism and liberalism exist in some kind of congruent relationship, such that attempts to implement the conceptually incoherent liberal ideal will collapse into progressive-authoritarianism rather than traditionalist-authoritarianism. These postliberals advance what I call the conceptual No Alternatives Argument.

Other postliberals believe that realising liberalism is conceptually possible but *practically* impossible. These postliberals hold that, although liberalism is a coherent ideal, attempting to implement it will unavoidably, or near-unavoidably, result in the eventual realisation of progressive-authoritarianism instead. These postliberals are committed to some version of the claim that the real-world consequences of attempting to implement liberalism reliably defeat the realisation of liberalism; in other words, that liberalism is coherent but practically self-defeating. This is an empirical claim about the probable effects of real-world political decisions, so I will call this the empirical No Alternatives Argument.

Generically, the No Alternatives Argument can be formalised as follows:

(P1 (The Liberal Decay Thesis)): Attempts to realise liberalism by protecting the free speech and agency rights of both progressives and traditionalists simultaneously will, in any regime, decay into progressive-authoritarianism;

(P2): If the regime must (per P1) violate the basic agency and free speech rights of either traditionalists or progressives, it should make sure that it adopts the *true* conception of the good as the basis of this violation of basic liberties, because the alternative would involve a risk of removing the basic liberty to follow and express the *truth*, which is far worse than removing the equivalent liberty to follow and express falsehood;

³⁰² (Vermeule 2022) makes this claim.

(P3): Traditionalist conceptions of the good (or some specific traditionalist conceptions of the good, e.g. conservative Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, etc.) are *true* (or more true than progressive ones), so, if forced to choose, traditionalists should support a traditionalist-authoritarian regime over a progressive-authoritarian one.

(C): Since they are (per P1) forced to choose between traditionalist- and progressive-authoritarianism, traditionalists should support traditionalist-authoritarianism.

Affirming (C) gets you, for instance, to a position in which the anti-liberal character of Catholic integralism or Christian nationalism has no weight as an objection to these ideologies.

The conceptual and empirical versions of the argument will be distinguished by the reasons they offer for accepting (P1): the conceptual argument holds (P1) is true because liberalism is an incoherent ideal, while the empirical version holds it is true because of some empirically predictable unintended consequences of attempting to realise liberalism.

Formulated as above, the No Alternatives Argument is valid. (P2) seems trivially true.³⁰³ (P3) is outside the scope of this thesis, and of most plausible forms of liberal theory.³⁰⁴ The argument's soundness therefore turns on (P1) (the Liberal Decay Thesis). If the Liberal Decay Thesis is true, the attempt to realise liberalism is either certain or at least highly likely to increasingly restrict the basic liberties of traditionalists and thereby to decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes.

The burden on liberals who wish to refute the No Alternatives Argument, then, is to show that (P1) is false—that liberal justice is possible and we are not doomed to a zero-sum agonistic struggle between mutually uncomprehending sects. If this burden cannot be met, some liberals might worry, with Rawls (quoting Kant) “whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live upon the earth”.³⁰⁵

In Part 2 of this thesis (Chapters 4 and 5), I will examine the reasons these thinkers find (P1) to be plausible, and systematically evaluate the truth of (P1). For now, however, my aim is simply to show that the No Alternatives Argument is central to the postliberal arguments of Deneen, Vermeule, and Hazony.

Deneen presents a wide variety of arguments against liberalism, and *Why Liberalism Failed* does not contain the No Alternatives Argument. Instead, Deneen concludes the book with a

³⁰³ A complication arises in the case of traditionalist conceptions of the good that demand restricting the basic negative liberty to follow *other* traditionalist conceptions of the good. (For instance Catholic integralism would in principle allow the state to place Protestants on trial for heresy (Vallier 2023, 83)). For the most part, however, postliberals (even avowed Catholic integralists) write as if the salient choice is between progressive-authoritarianism and a generic, ecumenical form of traditionalist-authoritarianism. I will assume they are correct about this for the sake of simplicity.

³⁰⁴ It would be highly damaging for the liberal project if it could only proceed by assuming certain controversial traditionalist views of the good are *false*!

³⁰⁵ (Rawls 2005, lxii)

judgement that the desirable destination of politics after liberalism “is unknown and unforeseeable”, requiring “generations” to discern fully.³⁰⁶ Eventually, Deneen hoped, a “better theory of politics... might ultimately emerge” from local “experience and practice”.³⁰⁷ The only hint of the No Alternatives Argument in this work lies in Deneen’s claim to observe “increasingly... active government... efforts to control religious and familial practice and belief”.³⁰⁸

However, Deneen’s position appears to have evolved, coming much closer to explicitly embracing traditionalist-authoritarianism, in response to a partially critical review of *Why Liberalism Failed* by Vermeule, which centred around a version of the No Alternatives Argument. In this review, Vermeule claims to identify a “methodological error” in Deneen’s account of “the motivations of liberal agents”, which he thinks led Deneen to embrace a conclusion that is in deep tension with the premises of his own analysis.³⁰⁹

Since, according to Vermeule, Deneen’s book recognises that liberal agents are driven by a “fighting, evangelistic faith”, Deneen ought to have recognised that his call for renewed local practices of virtue and reflection, eventually leading to a new political theory, would be impossible to implement under a liberal regime, which would only allow non-liberal local communities to exist “for purely practical reasons”.³¹⁰ Liberal agents, claims Vermeule, are deeply and intensely (even if unconsciously) committed to the universal imposition of a “substantive comprehensive theory of the common good”. Thus, if any of the local practices that the conclusion of *Why Liberalism Failed* called for ever began to challenge the hegemony of this liberal (progressive) theory of the common good, liberals would suppress these practices.³¹¹ Therefore, argues Vermeule, there is no alternative to liberalism that does not involve seeking to impose a *traditionalist* substantive and comprehensive theory of the common good. Vermeule’s review was ambivalent about traditionalist coercion, claiming that coercion cannot be meaningfully distinguished from persuasion.³¹² Elsewhere, however, Vermeule has condemned “the error that it is possible to refrain from coercion”,³¹³ and described “integralism or... political Catholicism” as “the only... genuinely political” alternative to liberalism”, precisely because of its willingness to embrace coercion.³¹⁴

We can see, then, how Vermeule makes the No Alternatives Argument central to the case for embracing a genuinely anti-liberal, rather than localist, alternative to purported liberal hegemony. In response to this review, Deneen shifted his position to one that favours collective, state-led attempts to apply traditionalist conceptions of flourishing, a project on which his later

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 182

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 183

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 189

³⁰⁹ (Vermeule 2018b)

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid. Here, Vermeule considers the distinction between coercive and non-coercive means “so fragile as to be nearly useless”.

³¹³ (Vermeule 2022c)

³¹⁴ (Vermeule 2023c)

Regime Change expanded.³¹⁵ Deneen also came to embrace the No Alternatives Argument, plausibly in response to Vermeule’s discussion of his work. In *Regime Change*, Deneen claims to witness a “tyrannical liberalism... that is not a contradiction of liberalism but its fulfillment”,³¹⁶ which targets “religious believers”³¹⁷ with a “white-hot fervor” to ensure “individual *preference* must always prevail”, i.e. that progressive conceptions of flourishing are imposed on the population.³¹⁸ Elsewhere, in a response to the claim that traditionalist communities can seek “refuge” from progressive-liberal coercion without challenging the regime, Deneen has claimed that the liberal regime is deeply committed to “forcing churches, religious organizations, and other traditional communities to conform to progressivist ideology”.³¹⁹ Deneen, then, like Vermeule, makes the No Alternatives Argument central to his case against liberalism.³²⁰

Deneen mentions, as an example of this purported coercive imposition of progressivism, an FBI investigation into conservative Catholic communities.³²¹ It is possible, however, to generate other examples of actual or proposed policies, that purportedly constitute coercive progressivism, of the kind that Deneen, Vermeule, and other proponents of the No Alternatives Argument seem to have in mind. Removing the ‘ministerial exception’ that protects religious organisations from anti-discrimination requirements when hiring religious officials, for instance, would seemingly make it impossible for traditionalists to legally organise religious communities in line with the moral and metaphysical beliefs about sex and gender that many traditionalists affirm, plausibly violating their basic agency rights.³²² Revoking parental custody in cases where parents do not affirm a child’s transgender identification would seemingly make it impossible for many traditionalist parents to raise their children in line with their beliefs about sex and gender, again plausibly violating basic agency rights.³²³ Banning even “casual conversation” and “private prayer” that aims to persuade non-heterosexual people to change or not act on their sexual desires, under the heading of a ban on “conversion therapy”, would unambiguously violate many traditionalists’ basic agency and free speech rights.³²⁴

A complexity, however, arises from the fact that Deneen, unlike Vermeule, has never expressly endorsed restricting progressives’ basic agency and free speech rights. Indeed, in an interview with Ezra Klein, when pressed on the specifics of a postliberal policy agenda, Deneen would not

³¹⁵ (Deneen 2023).

³¹⁶ (Deneen 2023b, 63)

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 252

³¹⁹ (Deneen 2024, 171)

³²⁰ I will analyse Deneen’s version of the No Alternatives Argument in more detail in chapter 3.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² Some liberal theorists support removing the exception. See e.g. (Chambers 2024, 63–8). Although many versions of liberalism affirm extensive anti-discrimination laws, removing the ‘ministerial exception’ would seem, *prima facie*, to violate basic agency rights.

³²³ See (Moschella 2023, 1563–4). Minimal liberalism is compatible with different views of the relative weighting of parents’ and children’s rights, so I am not committed to the view that this policy would violate basic agency rights, but it is clearly the kind of policy these postliberals have in mind.

³²⁴ See (Williams 2024b). Some activists have explicitly called for banning “casual conversation” and “private prayer” under the heading of “conversion therapy”. I discuss this example in more detail in chapter 5. Obviously, banning abusive medical practices under this heading does *not* violate basic agency rights.

endorse anything more coercive than a slightly longer mandatory waiting period for divorce.³²⁵ Because of this ambiguity, scholars disagree over how far Deneen is committed to traditionalist-authoritarianism. As I have already noted, Sleat argues that Deneen's rhetoric belies his practical commitment to liberal values of toleration and pluralism.³²⁶ On the other hand, Patterson believes that Deneen is really committed to integralism and that his reticence about coercion is strategic.³²⁷

I disagree with Patterson's claim that Deneen is committed to integralism, but I will not discuss this claim here—if true, it would reinforce, rather than challenge, my claim about Deneen's centrality to anti-liberal postliberalism. Sleat's claim, however, does challenge my interpretation. Through a systematic study of his writings and public statements, Sleat demonstrates that Deneen has never explicitly endorsed policies that would contradict my conceptions of minimal agency and free speech rights.³²⁸ Even Deneen's support for a "moral media" and bans on pornography would not, Sleat argues, constitute "authoritarianism" because they would not involve wider content-based restrictions on the expression of ideas.³²⁹

There are, of course, two ways to interpret Deneen's reticence about anti-liberalism: either "coyness" about the full authoritarian implications of his ideas is at work, or else, as Sleat argues, Deneen "envisages" his ideas "pursued within a framework we would broadly recognise as liberal... even if its underlying philosophy would be conservative".³³⁰ As far as it goes, I find Sleat's analysis of Deneen's commitments persuasive, but I do not think that this is a reason to remove Deneen from my trio of central anti-liberal postliberals. If, as Sleat claims, Deneen is not committed to genuine anti-liberalism, we might wonder why he makes the No Alternatives Argument against *liberalism* in such strident language. Perhaps the tension could be reconciled as follows: Deneen thinks that attempts to realise *neutralist* or *progressive-perfectionist* liberalism will unavoidably decay into progressive-authoritarianism, but that *traditionalist-perfectionist* liberalism will *not* necessarily decay into authoritarianism of either kind. Whether Deneen would agree with this is pure speculation.³³¹

However, as I explained in the previous part of this chapter, despite Deneen's reticence about endorsing specific anti-liberal policies, his ideology contains no rationale for avoiding anti-liberalism and potential rationales for imposing it. I think this justifies me in treating

³²⁵ (Klein and Deneen 2022)

³²⁶ (Sleat 2025, 47–60)

³²⁷ (Howes 2025, 02:50–03:15)

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54–8

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55. I agree with Sleat, whose implicit conception of the minimal threshold for liberalism is similar to mine, that pornography bans are compatible with minimal liberalism. To demonstrate this would involve showing that, even if porn communicates ideas, there are no ideas that can *only* be communicated through porn; and thus, that banning porn falls under the regulation of the 'time, manner, and place' of speech, not its content. For a convincing argument that regulating 'obscenity' as a manner of speech can be distinguished from content-based regulation, see (Finnis 1967).

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ This interpretation would also place Deneen, ironically, close to some versions of the fusionist conservatism he rhetorically decries.

Deneen's articulation of the No Alternatives Argument as central to the genuinely anti-liberal postliberal arguments that the next section of this thesis will evaluate.

Finally, the No Alternatives Argument is also central to Hazony's postliberalism. In Hazony's 2020 *Quillette* article 'The Challenge of Marxism',³³² which was reincluded in his 2022 book *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*,³³³ Hazony argues for a version of the Liberal Decay Thesis and thereby for the No Alternatives Argument. Hazony describes the ideology into which liberalism is collapsing as a form of "Marxism" or "neo-Marxism".³³⁴ I have used the term progressive-authoritarianism to capture the idea of the authoritarian imposition of progressive views of human flourishing, which is clearly one of the core features of what Hazony calls neo-Marxism.³³⁵

In this article, Hazony defends the Liberal Decay Thesis. Hazony argues here that liberalism is unable to offer sufficient reasons for defending liberal interpretations of liberalism's core concepts, such as freedom and equality. He then further argues that progressive-authoritarianism is able to offer a strong reason for its own, more demanding interpretation of these concepts, namely its assumption that all group-based power relations are evidence of oppression. Therefore, in Hazony's view, liberalism is unable to respond to rhetorical challenges from the progressive-authoritarianism that he labels "Marxism" or "neo-Marxism".³³⁶

Thus, "liberalism has a tendency to transfer power to Marxists within a few decades".³³⁷ Hazony describes the mechanism as an "endless dance of liberalism and Marxism" that "moves only in one direction."³³⁸ This argument, that liberalism is in imminent danger of collapsing into neo-Marxism, is repeated by Hazony frequently and is central to his rhetorical demands that liberalism be abandoned in favour of his idea of "conservative democracy" lest liberalism be replaced by something far worse.³³⁹ Because of liberalism's unavoidable decay into "neo-Marxism", i.e. progressive-authoritarianism, argues Hazony, a stable regime that is not to become neo-Marxist cannot be liberal. "Conservative democracy", a variety of traditionalist-perfectionism that accords some value to freedom but balances it against other values such as "nationalism", "family and congregation", and "public religion", is Hazony's preferred alternative to progressive-authoritarianism.³⁴⁰ The No Alternatives Argument, then, is crucial to Hazony's argument for conservative democracy because it purports to show that liberal democracy is not a stable alternative, but rather will decay unavoidably into progressive-authoritarianism. If traditionalist conceptions of human flourishing are better than

³³² (Hazony 2020)

³³³ (Hazony 2022, 339–57)

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ I will not discuss the merits or otherwise of identifying progressive-authoritarianism with Marxism in this thesis.

³³⁶ Ibid., 343–4

³³⁷ Ibid., 348

³³⁸ Ibid., 351

³³⁹ Ibid., 358–9

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 362–70

progressive ones, as Hazony assumes, it is therefore easy to show the superiority of conservative democracy to “neo-Marxist” progressive authoritarianism. And as I showed previously, when discussing National Conservatism, although Hazony (like Deneen) does not explicitly renounce the protection of minimal agency and free speech rights for progressives, his view of political morality contains no clear rationale for protecting them and potential rationales for not doing so, so it is fair to characterise National Conservatism and conservative democracy as varieties of traditionalist-authoritarianism.

III: The Genealogy of Postliberalism

I have demonstrated that the No Alternatives Argument is a distinctive postliberal critique of liberalism, and that it is central to the arguments of the three postliberal thinkers (Deneen, Vermeule, and Hazony) on whom—because of their public prominence, the clarity with which they articulate the No Alternatives Argument, and its centrality to their work—the rest of this thesis will focus.

Demonstrating the novelty of the No Alternatives Argument is more complicated. As I noted above, comprehensively showing that no significant traditionalist anti-liberal thinkers articulated the No Alternatives Argument prior to the emergence of contemporary postliberalism would be a very difficult task.

Therefore, I will instead offer a brief intellectual genealogy of postliberalism, focusing specifically on antecedents of the No Alternatives Argument, to show why traditionalist anti-liberals began to be attracted by the argument only towards the end of the twentieth century, and why this attraction increased substantially after the mid-2010s.³⁴¹ In the course of offering this genealogy, I will also show why Patterson’s claim that the postliberal critique of liberalism is substantively identical with early-twentieth-century Catholic anti-liberalism is mistaken, even if we confine our attention to Catholic varieties of contemporary postliberalism.³⁴²

Patterson bases this judgement on the fact that Catholic postliberals propose similar positive, substantive accounts of political morality to those of early-twentieth-century Catholic anti-liberal thinkers.³⁴³ I largely accept Patterson’s claim here. However, as this genealogy will show, the No Alternatives Argument is an original argument of contemporary postliberalism, which, in fact, emerged for reasons deeply rooted in cultural and ideological conditions that took root in the major liberal democracies only from the 1960s onwards. Even if the constructive arguments of postliberalism often reiterate earlier forms of Catholic anti-liberalism, the *postliberal critique of liberalism* remains distinct and novel.

To understand the features of the specifically post-1960s cultural and political conditions that make the No Alternatives Argument appealing, we should first note the argument’s

³⁴¹ I offer a full genealogy in (Williams and da Silva 2025)

³⁴² (Patterson 2024)

³⁴³ Ibid.

second-order nature. A *first-order* traditionalist anti-liberal argument would criticise liberalism for failing to promote the correct, traditionalist values among citizens. First-order arguments would claim that liberalism's effects are bad for citizens as judged from the standpoint of a more-or-less comprehensive traditionalist conception of flourishing. Such arguments might claim that liberalism undermines marital fidelity or religious faith, for instance, and that traditionalist coercion is justified in order to shore up this fidelity and faith. The No Alternatives Argument, however, does not rest on a claim about the simple badness of the effects of liberalism as judged from such a standpoint; it rests on a claim about the inability of traditionalists to live as traditionalists under a liberal regime. *It is not that we wish to coerce progressives simply because progressivism is a bad view of human flourishing*, postliberals can say, *but rather that, much as we may regret this fact, it is unavoidable that someone will end up being coerced, and it is better that people are coerced into following the true view of human flourishing than a false one.*

It is, I think, highly plausible that much of the appeal of this second-order style of argument derives from the way in which the No Alternatives Argument appears to *unmask* liberal pretences. The Liberal Decay Thesis asserts that liberalism's claim to respect the rights of citizens irrespective of their conceptions of flourishing is in some crucial sense illusory. Postliberals frequently emphasise the way in which they are, as they see it, exposing liberalism's deceptive self-image.³⁴⁴ In order for this style of argument to attract traditionalists, it first be true that liberalism *actually purports* to be in at least some weak sense neutral between conceptions of human flourishing, i.e. to at least respect the minimal agency and free speech rights of citizens regardless of their conceptions of flourishing. I will show below that this became true of the dominant strands of liberal theory only in the 1950s.

This second-order style of argument will, I suspect, have its appeal further increased if most traditionalists have been saturated in a political culture in which liberalism is hegemonic, precisely because appealing to the unavoidability of coercion softens the intuitive discomfort with coercion that persons saturated in such a culture usually feel. Thus, a second necessary (or near-necessary) condition for the No Alternative Argument's appeal to traditionalists is that all the major traditionalist comprehensive doctrines in a society are committed to some kind of liberalism. I will show below that this became true in the major liberal democracies only with the Catholic Church's official embrace of liberalism in the 1960s.

Finally, the salience of the No Alternatives Argument derives in large part from the salience of political debates about the dimensions of human flourishing about which it purports that the coercive imposition of some view or other is unavoidable. These dimensions concern religion, family, sexuality, and gender. I will show that political debates about these dimensions of flourishing became salient only with the cultural upheavals of the 1960s (with the exception of religion, which became salient in a new and distinct way), and that they became enormously more salient, in some important respects, in the 2010s. Cumulatively, my genealogical account will show that the No Alternatives Argument could not have had wide appeal prior to around the 1970s and that its appeal increased enormously in the 2010s.

³⁴⁴ E.g. (Vermeule 2017b, 2023b; Feser 2024; Deneen 2022)

First, let us consider the history of liberalism. As recent scholars of this history such as Alan Kahan and Helena Rosenblatt have shown, nineteenth-century liberal thinkers typically viewed their liberalism as a doctrine aimed at the comprehensive moral improvement of humanity and requiring some form of religion, or at least religiously inspired morality. Liberals variously appealed to religious doctrines such as liberal Protestantism, Freemasonry, or Comte's 'religion of humanity' to provide both an intellectual grounding for, and a means to realise, this moral improvement.³⁴⁵ Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism, then, was typically not only 'comprehensive' but explicitly grounded in a comprehensive doctrine with much more substantive and specific content—often including a specific religious doctrine—than that found in the comprehensive liberalism of the late twentieth-century. It is also important to note that comprehensive doctrines grounding liberalism, such as Comtean religion, typically had both progressive and traditionalist content; they differed from the orthodox Catholicism of the time in being relatively *more* progressive (i.e. giving less weight to epistemic deference and/or strong evaluation), not in rejecting *all* traditionalist ideas.

The period between the late nineteenth-century and the early Cold War, however, saw liberal ideology undergo a major shift in a less perfectionist and less traditionalist direction. Alan Kahan describes this process as an abandonment, or at least deliberate weakening, by liberals of their own ideology's "moral pillar". Whereas early liberalism, as we have seen, was typically based on a religious (but often not orthodoxly Christian) comprehensive doctrine of some kind and a somewhat traditionalist view of the family, twentieth-century liberalism increasingly began to abandon this moral "pillar" and ground itself purely in 'political' and economic arguments.³⁴⁶ Samuel Moyn's recent study of "Cold War liberalism" views this process as culminating in the 1950s, when liberal intellectuals like Isaiah Berlin attempted to ground liberalism without appealing to any specific, substantive views of human flourishing.³⁴⁷

Moyn views this turning—of "*Liberalism Against Itself*"—as tragic, because it led liberals to forego the chance to ground their ideology on a specific, substantive, but *progressive* comprehensive doctrine.³⁴⁸ The historical narrative I am developing here, however, is compatible with a wide range of normative evaluations of the developments I am describing. Conservative thinkers have noted the same detachment of liberalism from specific and substantive views of human flourishing, but identified the real tragedy as the separation of liberalism from the *traditionalist* elements of its comprehensive moral foundations. Allan Bloom, for instance, described, in the 1980s, the separation of popular understandings of liberalism from specific, substantive, comprehensive moral foundations as involving the spread of a "relativism" that impoverished individuals' inner lives and would eventually undermine the

³⁴⁵ (Kahan 2023, 13–17; Rosenblatt 2021, 41–88).

³⁴⁶ (Kahan 2023, 417)

³⁴⁷ (Moyn 2024, 1–4; 53–8). Berlin's value-pluralism is a *substantive* claim about human flourishing but it deliberately avoids a determinate *specification* of the first-order features of a flourishing life.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 171–6. There were always progressive elements within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism, of course.

appeal of liberalism itself.³⁴⁹ Similarly, and more recently, R. R. Reno has argued that post-World War II liberalism witnessed an abandonment of the “strong gods” that grounded political values in substantive conceptions of flourishing, leading to a growing culture of *anomie*.³⁵⁰ Historians of liberalism like Kahan and Moyn are describing the intellectual origins of the same cultural phenomena these conservative critics bemoaned.

This means, of course, that traditionalists could not see any appeal in trying to *unmask* the covert progressivism of liberalism prior to the Cold War, because this progressivism was both already *overt* and explicitly *limited* and incomplete, co-existing as it did as a component of varieties of liberalism grounded in comprehensive doctrines (like liberal Protestantism) that contain both progressive and traditionalist elements. The No Alternatives Argument derives its cultural appeal from the co-existence of purportedly neutralist liberal theory with seemingly progressive-tilted liberal practice, and neutralism did not become central to liberal theory until the Cold War.

Second, the history of the Catholic Church’s changing attitude to liberalism is well known, but bears briefly recapping. The No Alternatives Argument finds appeal as a discursive move among Catholics intellectuals only in the Catholic intellectual environment that emerged after Vatican II’s *Dignitatus Humanae*. Prior to the issuing of this Declaration in 1965, confessional authoritarianism was the Catholic Church’s official political ideal.³⁵¹ The Church had accepted pragmatic toleration of other regime-types since at least the 1890s, but official Magisterial teaching held integralism to be the ultimate ideal.³⁵²

This shaped the thinking of both liberals and Catholic anti-liberals in important ways. Catholic anti-liberals did not need to ‘unmask’ liberalism as unacceptably anti-Catholic, anti-religious, or progressive in the preconiliar world, because they could justify their anti-liberalism with a straightforward appeal to Magisterial authority. Liberals, on the other hand, generally did not conceal a deep animus toward Catholicism, or distinguish between anti-Catholic measures that might be justified as a means of what we might anachronistically call the ‘containment’ of anti-liberalism and those which expressed a perfectionist desire to reduce adherence to, or to eliminate, Catholicism.³⁵³ Liberals, faced with a major and very powerful comprehensive doctrine (indeed, a dominant doctrine in some of the countries and regions in which liberalism emerged), had powerful—albeit often subrational, insofar as distinguishing between Catholic worship and Catholic politics was conceptually possible—reasons not to adopt a stance of purported neutrality between comprehensive doctrines. This further reinforced the tendency, noted above, of liberal theory to eschew claims to neutrality and to openly promote specific comprehensive doctrines, often with religious content, thereby contributing to the limited appeal of ‘unmasking’ strategies among traditionalists.

³⁴⁹ (Bloom 2008 [1987], 25). Of course, doctrines like Berlin’s value pluralism did not entail ethical relativism. Still, Bloom was plausibly correct that vulgarised and simplified popular understandings of these doctrines could seem very close to relativism.

³⁵⁰ (Reno 2019)

³⁵¹ See (Vallier 2023a, 53–91) for a summary of pre-Vatican II Catholic anti-liberalism.

³⁵² Leo XIII endorsed co-operation with the secular French Third Republic in 1892. See (Xiii 2020 [1892])

³⁵³ (Kahan 2023, 181–98; Rosenblatt 2021, 194–220).

Third, the aim of the No Alternatives Argument to unmask liberalism's covert commitment to progressivism derived enormously increased appeal among traditionalists from the cultural 'revolution' of the 1960s, liberal support for which seems to have been a necessary condition of the plausibility, for some traditionalists, of the claim that liberal practice is tilted towards progressivism. This decade, as is well known, witnessed the rise to salience of a new set of issues relating to sex, religion, and the family, all of which tended to divide traditionalists from progressives. Hugh McLeod identifies a sudden change in public perceptions of the religious and moral culture of nearly all Western countries, arguing that the shift in perceptions was abrupt and can be very precisely periodised: "between 1963 and 1966... most people *believed* they were moving into a 'pluralist, 'post-Christian', or even 'secular' society".³⁵⁴ Callum Brown, similarly, identifies a "remarkably sudden and culturally violent event" in Britain involving changes in attitudes to premarital sex and religion.³⁵⁵ "From 1963 most... indices of religiosity... enter free fall",³⁵⁶ as the acceptability of premarital sex "destroyed the entire house of cards" of an earlier religio-moral consensus.³⁵⁷

Even if McLeod and Brown overstate the rapidity and suddenness of change, it is evident that the divide between progressive and traditionalist attitudes to religion and sex became far more culturally and politically charged as a result of the 'long nineteen-sixties'. The changes in public culture were closely connected to political reforms promoted by various progressives and liberals, including the introduction of no-fault divorce, the legalisation of private homosexual conduct and abortion, and (in the United States) the ending of prayer in public schools.³⁵⁸ The extent to which these newly salient political campaigns generated salient new political cleavages varied greatly between countries, with the prominence of the 'religious right' far greater in the United States than elsewhere. All the major English-speaking democracies, however, saw a traditionalist-progressive cleavage become salient at a *cultural* level. This cleavage cut across the lines of the earlier cleavage between traditionalist communities that officially opposed liberalism (chiefly Roman Catholicism) and the somewhat less traditionalist comprehensive doctrines (like liberal Protestantism) that endorsed liberalism, because almost all religious communities were at least somewhat internally divided on these newly salient issues. Thus, Hunter describes the new progressive-traditionalist cultural cleavage as one that "cuts *across* the old lines of conflict" (emphasis original), making "the distinctions... between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews... virtually irrelevant."³⁵⁹

Moreover, the new progressive-traditionalist 'culture war' was, for the most part, a war fought *within* liberalism, by two sides who largely accepted a minimally liberal regime. The major exception to this generalisation is the defence by some traditionalists of laws that criminalised

³⁵⁴ (McLeod 2007, 241)

³⁵⁵ (Brown 2009, 176)

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 188

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 180. Compare Philip Larkin's *Annus Mirabilis*, which begins: "Sexual intercourse began / in nineteen sixty-three..." (Larkin 1974, 29)

³⁵⁸ (McLeod 2007, 215–239)

³⁵⁹ (Hunter 1991, 43)

private homosexual acts between consenting adults.³⁶⁰ However, on most of the political issues that comprised the new culture war, social conservatives took political positions that were compatible with minimal liberalism. Nothing in minimal liberalism requires a no-fault divorce regime, publicly-funded distribution of contraceptives to unmarried persons, recognition of same-sex marriage, or a right to abortion.³⁶¹ Jon A. Shields has shown that, between the 1970s and the 2000s, most of the activist movements comprising America's 'Christian Right', often alleged by liberal theorists to represent a flagrantly illiberal political agenda,³⁶² in fact took pains to argue for their positions from premises consistent with minimal liberalism.³⁶³

Proto-postliberal arguments would begin to emerge once this new cultural cleavage had become established. These arguments would seek to 'unmask' a liberalism purportedly neutral about the questions of personal morality raised, or impinged upon, by the new culture war as covertly collusive with progressivism. These arguments would later, after social conservatives suffered a series of cultural defeats in the 2010s, be radicalised and taken to imply that liberalism was so unremittingly (but covertly) hostile to traditionalism as to unavoidably collapse into progressive-authoritarianism. Thus, as I will show below, it took until the second half of the 2010s for the Liberal Decay Thesis to be clearly articulated by social conservatives, who had, for the most part, hitherto been committed to some variety of liberalism.

III.i: From Proto-Postliberalism to the No Alternatives Argument

It is plausible, though speculative, to think that the cultural and political conditions I have described above—hegemonic neutralist liberalism, the end of the Catholic-liberal mutual hostility, and the salience of the progressive-traditionalist cleavage on religion and sex—created psychological pressure for traditionalist anti-liberals to switch from first to second-order modes of critique. Since liberalism was no longer overtly hostile to any major traditionalist comprehensive doctrine, and since progressivism seemed to be spreading hand-in-hand with liberalism through the social reforms of the long nineteen-sixties, traditionalists now had a powerful incentive to 'unmask' liberalism as *false*ly neutral and covert form of progressive-perfectionism, or—as would become the postliberal claim in the 2010s—progressive-authoritarianism.

Corroboration of this psychological pressure can be seen in the change in rhetoric of outstanding and representative traditionalist anti-liberal thinkers before and after the 1960s.

³⁶⁰ (Jaffa 2018b, 50)

³⁶¹ Whether protecting minimal agency implies a right to abortion, or conversely forbids permitting abortion, depends on whether (or when) a foetus is a person with agency rights. Minimal liberalism *per se* is silent on this question.

³⁶² See e.g. Dworkin's description of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority movement: "they know what kind of sex is bad... that contraception is sin, and that abortion is capital sin. They think the rest of us should be forced to practice what they preach." (Dworkin 1983). Dworkin may have been right about Falwell, but his Moral Majority was highly unrepresentative of the rest of the 'Christian Right'. Shields (2009, 46) observes that such groups came "late to the culture wars", and that "their militancy alienates [most] conservative Christians".

³⁶³ (Shields 2009)

Joseph de Maistre, writing at the turn of the 19th century, is typically regarded as the most influential thinker of the traditionalist anti-liberal right.³⁶⁴ He devoted considerable effort to demonstrating that liberal regimes, which he assumes are intrinsically coercive towards Catholicism, inevitably collapse into chaos and violence, from which a traditionalist anti-liberal regime will re-emerge.³⁶⁵ Maistre does not, however, even evaluate the claim that Catholicism and other comprehensive doctrines can or should co-exist under a liberal regime, because this was not a salient position in the debates in which he was participating. He thus does not formulate, or evaluate, anything resembling Liberal Decay Thesis. The same is true of later outstanding traditionalist anti-liberals like Louis Veuillot (writing in 1874)³⁶⁶ or Louis Billot (in 1922).³⁶⁷

The comparison to one of the most noted (and radical) traditionalist anti-liberals of the 1970s is instructive. The Calvinist theologian Rousas John Rushdoony's 1973 *Institutes of Biblical Law*, which called for the application of Old Testament Mosaic law in the United States,³⁶⁸ prominently contains a primitive version of the No Alternatives Argument. Rushdoony claims that "law is inescapably religious" because it "establishes... the ultimate concerns of a culture", and that therefore "no disestablishment of religion... is possible in any society".³⁶⁹ The opening section of Rushdoony's book, which is the only part of the work which attempts to justify his overall system (the rest is detailed Biblical hermeneutics in relation to specific points of civil law), devotes three of its fifteen pages to laying out this primitive version of the No Alternatives Argument.³⁷⁰

Rushdoony was not a sophisticated critic of liberalism. A far more sophisticated attempt to 'unmask' liberalism's covert progressivism, which eventually issued in a more refined version of the No Alternatives Argument, would develop in the course of an intra-Catholic debate about the nature of American liberalism in the 1980s and '90s.

This debate pitted a group of proto-postliberal thinkers, whose most prominent member was the philosopher and theologian David L. Schindler, and whom Mark Lowery (following Russell Shaw) calls "cultural radicals", against a group of thinkers usually referred to as the Catholic "neoconservatives".³⁷¹ The Catholic neoconservatives—sometimes derisively referred to by their opponents as "Whig Thomists"—comprised a group of public intellectuals associated with the ecumenical religious-conservative magazine *First Things*, founded in 1990, including the

³⁶⁴ (Holmes 1996, 13–16)

³⁶⁵ (Maistre 2012 [1796], 10–18)

³⁶⁶ (Veuillot 2023 [1874], 71–4)

³⁶⁷ (Billot 2020 [1922])

³⁶⁸ (Rushdoony 1973, 3–5)

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 13–14

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13–15. The contemporary ultra-conservative Calvinist theologian Doug Wilson paraphrases Rushdoony's nascent No Alternatives Argument as "not whether, but which" in his call for a political restoration of "mere Christendom". See (Wilson 2023, 142): "It is not whether we will impose morality, but rather which morality we will impose". The argument, citing Rushdoony, is repeated three times in Wilson's short book (also at 76, 98).

³⁷¹ (Lowery 1998). 'Neoconservative', a label originally embraced by thinkers who identified their conservatism with the impulse to conserve something modern, is an apt label for conservative Catholics who wished to conserve the combination of social traditionalism and political liberalism affirmed at Vatican II. See (Kupfer 2022) on neoconservatism in general.

magazine's founder Richard John Neuhaus, as well as the political analysts George Weigel and Michael Novak.³⁷²

The Catholic neoconservatives sought, in the American context, to develop a traditionalist public philosophy for a religiously plural and broadly liberal regime. This public philosophy, articulated in Neuhaus's 1987 *The Catholic Moment*, would take particular inspiration from Catholic thought, but would also draw on conservative Protestantism and Judaism to offer an account of political morality grounded in the purportedly universally knowable truths of natural law but prescinding from specific moral and theological claims derived from revelation.³⁷³ The neoconservative public philosophy would be socially conservative, calling for the public but largely non-coercive upholding of traditionalist Christian and Jewish views of family and sexuality, but friendly towards a broadly liberal political regime. These thinkers, bemoaning American jurisprudential decisions that had advanced progressivism by secularising public schools and purporting to discover new Constitutional rights to abortion or public provision of contraceptives, viewed this turn away from traditionalist-perfectionism as an aberration in the Anglo-American liberal tradition, when rightly understood as continuous with the classical natural law tradition.³⁷⁴

The proto-postliberals challenged this neoconservative interpretation of liberalism, and, in doing so, engaged the neoconservatives in a debate about the nature of liberalism that foreshadowed, and influenced, today's postliberal debate about liberalism's attitude to the rights of traditionalists. In the 1980s and '90s, David L. Schindler (the father of the D. C. Schindler, discussed in part I.i.a of this chapter) developed a sophisticated critique of liberalism that purported, in the style of postliberalism as opposed to the 'classical' traditionalist right, to unmask liberalism's pretension to theological neutrality and broader neutrality between comprehensive doctrines.

Schindler took issue with Weigel's claim that American liberalism was hospitable to and encouraging of authentic religiosity,³⁷⁵ and claimed that the religious liberty afforded by liberal constitutionalism and prized by the 'neoconservatives' was a sham, based on a godless anthropology unmoored from grace and forming citizens incapable of true communion even if they performed the outward rights of worship. Schindler also claimed that the 'neoconservative' defence of a conservative version of liberalism grounded in natural law rested on a faulty metaphysics: because, in Schindler's view, grace and nature could not be analytically separated, a natural law-based liberalism was an impossibility.³⁷⁶ Schindler thus anticipated today's No Alternatives Argument in that he claimed to unmask the purportedly neutral liberties protected by liberalism as covertly in alliance with progressive conceptions of flourishing.

³⁷² (Russell 2021). "Whig Thomists" alludes to the Catholic liberal Lord Acton's claim that Thomas Aquinas was "the first Whig". See (Novak 1990) for a defence of this claim by a leading Catholic neoconservative.

³⁷³ (Neuhaus 1987). Neuhaus was formally still a Lutheran at the time of publication, and was received into the Catholic Church in 1990.

³⁷⁴ (Novak 1998, 774)

³⁷⁵ (Weigel 1988)

³⁷⁶ (Schindler 1996, 43–88)

Schindler did not, however, claim that liberalism was committed to undermining the basic agency and free speech rights of traditionalists and therefore did not call for its replacement by a fully anti-liberal regime. Thus, I call Schindler's position *proto*-postliberalism because it represents the first sophisticated attempt to 'unmask' purportedly neutral liberalism as covertly progressive.

The 2010s saw social and religious conservatives suffer a series of defeats, both legal and (apparently) cultural, over same-sex marriage and gender identity. The decade also witnessed the rise to prominence in left-of-centre circles of an ideology Kaufmann describes as "progressive extremism" (or "woke"), which appeared to combine radical progressivism on family, sexuality, and gender issues with a new intolerance of dissenting views.³⁷⁷ Rising levels of social and cultural censorship of traditionalist views began to alarm these same religious and social conservatives.³⁷⁸

In this radically changing cultural environment, the Catholic neoconservative claim that the structure of the liberal regime (American or otherwise) was fundamentally friendly to traditionalist religion began to seem increasingly implausible to religious and social conservatives, appearing to vindicate Schindler's warnings. As America's cultural mainstream seemed to move ever further from the mores demanded by Catholic conceptions of natural law, many religious conservatives hitherto in the 'Whig Thomist' camp began to move in a radical direction, increasingly seeing the project of Neuhaus, Weigel, and Novak as a catastrophic failure. Indeed, the magnitude of the shift on America's religious conservative right is represented by the gulf between Neuhaus, the founding editor of *First Things*, and the current editor R. R. Reno, who has defended anti-liberal varieties of postliberalism and even a kind of (extremely loosely defined) 'integralism'.³⁷⁹

By the mid-2010s, then, with the rise of apparent cultural intolerance of traditionalist views, the Liberal Decay Thesis began to appear plausible to many traditionalists, and this is why we see the No Alternatives Argument appear in its fully developed form in the second half of this decade in the work of thinkers like Deneen, Vermeule, and Hazony.

In sum, the social and cultural conditions in which the No Alternatives Argument appeared appealing to traditionalists were not in place until the 1970s, and the Liberal Decay Thesis began to widely appear plausible to traditionalists only in the 2010s.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the universe of arguments described by their own supporters or by others as 'postliberal'. From this universe, which contains both positive arguments for distinct accounts of political morality and critiques of liberalism, it has identified the distinct, novel

³⁷⁷ (Kaufmann 2024a)

³⁷⁸ See e.g. (Lukianoff and Schlott 2023)

³⁷⁹ (Reno 2019, 2018)

postliberal critique of liberalism, which purports to justify a genuinely anti-liberal alternative, as the No Alternatives Argument, which claims that liberalism inevitably decays into progressive-authoritarianism and must therefore, if traditionalism contains the truth about human flourishing, be replaced with traditionalist-authoritarianism. Finally, I have, by providing a brief genealogy of the origins of the No Alternatives Argument, explained why it is genuinely novel and was not articulated by traditionalist anti-liberals prior to the mid-2010s. Chapter 3 will now review existing attempts by liberals to refute the No Alternatives Argument and explain why they fail.

Chapter 3: Why the Postliberal Critique of Liberal Regimes Has Not Been Refuted

This thesis's Introduction noted the widespread popular perception of postliberalism as a radical, new, and dangerous threat to liberty.³⁸⁰ My preceding chapters have substantiated this claim by developing (Chapter 1) a precise conception of the content of liberalism, and showing (Chapter 2) how the novel and distinct postliberal critique of liberalism—the claim that, because the basic liberties of both progressives and traditionalists cannot be stably protected by any regime, liberalism should be replaced by a form of traditionalist-authoritarianism that imposes traditionalist values and removes basic liberties from progressives³⁸¹—obviously contradicts this conception of liberalism.

The aim of this chapter is not to assess whether postliberal claims about liberalism are all-things-considered true but to assess whether existing critiques of these postliberal claims by liberals succeed in showing these claims to be *untrue* (I will evaluate the first-order merits of these postliberal claims in Part 2 (Chapters 4 and 5)). I will do this by examining the two most prominent academic responses to postliberal critiques of liberalism to have been published by liberals at the time of writing, namely Andrew Koppelman's response to Patrick Deneen³⁸² and Cass Sunstein's response to Yoram Hazony.³⁸³ Although Sleat, Borg, and Kelly all attempt to evaluate postliberal arguments, their focus on constructive postliberal arguments means they are able to pay little sustained attention to the No Alternatives Argument and the Liberal Decay Thesis—the claim that liberalism inevitably decays into progressive-authoritarianism—on which the argument rests.³⁸⁴ By contrast, Koppelman and Sunstein focus principally on the critical claims about liberalism of Deneen and Hazony respectively, and a great deal of what these liberal theorists say therefore constitutes a critique of the No Alternatives Argument.

My central claim in this chapter, which I will demonstrate inductively by detailed engagement with Koppelman and Sunstein's arguments, is that these scholars have failed to refute postliberal claims about liberalism because they have misunderstood the object of the postliberal critique offered by Deneen and Hazony. Specifically, they have largely misinterpreted Deneen's and Hazony's claims about liberal regimes as claims about liberal theory. Where they do recognise that Deneen and Hazony are making claims about liberal regimes, Koppelman and Sunstein offer only weak responses to these claims. I conclude that the extant critiques of the No Alternatives Argument from liberal academics fail to refute the argument, and this sets the stage for my first-order evaluation of this novel postliberal critique of liberalism in Chapters 4 and 5.

³⁸⁰ E.g. (Wright 2023; Ward 2024; Nelson 2024)

³⁸¹ See Introduction, Part II.iv, on traditionalism and progressivism

³⁸² (Koppelman 2022)

³⁸³ (Sunstein 2020)

³⁸⁴ (Sleat 2025; Kelly 2025a; Borg 2025)

Koppelman's attempt to rebut postliberal claims about liberalism takes the form of a detailed response to arguments for the Liberal Decay Thesis advanced by Deneen,³⁸⁵ so Part (I.i) of this chapter will first provide an exegesis of the claims Deneen makes about liberalism. Part (I.ii) will further elucidate Deneen's claims through an analysis of his reliance on specific methodological ideas from Strauss.

Part (II) will examine Koppelman's response to Deneen in detail, and conclude that Koppelman either (in most cases) misconstrues Deneen as making claims about liberal theory rather than about the liberal regime, or (in other cases) provides only weak and suggestive responses to Deneen's claims about the liberal regime. I conclude that Koppelman has failed to provide a refutation of the arguments by which Deneen supports the Liberal Decay Thesis (and thereby the No Alternatives Argument).

Part (III) will examine Sunstein's response to Hazony's critique of liberalism. Since Sunstein (like Koppelman on Deneen) focuses on those claims of Hazony's that Hazony presents as directly supporting the Liberal Decay Thesis, and thus the No Alternatives Argument, I first analyse Hazony's argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis to show how it is concerned with liberal regimes and not with liberal theory, and then show how Sunstein has misconstrued Hazony as making claims about liberal theory and therefore failed to refute Hazony's argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis.

I: Deneen's Critique of Liberalism

As is well known, Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* blames something that the author calls "liberalism" for a long list of crises and pathologies he claims to identify in modern societies, including the decay of intermediary institutions in the face of a false dialectic between statism and individualism,³⁸⁶ the loss of cultural traditions,³⁸⁷ the decline of the liberal arts,³⁸⁸ the growth of inequality and collapse of social mobility,³⁸⁹ and the erosion of citizenship and civic virtue.³⁹⁰ Deneen claims that liberalism has an unfolding, almost teleological dynamic that explains the progressive worsening of these various crises as liberalism "becomes more fully itself".³⁹¹ The main commitment of liberalism that causes these pathologies as it becomes fully manifest is something Deneen calls "voluntarism", which valorizes "the unfettered and autonomous choice of individuals".³⁹² The claim that liberal societies exhibit an underlying structural dynamic that tends to advance and radicalise liberalism is not, of course, unique to Deneen, but is

³⁸⁵ (Koppelman 2022). Koppelman also engages with Vermeule, but discusses Deneen in much greater depth.

³⁸⁶ (Deneen 2019, 43-63)

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 65-90

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-130

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 131-153

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154-178

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 179

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 31

widespread in both academic and popular writing by postliberals. For instance, we might compare it to Nick Timothy's idea of the "ultra-liberal ratchet", whereby both left and right parties come to advance a mutually reinforcing vision of radical individualism in (respectively) social and economic domains.³⁹³ Pabst and Milbank (who, as I argued in Chapter 2, do not defend postliberalism proper but a kind of communitarian liberalism) identify a similar "secretly collusive harmony" in the "metacrisis" of social and economic "ultra-liberalism".³⁹⁴ (These thinkers, however, affirm the claim that extant liberal regimes have a structural tendency to radicalize their commitment to ideals like autonomy without affirming the further claim, made by Deneen as well as Vermeule and Hazony, that this tendency necessarily leads to the denial of traditionalists' basic rights).³⁹⁵ Deneen's argument is also the most systematic defence of these claims from a postliberal thinker (as well as being the subject of Koppelman's response).

As I will show shortly, by "voluntarism", Deneen appears to mean something like the 'expressive individualism' that I identified as the paradigmatic form of progressivism, a feature of certain conceptions of the good discussed in this thesis's Introduction. Conceptions of the good are progressive inasmuch as they are characterised by a rejection both of what Charles Taylor calls "strong evaluation" (the belief that human desires can be evaluated by standards that are altogether outside of human desire)³⁹⁶ and of what I term *epistemic deference*, the belief that one should sometimes defer to other people's or institutions' judgement of the good (for instance, the conservative Catholic belief that one should sometimes defer to Magisterial teaching). Expressive individualism holds the human good to consist in the 'expression' of each individual's deepest personal intimations, making it a radically and unqualifiedly progressive conception of the good.³⁹⁷

I.i: Two Theses of Liberalism

In what follows, I will focus on interpreting the two claims I take to be central to the novel, postliberal critique of liberalism, which centres around the No Alternatives Argument that I discussed in Chapter 2. These claims are (1) that liberal regimes have a structural 'logic' characterized by the radicalization of "voluntarist" beliefs in the citizenry and among political elites, and (2) that part of this logic involves a tendency to increasingly restrict the liberty of traditionalists. It will shortly become apparent that Deneen intends these two claims to support the Liberal Decay Thesis and thereby the No Alternatives Argument.

Let us label these two claims adduced by Deneen to support the Liberal Decay Thesis (1) the *Structural Radicalization Thesis* and (2) the *Coercive Liberalism Thesis*.³⁹⁸ The claims are not

³⁹³ (Timothy 2021, 39–47)

³⁹⁴ (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 13)

³⁹⁵ Milbank and Pabst, as well as Timothy, argue that (what I view as a) modified version of liberalism would be immune to this radicalising dynamic.

³⁹⁶ (Taylor 1992, 14–16)

³⁹⁷ See Introduction, Part II.iv, on progressivism (and traditionalism). See (Bellah 1985, 333) on expressive individualism.

³⁹⁸ I borrow 'coercive liberalism' from (Oakes 2011b)

unique to Deneen. I will discuss the way they appear in Hazony's work later in this chapter, and Vermeule also makes both of these claims.³⁹⁹

I.i.a: Structural Radicalization

Most of *Why Liberalism Failed* involves a defense of the Structural Radicalization Thesis, the claim that liberalism involves the extension and radicalization of "voluntarism" (i.e. radical progressivism), and an exploration of the alleged effects of this process in different domains. Deneen considers this voluntarism to rest on a "false anthropology" that is fundamental to liberalism.⁴⁰⁰ Basic, background anthropological assumptions changed, he claims, in three ways with the genesis of the tradition that became liberalism: this tradition (1) posited an "ineradicable human selfishness" rather than seeking to cultivate human virtue, (2) reconceived liberty as the ability to gratify this selfishness rather than "the cultivation of self-limitation and self-rule", and (3) sought to "overcome" the "limits of nature" through manipulation of the natural environment. Deneen associates these three pivots in thought, respectively, with Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bacon.⁴⁰¹

Deneen sums up the new worldview ushered in by proto-liberalism as involving two elements: "anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and... human separation from and opposition to nature".⁴⁰² Citing Hobbes and Locke, Deneen identifies an individualist and "voluntarist logic" whereby the "legitimacy of all relationships" depends on choice.⁴⁰³ Liberalism's "war against nature",⁴⁰⁴ for Deneen, is less about the ecological crisis of late capitalism (though this is acknowledged),⁴⁰⁵ and more about the abandonment of natural law and a teleological vision of human nature. Thus, "separation from... nature" implies an anti-teleological metaphysics of the human being.

From the above, we can define the "voluntarism", the belief that Deneen thinks the liberal regime has a structural tendency to deepen and extend its commitment to over time, as:

*The belief that the human good is wholly a function of the exercise of the power of arbitrary choice, and in no way a function of the specific choices made (thus, the extent to which P makes free and authentic choices is the **only** thing that determines the goodness of P's life).*

We can interpret Deneen as claiming that the extension and radicalisation of the voluntarism he identifies as being bound up with the structure of liberal regimes takes place along the various dimensions of the regime I identified in this thesis's Introduction. Voluntarism, or political ideas linked to it, comes to play a more 'horizontally' *extensive* role in the rationales that ground the

³⁹⁹ (Vermeule 2023b)

⁴⁰⁰ (Deneen 2019, 19)

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 24-6

⁴⁰² Ibid., 30

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 32

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 33

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 14

regime's various practices, and the regime also comes to give more 'vertically' *intensive* weight to voluntarist ideas.⁴⁰⁶

It will be obvious that this voluntarism is a more radical doctrine than the conceptions of autonomy typically defended by liberals. Rawls's political liberalism, for instance, purports to abstain from judgment regarding first-order questions about the value of autonomy in a human life;⁴⁰⁷ Dworkin's comprehensive liberalism allows that a person who doesn't endorse the limitless autonomy implied by voluntarism can live a good life, as long as she genuinely endorses her more traditional values and doesn't accept them blindly or under coercion.⁴⁰⁸ Raz, who defends autonomy-based perfectionist liberalism, argues that valuable autonomy requires P to choose from *independently* valuable choices, and thus rejects the claim that P's authentic choice is the only thing that makes her life good.⁴⁰⁹ We may sensibly wonder how Deneen can justify the claim that liberalism is committed to voluntarism to the point of tending to radicalize this commitment over time, if most liberal theorists seem to reject voluntarism altogether. This will be clarified shortly in the discussion of Deneen's methodology in Part (I.ii).

I.i.b: Coercive Liberalism

Regarding the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, Deneen speculates at the end of *Why Liberalism Failed* that, as liberalism's crises worsen and its voluntarism radicalizes, liberals will "resort to imposing the liberal order by fiat".⁴¹⁰ Since *Why Liberalism Failed*, he has developed and defended the Coercive Liberalism Thesis further, arguing that liberalism is increasingly persecutory towards religious believers and other traditionalists who reject voluntarism as a conception of human flourishing.⁴¹¹ The plausibility of the Structural Radicalization Thesis, it is important to note, appears to be a necessary condition of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis's being plausible, since in order for the liberal regime to have a structural tendency to coerce people who dissent from voluntarism, it is presumably necessary for it to have a structural tendency to radicalize (deepen and extend) its commitment to voluntarism, on the basis of which it would then judge non-voluntarists as in need of coercive containment. Establishing the Structural Radicalization Thesis and the Coercive Liberalism Thesis as true would already go a long way to grounding the central postliberal argument for traditionalist-authoritarianism, as I will shortly explain in more detail.

The Coercive Liberalism Thesis must apply to the universe of all possible liberal regimes, not just to actually-existing ones, in order to support the claim that there is no alternative to authoritarianism of some kind. Modally, the Thesis need not assert the *absolutely inevitable* decay of liberal regimes into progressive-authoritarianism, but it must assert the *overwhelming probability* of this decay. If the decay were merely more *probable* than not, the Thesis would

⁴⁰⁶ See Introduction, Part II.iii, on this framework.

⁴⁰⁷ (Rawls 2005, 76–9)

⁴⁰⁸ (Dworkin 2000, 269)

⁴⁰⁹ (Raz 1987, 156–61)

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180

⁴¹¹ E.g. (Deneen 2024)

(again) struggle to justify the claim that there is no alternative to authoritarianism of some kind. If postliberals merely claimed the decay was *probable*, then, if it were feasible to avoid the occurrence of this probable decay, the No Alternatives Argument would not succeed. Even if it were not feasible to avoid the occurrence of this probable decay, a probability of decay above 0.5 does not necessarily warrant traditionalists in preferring traditionalist-authoritarianism, at least for traditionalists who ascribe some value to liberalism. The precise probability at which it becomes warranted for traditionalists who would otherwise prefer liberalism to traditionalist-authoritarian to become supporters traditionalist-authoritarianism, and which therefore is needed for the Thesis to do its job of supporting the No Alternatives Argument, cannot be specified in advance, but we can be fairly confident it is well above 0.5. (I will say more about these issues in the Introduction to Part 3 of this thesis).

The criticisms of Deneen's arguments for these two theses are, of course, nearly as well known as the theses themselves. Deneen *appears* to rely on interpretations of early modern liberal or proto-liberal thinkers like Hobbes,⁴¹² Locke,⁴¹³ Bacon,⁴¹⁴ and Machiavelli⁴¹⁵ to support his theses about liberalism's relationship to voluntarism. Illustratively, noting Deneen's apparent reliance on early modern thinkers, Stefan Borg claims that the postliberal movement "revolves around a particular understanding of social contract theory"⁴¹⁶ and "hinges on a reading of Hobbes and Locke".⁴¹⁷ If this were correct, the plausibility of Deneen's theses would be weakened by the fact that many of Deneen's interpretations of these thinkers are controversial.⁴¹⁸

Critics of *Why Liberalism Failed* tended to argue that liberalism is not a single, unified system of thought that unequivocally commits its adherents to voluntarism or to the practices producing the crises Deneen identifies; and that liberalism, because of its diversity, complexity, and fragmentation, is not a causal agent in a teleological historical process. Moyn, representatively, asserts that Deneen is in error to think "that there is something called liberalism that is a take-it-or-leave-it system".⁴¹⁹ Field, whose five-part critical review of *Why Liberalism Failed* is among the most thorough to have been published, claims that "radical individual autonomy is not the essence of liberal democracy",⁴²⁰ and supports this claim by disputing Deneen's interpretation of proto-liberal thinkers.⁴²¹ The core argument of these critics is that voluntarism does not dominate either the early modern thinkers Deneen cites or contemporary liberal theory, and that therefore the Structural Radicalization Thesis cannot be true. I will show this critical argument to be mistaken in Part (II) of this Chapter. Before doing so, I will first further explain how I believe we should interpret Deneen's claims, by illustrating his reliance upon Strauss's idea of the regime.

⁴¹² (Deneen 2019, 25-6, 31-2)

⁴¹³ Ibid., 32-3

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 36

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 24-5

⁴¹⁶ (Borg 2024, 8)

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 10

⁴¹⁸ For instance, the claim that Locke endorsed voluntarism is highly contested.

⁴¹⁹ (Moyn 2018)

⁴²⁰ (Field 2020a)

⁴²¹ (Field 2020b)

I.ii: Straussian Undercurrents

Even if Deneen's critics were right that voluntarism is not as central to either early or contemporary liberal theory as Deneen claims, this fact would not undermine the Structural Radicalization Thesis, or, by extension, the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. To prepare us to see why the claims of Deneen's critics about his misrepresentation of liberal theory do not refute the theses he defends, we need to turn to Deneen's reliance on certain Straussian ideas.

In what follows, I will offer a Straussian reading of Deneen's claims about liberalism, according to which Deneen is primarily critiquing the 'structural' logic of real-world liberal regimes rather than liberal theory. I argue that this Straussian reading is supported by the textual evidence, taken as a whole, including both explicit statements Deneen makes about his methods and the various (sometimes tacit) ways in which he relies on Strauss's view of the role of ideas in real-world politics. It is therefore the best exegetical account of Deneen's claims and arguments.

A conservative reviewer of Deneen's later *Regime Change* argued that Strauss "looms like a colossus", unacknowledged but ever present, behind Deneen's work.⁴²² This observation is the key to understanding what *Why Liberalism Failed* is trying to do. Deneen was taught (briefly) by Allan Bloom,⁴²³ a student of Strauss whose (in)famous *The Closing of the American Mind* argued that "from the earliest beginnings of liberal thought", a self-undermining tendency emerged, eventually culminating in a relativism in which "the argument justifying freedom disappears".⁴²⁴ Bloom's position draws on a particular interpretation of Strauss's identification of an early modern turn away from philosophical realism and political perfectionism.⁴²⁵

Against this position, which became known as 'East Coast' Straussianism, the 'West Coast' position discussed in Chapter 2 held that the early liberalism of (for instance) Locke and the American founders, which acknowledged a kind of natural law, was relatively continuous with classical thought, and that the real 'rupture' with the past occurred with 20th-century left-liberalism.⁴²⁶ The West Coast position became associated with relatively mainstream strands of American conservatism.⁴²⁷ In an essay on Strauss, Deneen has endorsed something close to the East Coast position,⁴²⁸ citing Strauss's essay *The Three Waves of Modernity* to argue that the political philosopher had (*contra* the West Coast view) identified the 'rupture' with modernity's first, 'classical' liberal wave.⁴²⁹ *Why Liberalism Failed*, I submit, should be read as a work of East Coast Straussianism, expanding on Bloom's abbreviated comments about liberalism's self-undermining character. This is true in a substantive sense, in that Deneen tries

⁴²² (Anton 2023)

⁴²³ (Deneen 2013)

⁴²⁴ (Bloom 2008 [1987], 27–8)

⁴²⁵ See (Strauss 1995)

⁴²⁶ See e.g. (Jaffa 2018b) for a West Coast critique of Bloom

⁴²⁷ (Zuckert and Zuckert 2008, 251–2)

⁴²⁸ (Deneen 2015)

⁴²⁹ (Strauss 1975)

to justify the rejection of liberalism and modernity that the East Coast position can seem to imply. It is also, crucially, true in a methodological sense.⁴³⁰

As I discussed in the Introduction,⁴³¹ Strauss suggests that “the guiding theme of political philosophy is the regime rather than the laws”.⁴³² A regime, as I interpret Strauss, embodies certain (sometimes implicit) assumptions about politics and human nature, which issue in a ‘structural’ tendency to produce certain political outcomes. In the preface to *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen claims to have “written in imitation of the classical explorations of the ‘logic of a regime’”,⁴³³ suggesting agreement with Strauss’s claim that “the cause of the laws is the regime”.⁴³⁴

This interpretation of Deneen’s book is also supported by the author’s frequent allusions to Strauss’s other ideas.⁴³⁵ At times, Deneen even uses quotation marks when borrowing Straussian terminology, such as when he describes a Machiavellian turn that based politics “upon reliability of ‘the low’ rather than aspiration to ‘the high.’”⁴³⁶ The source of this distinctive turn of phrase is, it appears, Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, which refers to “the low and the high” when contrasting a political attitude that seeks to harness citizens’ self-interest (the ‘low’) and one that aims to promote citizens’ virtues (the ‘high’).⁴³⁷ This observation supports the thesis that *Why Liberalism Failed* should be read as making claims primarily about the structural logic of the liberal *regimes* found in the contemporary West, rather than claims about intellectual genealogy or the logical implications of the ideas of liberal theory.

More recently, Deneen has been very explicit about his methodological debt to Strauss. In his February 2025 Neuhaus Lecture for *First Things* magazine, Deneen explains his reliance, when defending the Structural Radicalization Thesis, on Strauss’s image (outlined in *Three Waves of Modernity*) of modern thought comprising three overlapping and mutually constitutive waves. In this lecture, Deneen argues that these three waves of modern thought—comprising classical liberalism, left-liberalism, and the cluster of often Nietzsche-inspired ideas associated with postmodernism and radical antinomianism—share a common underlying telos, namely the liberation of the human will from perceived constraints.⁴³⁸

The precise content of the three waves, however, is less important than the structure of the argument. The claim Deneen is making is not that the ideas characterising any of the waves

⁴³⁰ (Field 2025, 81–88) also notes the congruence between Deneen’s critique of liberalism and Bloom’s earlier claims, but she does not use this congruence to provide an interpretation of the No Alternatives Argument.

⁴³¹ Introduction, Part II.iii

⁴³² (Strauss 1957, 362)

⁴³³ (Deneen 2019, vi.)

⁴³⁴ (Strauss 1957, 362)

⁴³⁵ For instance, Strauss’s notion of a Machiavellian turn away from political perfectionism (compare (Deneen 2019, 24–5) with (Strauss 1995, 250)), or the idea of modernity/liberalism involving several ‘waves’ (compare (Deneen 2019, 33–35) with (Strauss 1975, 85–6, 89–91)).

⁴³⁶ (Deneen 2019, 24).

⁴³⁷ (Strauss 1995, 250)

⁴³⁸ (Deneen 2025)

logically imply the others, but that each wave builds on the preceding waves by incorporating (“drawing... substance from”)⁴³⁹ some of the preceding waves’ ideas and assumptions—most saliently the idea of liberating the human will from constraints. How does this “drawing” of “substance” take place? Since Deneen is *not* saying that accepting the premises of classical liberalism logically commit one to contemporary left-liberal views on (say) transgender rights, we should interpret him as saying that there is something about the way the ideas of the three waves are *instantiated* in real-world regimes that makes the progressive radicalisation of the underlying idea of liberating the human will highly probable.

Thus, when Deneen claims to have written “in imitation of the classical explorations of the ‘the logic of the regime’”,⁴⁴⁰ I think we should take him at his word. Where Deneen makes statements that appear to be generalizations about liberal *theory*, I suggest the charitable practice of reading them, where possible, as claims about the ideas of liberalism as instantiated in the liberal *regime* instead. Once we make this crucial hermeneutic shift, we will see why *Why Liberalism Failed*’s critics missed their target.

The Straussian concept of the regime is a synchronic one, identifying a regime’s commitments at a point in time. The anthropological assumptions embodied by a regime are likely to be crude, vulgarised analogues of the ideas of theorists, even where those theorists directly inspired the regime, because most of the actors who comprise the regime—politicians, civil servants, judges, etc.—do not have the nuanced and sophisticated grasp of political philosophy found in the pages of academic journals or the works of seminal theorists. There is still a sense in which the ideas of a *liberal* regime must be related to *liberal* theory: something must make both of these things liberal. As I explain in the Introduction to this thesis, a version of liberal theory *constitutes* an interpretation of the core concepts of liberal ideology; a political practice, comprising part of a liberal regime, is *grounded in* an interpretation of these concepts.⁴⁴¹ It is therefore entirely possible that a regime could be liberal in a way quite distantly related to the ideas of the majority of liberal theorists, by being grounded in a quite different—often inchoate and implicit—interpretations of the core liberal concepts from the interpretations preferred by most liberal theorists. Such an outcome might make the regime no longer liberal, in which case actually-existing liberalism would turn out to be self-undermining.

Indeed, it is even possible that political philosophy might be largely epiphenomenal, reflecting on, but not causing, changes in the assumptions of the regime in which it takes place. This was not Strauss’s position. It is also presumably not Deneen’s given his frequent reference to the purported effects of various early modern thinkers’ ideas. Yet because the Straussian concept of a regime is synchronic and involves vulgarised anthropological assumptions, even if political philosophy *were* entirely epiphenomenal and Deneen’s claims about Early Modern thinkers were entirely irrelevant, this would not make Deneen’s descriptive claims about the regime *false*: a structural dynamic of voluntarist radicalisation could have set in for reasons wholly unrelated to the activities of these early modern thinkers.

⁴³⁹ (Deneen 2025, 30:03)

⁴⁴⁰ (Deneen 2019, vi)

⁴⁴¹ See Introduction, Part II.iii

Less radically, if it were true that at least some ideas do indeed have consequences, and political philosophy were not wholly epiphenomenal⁴⁴²—but also that Deneen had misunderstood Locke, Hobbes, Bacon, and Machiavelli, and/or that these thinkers had negligible direct or indirect influence on the formation of liberal regimes (perhaps other thinkers had much more of an impact)—this would *also* fail to show that the Structural Radicalization Thesis is false. This means, of course, that Borg’s claim about the dependence of postliberalism on a reading of early modern social contract theorists is also mistaken.⁴⁴³

Thus, even if critics like Moyn and Field *were* correct to claim that liberalism is internally highly diverse, that many versions of liberalism do not support “radical individual autonomy”, voluntarism, or expressive individualism, and that Deneen has wrongly attributed the ideas implicitly guiding contemporary liberal regimes to the theories of certain early modern thinkers, this would weaken Deneen’s case for the truth of the Structural Radicalization Thesis—perhaps show that his case for the Thesis does not succeed—but would not make the Thesis false. Indeed, depending on our prior assumptions about the Thesis’s plausibility, we might still judge it to be highly plausible even if the appeal to early modern thinkers does not add much to this plausibility. Indeed, the fact that *Why Liberalism Failed* was successful at persuading conservatives and Straussians of the truth of the two theses were are discussing, while liberals tended to find it unpersuasive, may show that one’s background prior judgements about the plausibility of the thesis play a major role in how convincing one finds the claims and arguments of the book.

I have shown that the Structural Radicalization Theses should be interpreted as a claim about the universe of possibly realisable liberal regimes, not the formal implications of liberal theory. The same is true of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. Deneen’s explicit defense of this Thesis is found in works published after *Why Liberalism Failed*, and he supplies a more detailed mechanism for this Thesis than he does for the Structural Radicalization Thesis. This mechanism builds on, and presupposes, the Structural Radicalization Thesis. Deneen does not clearly assert anything like the Coercive Liberalism Thesis in *Why Liberalism Failed*.⁴⁴⁴ As I noted in the previous chapter, however, in his later (2023) *Regime Change*, Deneen claims to witness a “tyrannical liberalism... that is not a contradiction of liberalism but its fulfillment”,⁴⁴⁵ which targets “religious believers”⁴⁴⁶ with a “white-hot fervor” to ensure “individual *preference* must always prevail”, i.e. that political decisions are based on voluntarism.⁴⁴⁷ Elsewhere, he has claimed that the liberal state is “forcing churches, religious organizations, and other traditional communities to conform to progressivist ideology”.⁴⁴⁸ In other words, Deneen is claiming that when individuals or communities reject voluntarism as a guiding principle for their own lives and the internal regulation of their communities, they are increasingly subject to coercive correction

⁴⁴² Cf. (Weaver 2013 [1948])

⁴⁴³ See (Borg 2024, 8)

⁴⁴⁴ But as noted above, he does speculate that the liberal regime may “impose” itself by “fiat” (2019, 180)

⁴⁴⁵ (Deneen 2023b, 63)

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 252

⁴⁴⁸ (Deneen 2024, 171)

by real-world liberal states—for instance, banned from hiring religious ministers in line with their theological convictions or from expressing traditionalist views about LGBT relationships even in ‘casual conversations’.

Deneen’s mechanism for the operation of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis is, facially, fairly plausible, if we are already convinced by the Structural Radicalization Thesis. Deneen argues that liberal principles that are supposed to protect negative liberties, including the basic agency and free speech rights of traditionalists—he gives the example of Mill’s harm principle—rely on theory-laden concepts that are hard to define independently of contestable judgments about human flourishing. Since “harm” is such a normatively-laden and contestable concept, for instance, there is nothing intrinsic to the concept of harm that prevents the mere failure to “openly and actively approve” of an action from being construed as harming the person who undertakes the action.⁴⁴⁹

To illustrate, if P, the owner of a small bakery in a town with many other bakeries, places a polite notice in her window saying that her bakery does not cater same-sex weddings and directing customers to another baker on the same street, and Q reads this notice after intending to hire P to cater her same-sex wedding, our judgement as to whether P has inflicted a (‘dignitary’) harm on Q is inseparable from our wider set of convictions about the human good as they pertain to same-sex relationships, sexual/romantic expression, religious conscience, and other related domains of human life. Extrapolating, it is plausible to think that the mere concept of ‘harm’, without being interpreted in light of some conception of the good or other, does not contain anything to prevent us from judging that even (say) P telling the congregation of her own church, when Q is elsewhere, that she does not believe same-sex relationships should be called ‘marriage’ inflicts a ‘dignitary’ harm on Q—or perhaps even that P’s merely declining to affirm (“openly and actively approve”),⁴⁵⁰ in this church, while Q is still elsewhere, that same-sex relationships are a positive good and ought to be celebrated, also inflicts this kind of harm.

(Of course, affirming that P inflicts harm on Q in these ways does not *automatically* lead to the conclusion that P’s right to act in these should, all-things-considered, be restricted. An additional premise, about the relative weight of P’s interest in free speech or agency vis-a-vis Q’s interest in avoiding the kinds of harm under consideration, would also be required. Nevertheless, affirming that P harms Q in these ways seems to obviate any *principled* commitment to protecting P’s basic agency and free speech rights, since it implies these rights can be qualified or limited on the basis of a conception of harm *inseparable from a wider, progressive conception of human flourishing*. P’s basic agency and free speech rights are clearly *restricted*—as opposed to merely limited to ensure the compossible protection of others’ basic rights—if the state limits P’s rights on the basis of this conception of harm. This judgement is in no way dependent on one’s own conception of flourishing or of harm, for (per chapter 1) basic agency and free speech rights in minimal liberalism are defined in a non-moralised way. Someone who thinks that restricting P’s basic rights to protect Q from this kind of harm is all-things-considered justified must concede that she supports denying P her basic agency rights, and that she is

⁴⁴⁹ (Deneen 2023, 63-4).

⁴⁵⁰ (Deneen 2023, 63-4).

therefore advocating a progressive-authoritarian view of political morality incompatible with minimal liberalism.)

Deneen's claim, which I find highly plausible, is that not just 'harm' but other concepts that play a normative role in liberal ideology— such as 'freedom', 'equality', etc.⁴⁵¹—are so contestable, and their detailed conceptualisation so much influenced by our background convictions about the good, that there is nothing in the mere concepts alone to prevent them from being deployed in rationales for the total removal of traditionalists' basic agency and free speech rights to follow and to express their conceptions of human flourishing, even in conventionally 'private' spaces like homes and houses of worship. Of course, If Deneen is right about this—I think he is—it would also seem to follow that these concepts could potentially be interpreted so as to justify the inverse, i.e. the total removal of *progressives'* basic negative liberties. To explain why the background anthropological assumptions predictably and systematically change in a voluntarist direction that is harmful to the liberties of traditionalists, Deneen must, therefore, appeal to the Structural Radicalization Thesis. This means that the overall strength of the case for the Coercive Liberalism Thesis cannot be stronger than the case for the Structural Radicalization Thesis.

Despite the fact that, as I noted earlier, the persuasiveness of Deneen's arguments for the Structural Radicalization Thesis depend in part on his readers' prior inclination to feel that they live under a pervasively voluntarist-inclined regime, it is worth ending this section by noting that one does not have to be a Straussian or a conservative to find the Structural Radicalization Thesis plausible (though it surely helps!).

The left-liberal political theorist Alexandre Lefebvre's recent analysis of liberalism "as a way of life" corroborates many of Deneen's claims about the structural radicalization of the liberal regime's anthropological assumptions.⁴⁵² For Lefebvre, the liberal idea of neutrality between conceptions of the human good has become a "ghost story".⁴⁵³ Citing Deneen and other postliberals, Lefebvre argues that the theoretical literature on political liberalism has exhibited "an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the takeover by liberalism over the past thirty years of the background culture of contemporary liberal democracies".⁴⁵⁴ One of the features of a background culture dominated by liberalism is that media, popular culture, and quotidian social practices explicitly or implicitly assume that not only are all social relationships legitimized by free choice, but also that individuals' lives are good solely in virtue of reflecting their authentic choices—in other words, it is a background culture dominated by Deneen's voluntarism, or expressive individualism.⁴⁵⁵ 'Live your best life', 'you do you': these, for Lefebvre, are the slogans of the liberal regime. Insofar as all this feels at least somewhat plausible, or at least not obviously false, as it clearly does to some progressive liberals as well as to many conservatives,

⁴⁵¹ We could reconstruct the preceding case about same-sex marriage to be one in which P is alleged to violate the (positive) freedom of Q, or to treat Q unequally.

⁴⁵² (Lefebvre 2024)

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 85

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 96 (footnote 33). Of course, unlike the postliberals, Lefebvre does not think this takeover has been altogether bad.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 100-127

we may find ourselves warming to Deneen's claims about liberalism's radicalising structural logic. For now, however, the important point is to note that, while Deneen's arguments for his core theses have flaws, these flaws do not necessarily make the theses false or even implausible.

II: Koppelman's Flawed Response to Deneen

Koppelman has published an important paper responding to Deneen's—and, to a lesser extent, Vermeule's—critique of liberalism.⁴⁵⁶ His paper, at the time of writing, is the most detailed and thorough attempt to refute Deneen's claims about liberalism by any academic. Koppelman engages with many of Deneen's particular claims about liberalism's effects in significant depth, but I will focus here on Koppelman's criticism of the Structural Radicalization Thesis and the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. I will evaluate three of Koppelman's arguments: his one argument against the Structural Radicalization Thesis and two against the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. Koppelman's argument against the Structural Radicalization Thesis, and the first of his two arguments against the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, misunderstand Deneen's claims by conflating claims about liberal regimes with claims about liberal theory. Koppelman's second argument against the Coercive Liberalism Thesis avoids this error, but is nevertheless an unconvincing response to Deneen's claims about liberal regimes, leaving many critical empirical questions about these regimes open.

By reviewing these arguments, we will not only see how Koppelman's failure to recognise Deneen's Straussian methodology undermines his ability to respond effectively to Deneen's central claims, but we will also begin to gain an idea of how postliberals might express their empirical claims about liberal regimes more precisely. This will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Koppelman's argument against the Structural Radicalization Thesis asserts that Deneen's claims about the structural logic of liberalism rely on a characterization of liberalism that “misunderstand[s] liberalism at a fundamental level”.⁴⁵⁷ Koppelman then charges Deneen with a failure to explain a mechanism for the Structural Radicalization Thesis. He also claims that insofar as Deneen *has* made gestures towards supplying a mechanism, this mechanism depends on a definition of liberalism—i.e., of liberalism as a moral commitment to voluntarism—“that would astonish most liberals”.⁴⁵⁸ Interestingly, Koppelman does not recognise the Straussian allusions in Deneen's work. When Deneen (in Koppelman's reading) attributes “inner necessity” to the progressive unfolding of liberalism, Koppelman claims that “all this talk... of historical inevitability is reminiscent of Marx”.⁴⁵⁹

This argument of Koppelman's fails because Deneen is not really attributing “inner necessity” to the logic of the ideas of liberal theory, but rather attributing a powerful structural tendency, which

⁴⁵⁶ (Koppelman 2022).

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 1530

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 1529

may fall short of strict necessity, to the logic of real-world liberal regimes. It is true Deneen sometimes uses language that seems to imply necessity and inevitability, but I think that a charitable reading, attentive to methodological claims I have made above, should treat such language as mere hyperbole, and acknowledge that Deneen is in the first instance making the more modest claim that liberal regimes have a structural logic that tends to make certain outcomes more probably—not always inevitable—over time.⁴⁶⁰ Disputing Deneen’s “idiosyncratic”⁴⁶¹ definition of liberalism as resting on voluntarism is orthogonal to the main issue of the liberal regime’s commitments, for we have already noted that a regime’s implicit anthropological commitments should be expected to be crude and vulgar. While it is surely correct that liberal theory does not rest on voluntarism, this does *not* mean that the liberal regime is not—perhaps implicitly—committed to voluntarism. Koppelman has failed to engage this claim about the liberal regime because he has failed to recognise that Deneen is making it, and instead attributed to Deneen a claim about the logic of liberal theory that (as I have argued above) we should not interpret Deneen as intending to make at all.

Koppelman makes two main arguments against the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. Here, he has more common ground with Deneen because he accepts Deneen’s central empirical claim that progressive-authoritarianism has been gaining ground in recent years. Koppelman’s first argument against this Thesis starts by agreeing with Deneen that the last decade has seen a trend towards the restriction of traditionalists’ basic agency and free speech rights in the United States and other liberal polities. Koppelman identifies this trend as beginning in the mid-2010s,⁴⁶² and believes that it is a “historical blip” unrelated to liberalism’s deep logic.⁴⁶³ To support this ‘blip’ interpretation of progressive-authoritarianism, Koppelman first argues that the supporters of this coercion “aren’t liberals”⁴⁶⁴ but rather “leftists”⁴⁶⁵ and “radical tendencies” who endorse “wokeness”.⁴⁶⁶ What Koppelman is asserting here is that, on the correct understanding of liberal theory, the commitments of the persons who support restricting the basic agency and free speech rights of traditionalists make them progressive-authoritarians and *not* liberals.

This claim, if true, would not refute the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. Recall that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis holds that real-world progressive-authoritarianism is driven by the logic of the regime’s crude, vulgarised voluntarist anthropological assumptions, not by the logic of the ideas of academic liberal theory. Thus, it is possible that an increasing number of important actors within the regime hold views that are more progressive-authoritarian than liberal. It is also possible that liberalism, correctly understood, actually forbids the restrictions of traditionalists’ basic rights that Deneen and Koppelman both deplore. Neither of these claims is inconsistent with the Coercive Liberalism Thesis.

⁴⁶⁰ Perhaps, over a long enough time, some of them become near-inevitable.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 1531-2, 1535; 1549

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1549

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1527; 1531-2

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1531

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1548-9

If liberal theory forbids restricting traditionalists' agency and free speech rights, the Coercive Liberalism Thesis holds that real-world liberal regimes are self-undermining. The Thesis claims that the structural dynamics of a regime committed, on the whole, to vulgarised versions of the assumptions of liberalism make it more likely that agents with progressive-authoritarian views will over time become influential within the regime. Koppelman has not addressed this claim. He has mistakenly interpreted Deneen as claiming that the rationales for progressive-authoritarianism depend on the explicit commitments of liberal theory. Deneen is not, as I have demonstrated above, committed to this claim. Koppelman has therefore entirely failed to engage with the claim that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis actually depends upon, i.e. the claim that attempting to instantiate liberal theory in real-world regimes predictably leads to the (often implicit) commitments of those regimes drifting in a progressive-authoritarian direction.

Koppelman's second argument against the Coercive Liberalism Thesis is the right kind of argument because it avoids conflating claims about liberal theory with claims about liberal regimes. However, it remains inconclusive, and at most draws attention to the kind of empirical questions on which the truth of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis depends without providing strong reasons to believe Koppelman's answers to these questions instead of Deneen's.

Koppelman argues that the recency and apparent contingency of the trend towards progressive-authoritarianism indicate that the coercion of traditionalists does not have a deep structural cause. Koppelman notes that this progressive-authoritarianism "became widespread only around 2015",⁴⁶⁷ and is consistently supported only by "about twelve percent of Democratic voters",⁴⁶⁸ albeit a group who are "overrepresented" in "the media, advocacy groups, nonprofits".⁴⁶⁹ "If this is the inevitable deep logic of liberalism", he concludes, "it took its time getting here".⁴⁷⁰

Koppelman's argument is not remotely sufficient to refute Deneen's claim that progressive-authoritarianism has a deep structural cause in the logic of liberal regimes. The recency and minority character of any ideological movement can either show it to be a blip, or, depending on its causes, to be a coming wave. Many ideological movements in history have begun with small numbers of educated elites and spread to whole societies through the diffusion mechanisms (like "media, advocacy groups, nonprofits") that these elites control. The question of whether progressive-authoritarianism is a blip or a coming wave is therefore entirely open, despite Koppelman's observations about recency and its minority support. In Chapter 5, I will engage with the available empirical evidence about the mechanisms behind the rise of progressive-authoritarianism, and explain why I think the 'coming wave' interpretation is more likely to be correct.⁴⁷¹ For now, it is sufficient to note that Koppelman has entirely failed to prove that the 'blip' interpretation is correct, and that the question remains fully open.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 1549

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 1548

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 1549

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ See Chapter 5 of this thesis

In summary, Koppelman has not refuted the Structural Radicalisation Thesis or the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. He has mischaracterized many of Deneen's arguments as depending on claims about liberal theory rather than claims about the liberal regime. This does not bode particularly well for the academic response to postliberal claims. The only other extant attempt by a liberal academic to refute either of these two postliberal theses is Sunstein's reply to Hazony's critique of liberalism. I will now show that Sunstein also fails to refute either thesis, mainly because, like Koppelman, he conflates postliberal claims about liberal regimes with claims about liberal theory.

III: Sunstein's Flawed Response to Hazony

III.i: Hazony's Initial Claims

In this section, I will first reconstruct Hazony's argument for the Structural Radicalization and Coercive Liberalism Theses, and then show how Sunstein's response to Hazony fails to refute these theses.

I noted in Chapter 2 that the most detailed presentation of Hazony's argument for the two theses is found in his 2020 *Quillette* article 'The Challenge of Marxism',⁴⁷² which was reincluded in his 2022 book *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*.⁴⁷³ However, Sunstein's article engages only with Hazony's 2019 Herbert W. Vaughan Lecture, so I will initially reconstruct Hazony's views on the mechanism of liberal collapse based solely on this lecture. When discussing Sunstein's response, however, I will use Hazony's *Quillette* article to clarify ambiguities in the argument as presented in the Vaughan Lecture, and on this basis show how Sunstein misunderstands the argument for the two theses and fails to refute them.

Hazony describes the ideology into which liberalism is collapsing as a form of "Marxism" or "neo-Marxism".⁴⁷⁴ I have used the term 'progressive authoritarianism' to capture what I think is the lowest common denominator between Hazony, Deneen, and Vermeule in their interpretation of liberalism's successor ideology. Despite the fact that Hazony, unlike Deneen and Vermeule, uses the term "neo-Marxism" to describe this successor ideology, I think all three would agree that one of the most important characteristics of the successor ideology is its commitment to the authoritarian imposition of progressive views of human flourishing, so I will not discuss the merits or otherwise of identifying this successor ideology with Marxism in this chapter.

Hazony's Herbert W. Vaughan Lecture was later published in two parts in *The American Mind*.⁴⁷⁵ Hazony's primary objective in the lecture is to demonstrate that 'rationalist' versions of

⁴⁷² (Hazony 2020)

⁴⁷³ (Hazony 2022, 339–57)

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ (Hazony 2019a, 2019b)

conservatism, which purport to derive knowledge of political morality from self-evident first principles, cannot supply a sufficient rationale for conserving inherited traditions.

In the course of making this argument, however, Hazony also defends the Structural Radicalization and Coercive Liberalism Theses. Hazony argues that liberalism, which he identifies as a rationalist political ideology stemming from the Enlightenment, is “unwilling or unable to successfully defend almost *any* inherited political ideals or norms”.⁴⁷⁶ This includes the inherited norms of liberalism itself: liberalism is also unwilling or unable to defend *itself* against progressive authoritarianism. In making this claim about liberalism, Hazony is claiming that liberalism has an overwhelming tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism; he is thus defending the Coercive Liberalism Thesis.

Hazony defends this thesis by appealing, via the 17th-century jurist and scholar of Jewish law John Selden, to the radical dissensus on almost all values that he thinks is produced by rationalism. Without relying on a set of concepts inherited from traditional discourses such as religious thought or English common law, “reason alone is capable of coming to virtually any conclusion”.⁴⁷⁷ For this reason, when assaulted by progressive authoritarians who deploy concepts that resonate with liberalism—such as freedom or equality—liberalism, as a rationalist ideology, cannot defend its inherited understanding of these concepts against the radically different interpretations offered by the progressive-authoritarians. This appeal to inevitable dissensus combined with the vulnerability of liberal interpretations of liberalism’s concepts to challenge from progressive-authoritarian interpretations constitutes Hazony’s argument for the Structural Radicalization Thesis.

As in the case of Deneen’s arguments for the two Theses, Hazony’s argument for the Coercive Liberalism Theses depends and presupposes the Structural Radicalization Thesis. It is clear, however, that Hazony’s mechanism for the Structural Radicalization Thesis is somewhat different to Deneen’s. Rather than appealing to the purported tendency of real-world regimes to instantiate crude, vulgar versions of the ideas of these liberal theory which are vulnerable to radicalizing arguments, Hazony instead appeals to purported the tendency of these regimes to instantiate *conceptually vague and indeterminate* versions of these ideas, which are also vulnerable to radicalising arguments.

The latter part of the Vaughan Lecture defends two other claims about the rationalism that Hazony takes to be a commitment of both liberalism and some versions of conservatism. First, Hazony argues that, because the liberal commitment to rationalism rejects reliance on inherited norms and values, it is also unable to justify the “constraint” and “self-discipline” that are necessary to secure both the mutual respect of citizens for one another’s freedom and the maintenance of virtuous practices such as marriage, religious worship, and military service. The norms and values that underpin this kind of self-discipline cannot be arrived at through rationalist means but depend on inherited understandings of personal and political morality.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ (Hazony 2019a)

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ (Hazony 2019b)

Hazony then argues that liberal rationalism is also incapable of justifying “the idea of honor” that induces people to exercise self-discipline willingly. This is not just because of the moral dissensus that rationalism produces, but also because liberalism is committed to an “insatiable egalitarianism of choices” in which all individual choices must be “regarded as equal”, whether they reflect healthy self-discipline or not.⁴⁷⁹ Thus, for Hazony, liberalism, due to its commitment to rationalism, systematically undermines inherited norms and values, acceptance of self-discipline, and norms of honour that encourage people to embrace self-sacrifice for the good of the community.

Although Hazony does not explicitly relate these two purported characteristics of liberalism to the ideology’s tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism—the Vaughan Lectures instead rest the explicit case for this tendency only on liberalism’s purported inability to defend inherited norms—it is plausible to think that these two features tend to make liberalism unstable. A society that cannot maintain the self-discipline and norms of honor needed for its proper functioning is likely to see a breakdown in social stability and the discrediting of the hitherto-prevailing interpretations of its ruling ideology. This does not, in itself, mean that progressive-authoritarianism is likely to be the relevant successor ideology. However, in conjunction with the appeal to the vulnerability of the vague concepts of liberal ideology to progressive-authoritarian appeals to more demanding interpretations of the same concepts, these two additional destabilizing features of liberalism may make the decay into progressive-authoritarianism still more likely.

However, because Hazony’s Vaughan Lectures are primarily a critique of rationalist conservatism rather than of liberalism, the mechanism Hazony supplies for the two Theses are not complete. Hazony has explained here why, if liberalism is unable to defend the inherited values and traditions *of liberalism itself*, it is likely that liberalism will not be stable and will be replaced by something else, and he has explained why liberalism is vulnerable to challenges from progressive-authoritarian interpretations of liberalism’s own core concepts. But he has not explained why liberalism is not also, perhaps equally, vulnerable to challenges from *other* interpretations of its own core concepts, such as conservative or populist interpretations. Therefore, we still need a mechanism to explain why the successor ideology is likely to be progressive-authoritarianism and not conservatism or something entirely different, and thus to turn a claim about the generic instability of liberal regimes into a claim about their proneness to structural radicalization and eventual decay into progressive-authoritarianism.

Why, in other words, is it that the ideology successfully offering competing interpretations of liberal concepts to undermine the inherited values of liberalism is progressive-authoritarianism and not something else? I will return to this question, and to the gaps in the argument of Hazony’s Vaughan Lectures, after addressing the flaws in Sunstein’s response to Hazony.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

III.ii: Sunstein's Response

Sunstein takes issue with Hazony's three claims about liberalism in the Vaughan Lectures and, addressing each in turn, argues that liberalism is not in fact committed to the positions that Hazony claims it is. First, addressing Hazony's claim that the liberal commitment to rationalism makes liberalism unable to defend inherited norms and values, Sunstein argues that liberalism is sometimes "fully able" to protect these. "Liberalism is a constellation of ideas", and some versions of liberal theory "agree that if an ideal has longevity on its side, there might be a lot to say in its favor". Sunstein points out that some versions of liberalism embrace Burke or Hayek's arguments in favour of treating traditional and long-established values as at least presumptively valid.⁴⁸⁰ Second, Sunstein addresses Hazony's claim that liberalism undermines self-discipline and constraint. Here, Sunstein claims that liberalism can support a wide variety of kinds of constraint. Most obviously, liberals support constraining actions that cause "harm to others"; but Sunstein also identifies "pre-commitment strategies", "solutions to collective action problems", and "constraints on freedom" that promote "autonomy and welfare". Therefore, argues Sunstein, liberalism cannot easily be linked in a "causal chain" to practices like "divorce, abortion, [and] promiscuity" that for Hazony evince a lack of self-discipline and constraint.⁴⁸¹ Thirdly and finally, Sunstein responds to Hazony's claim that liberalism undermines norms of honour by arguing that liberals sometimes actively seek to bestow honour on figures like the American Founding Fathers, civil rights leaders, and "all those who fought for our nation at war".⁴⁸²

Summing up, Sunstein asserts that "liberalism is not an agent in history", and that we cannot attribute real-world phenomena to liberalism without "paying attention to the need to identify microfoundations and mechanisms".⁴⁸³ Is Sunstein right, and how far does this go to refuting Hazony's claims? I will argue that Sunstein is correct to say that 'liberalism', as such, is not a historical agent; but perhaps the term picks out a set of ideas with predictable consequences when applied in real-world regimes.

I earlier noted that Koppelman conflated Deneen's claims about the consequences of applying liberal ideas in real-world regimes with claims about the logical implications of liberal theory. Sunstein makes the same error about Hazony's claims about liberalism. Clearly assuming that Hazony is making claims about the implications of liberal theory, Sunstein complains that it is difficult to "get traction" on Hazony's claims because of the enormous "diversity of views that can be found within the liberal tent". Since thinkers like Bentham, Mill, Hayek, and Rawls differ so much among themselves, Sunstein argues, it is "reckless to speak of the 'logic of liberalism'".⁴⁸⁴ In other words, Sunstein thinks that 'liberalism' *simpliciter* is not an idea with determinate implications, because there are so many different versions of liberalism with different implications. Underlying all three of Sunstein's objections to Hazony's three specific claims (about inherited values, constraint, and honour), and Sunstein's overall judgement that

⁴⁸⁰ (Sunstein 2020, 180)

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 181

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 182

⁴⁸⁴ (Sunstein 2020, 178)

“liberalism is not an agent in history”, is the complaint that Hazony has elided the differences between the logical implications of different versions of liberalism.⁴⁸⁵

This is a convincing response to Hazony if we interpret Hazony’s claims as claims about the implications of liberal theory, and *only if* we thus interpret Hazony’s claims.

Sunstein is correct to point out that some versions of liberal theory do not logically imply a rejection of (or indifference to) inherited values, constraint, or honour. If, however, Hazony is, like Deneen, really making claims about the predictable consequences of applying crude, vulgarised analogues of the ideas of liberal theory as the grounds of the practices of real-world regimes, then Sunstein’s reply would barely engage with the essential claims. On this regime-based interpretation, it does not matter that some versions of liberal theory do not logically imply the things Hazony says liberalism leads to. What matters is whether the interpretations of liberal values assumed (often implicitly) by actors within the liberal regime tend to predictably lead the regime to decisions, laws, and policies that evince a disregard for inherited traditions, constraint, and honour; and which undermine belief in these ideas among citizens. Sunstein does not attempt to refute this claim.

III.iii: Understanding Hazony’s Claims and Sunstein’s Mistake

Which interpretation of Hazony’s critique, then, is correct? I noted earlier that the mechanism for liberal collapse that Hazony supplies in the Vaughan Lecture is incomplete. Attending to the later work in which Hazony completes the mechanism will allow us to determine whether we should adopt a theory-based or a regime-based interpretation of his claims about liberalism.

In Hazony’s 2020 article ‘The Challenge of Marxism’, which later became a chapter in his 2022 book *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, he explains the mechanism for the collapse of liberalism into progressive-authoritarianism in a way that clearly shows the regime-based interpretation to be correct. I noted earlier that the first key to Hazony’s mechanism for this collapse (and thereby his argument for the two postliberal theses) is the claim that core liberal concepts like ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ are “highly abstract terms” that “cannot be given stable content” except through empirically-grounded and inherited traditions like religion and English common law.⁴⁸⁶ The genuinely liberal interpretations of these core liberal concepts (i.e., interpretations consistent with minimal liberalism), therefore, far from being established through pure reason, are in fact accepted largely because they are “inherited norms” in liberal societies.⁴⁸⁷ As I noted earlier, if the crude liberal ideas accepted by actors in liberal regimes cannot provide a strong rationale for accepting inherited norms, then Hazony’s claim that liberal interpretations of the ideology’s core concepts are accepted because they are inherited norms suffices to demonstrate the instability of liberalism. By itself, however, it does not explain why liberalism tends to collapse into progressive-authoritarianism and not into something else.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 181

⁴⁸⁶ (Hazony 2022, 349)

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 352

Hazony's *Quillette* article contains two further keys to his mechanism for this liberal collapse that explain why liberalism's successor ideology is overwhelmingly likely to be progressive-authoritarianism. The second key to Hazony's mechanism is the claim that the core concepts of progressive-authoritarianism are *also* the core concepts of liberalism, but with particular, highly demanding interpretations that, if accepted, transform liberalism into a non-liberal form of progressivism. Progressive-authoritarianism, like liberalism, relies on interpretations of concepts like 'freedom' and 'equality'; but unlike liberalism, it interprets them as requiring the elimination of all group-based power relations and inequalities.⁴⁸⁸ It therefore also interprets these concepts as requiring the infringement of the basic agency and free speech rights of traditionalists when they seem to reinforce these group-based power relations and inequalities. The second key, then, is the claim that the conceptual core of progressive-authoritarianism consists of a more demanding interpretation of the conceptual core of liberalism.

The third and final key to the mechanism is the claim that progressive-authoritarianism is better able to give *stable* content to the core values it shares with liberalism than liberalism is. Progressive-authoritarianism is based on an implicit, axiomatic assumption that all group-based power relations and inequalities are the result of oppression. It interprets concepts like 'freedom' and 'equality' consistently with this assumption.⁴⁸⁹ In contrast, liberalism has no stable means of determining which group-based inequalities are the result of oppression, except by relying on inherited understandings of liberal concepts (which, as we saw, Hazony thinks liberalism can provide no strong reason for doing).

Based on these three claims—(1) liberalism has no sufficiently strong rationale for its own interpretation of its core concepts, (2) core progressive-authoritarian concepts are more demanding interpretations of liberal ones, and (3) progressive-authoritarianism can give these concepts more stable content than liberalism can—Hazony concludes that (a) liberalism can provide no strong reason to uphold its own values when challenged by progressive-authoritarianism and that such a challenge is therefore likely to succeed, (b) that progressive-authoritarianism is highly *likely* to challenge liberalism because it relies upon interpretations of the values that liberalism propagates, and (c) progressive-authoritarianism lacks the destabilising internal dynamic of liberalism so is, after a successful challenge, likely to be a stable successor ideology to liberalism. Conclusions (a-c) constitute Hazony's complete mechanism for the Structural Radicalization Thesis (liberalism is overwhelmingly likely to decay into a successor ideology, progressive-authoritarianism that interprets liberalism's core concepts in a radicalized way) and thence the Coercive Liberalism Theses (this successor ideology is overwhelmingly likely to restrict the agency and free speech rights of traditionalists).

Hazony describes the mechanism outlined above as an "endless dance of liberalism and Marxism" that "moves only in one direction."⁴⁹⁰ The mechanism only operates, of course, if

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 343-4, 351

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 343-4

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 351

Hazony's claim that liberalism cannot provide strong reasons to uphold inherited traditions is correct; otherwise, liberals could have strong reasons to uphold their inherited interpretations of liberal concepts against progressive authoritarian challenges. As we saw earlier, Sunstein challenges claim (1) of Hazony's objecting to this claim by pointing to the existence of versions of liberal theory, such as Hayek's, which arguably *can* provide strong reasons to uphold at least some inherited norms.⁴⁹¹

Whether this challenge succeeds depends on whether Hazony's critique is theory-based or regime-based. If Hazony is claiming that no version of liberal *theory* can provide strong reasons to uphold inherited traditions, Sunstein's appeal to the existence of Burkean or Hayekian liberalism could defeat Hazony's claim or at least require it to be qualified. If, however, Hazony is claiming that the crude, vulgarised assumptions made by actors in liberal regimes cannot provide strong reasons to uphold inherited traditions, Sunstein's objection is irrelevant.

The regime-based interpretation of Hazony's mechanism is the correct one. In his *Quillette* essay, Hazony makes a crucial concession which demonstrates that he intends his mechanism to be understood as regime-based. He acknowledges that "not all liberals give in to the Marxists' demands—and certainly not on every occasion."⁴⁹² Although he does not expand on why not all liberals give in, I think it is most plausible to interpret him as accepting that some versions of liberal theory supply rationales for upholding inherited interpretations of liberal values, and that these rationales are subjectively convincing to at least some liberals.⁴⁹³ Sunstein is obviously correct that some versions of liberal theory, like Hayekian liberalism, supply such rationales. Hazony can accept this, and accept that these versions of liberal theory are internally coherent. Moreover, he can *only* accept this obvious truth without weakening his mechanism if the mechanism is interpreted in the regime-based way. Overall, then, the regime-based interpretation of Hazony's mechanism is demanded by both a close reading of his work and by a charitable desire to avoid interpreting him as making obviously false universal claims about liberal theory.

Therefore, since the regime-based interpretation is the best interpretation of Hazony's mechanism, Sunstein's critique of Hazony fails to object to the correct claims and therefore fails to refute, or even undermine confidence in, Hazony's argument for the two postliberal theses that this chapter has discussed. It is still an entirely open question whether the versions of liberal assumptions instantiated in liberal regimes are unable to supply sufficient rationales for defending liberal interpretations of the ideology's core concepts. Nevertheless, there is still one respect in which Sunstein might help us recognise limitations in the mechanisms for liberal decay into progressive-authoritarianism that Hazony, and other postliberals, have posited. This is the need to provide "microfoundations" for the relationships between the development and propagation of versions of liberal theory and the particular political practices, that are grounded

⁴⁹¹ I will not assess the correctness of Sunstein's interpretation of Hayekian liberalism here.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 351

⁴⁹³ Hazony's explicit statements would also be consistent with interpreting him as saying that some liberals hold fast to inherited interpretations of liberal concepts despite lacking any real rationale for doing so, this interpretation would make Hazony committed to the extremely implausible claim that *no* version of liberal theory can possibly supply a rationale for preserving inherited interpretations of liberal concepts.

in vulgarised liberal assumptions, of liberal regimes.⁴⁹⁴ That Koppelman and Sunstein have failed to refute the postliberal Theses as defended by Deneen and Hazony does not prove the Theses to be true. Chapter 5, therefore, will assess the all-things-considered truth of these Theses by conducting a systematic assessment of the existing empirical evidence for and against the existence of the necessary microfoundations.

Conclusion: An Enduring Burden

This chapter has demonstrated that the most developed scholarly responses to the novel postliberal critique of liberalism (i.e., the No Alternatives Argument)—namely those of Koppelman and Sunstein—have failed to refute the argument. For the most part, the liberal responses of Koppelman and Sunstein have failed to seriously engage with these postliberal claims because they conflate claims about real-world liberal regimes with claims about liberal theory. Whether liberal coexistence is possible, or conversely whether authoritarianism is inevitable, remains an open question.

I have deliberately avoided direct evaluation of the postliberal theses—the Liberal Decay Thesis that is the crucial premise in the No Alternatives Argument and the Structural Radicalization and Coercive Liberalism theses on which the Liberal Decay Thesis depends—in order to avoid complicating the issue, but it is clear that a great many people find the theses intuitively plausible. Some of these people are conservative Straussians, but others are left-liberals like Alexandre Lefebvre. If true, the postliberal theses have the extremely important implication that co-existence between progressives and traditionalists on liberal terms is impossible.

The failure of liberal responses to this postliberal critique does not necessarily mean the critique is correct. An important means of assessing this postliberal critique will be the investigation of the microfoundations connecting the development and spread of versions of liberal theory with the practices of liberal regimes. Chapter 5 will investigate these microfoundations by evaluating relevant empirical research.

I turn, then, in the following Part 2 of this thesis to evaluate the novel postliberal critique of liberalism on its own first-order merits. Chapter 4 will examine conceptual versions of the No Alternatives Argument, which claim that some conceptual feature of politics, law, or the common good makes the impossibility of realising the protection of both progressives' and traditionalists' minimal agency and free speech rights analytically true. Chapter 5 will then examine empirical versions of the No Alternatives Argument, which attempt to support the Liberal Decay Thesis through appeals to historical and social-scientific evidence. I will argue in chapter 4 that the conceptual No Alternatives Argument fails entirely, and in chapter 5 that although the Coercive Liberalism Thesis is probably true of *extant* liberal regimes, we are not warranted in judging the Liberal Decay Thesis to be true of all possible liberal regimes.

⁴⁹⁴ (Sunstein 2020, 182)

Part 2: Evaluating The Postliberal Critique of Liberalism

Introduction to Part 2

The previous Part of this thesis has outlined the postliberal critique of liberalism and shown that it has not yet been refuted. I have identified in Chapter 1 the necessary conditions of an ideology's being 'minimally' liberal as respect for minimal agency and free speech rights, minimal formal equality under the law, minimal welfare rights, and minimal accountable government. Chapter 2 then identified the full range of views that have been labelled 'postliberal' and analysed their relationship to his minimal liberalism. This chapter then identified the distinctive, novel postliberal critique of liberalism as the No Alternatives Argument, which rests on the Liberal Decay Thesis, i.e., the claim that liberalism is overwhelmingly likely to decay into progressive-authoritarianism.

The No Alternatives Argument is supposed to persuade traditionalists that, since they have no alternative and are forced to choose, they must support traditionalist-authoritarianism. Chapter 3 then showed that existing liberal responses to this No Alternatives Argument from Koppelman and Sunstein have failed to refute it, largely because they conflate claims about liberal theory with claims about liberal regimes.

Part 2 of this thesis will now directly evaluate the postliberal critique of liberalism itself. Chapter 4 will evaluate conceptual versions of the No Alternatives Argument, and Chapter 5 will evaluate empirical versions.

Chapter 4: The Conceptual No Alternatives Argument

Part 1 of this Thesis has identified the distinct and novel postliberal critique of liberalism as the No Alternatives Argument. Part 1 also showed that the No Alternatives Argument has not yet been refuted by the existing responses that liberal academics have made to the argument. Readers who wish to review the generic form of the No Alternatives Argument may revisit chapter 2, section II.

I noted in Chapter 2 that there are two distinct ways that the argument may be understood. The conceptual No Alternatives Argument holds that liberalism, specifically the protection of minimal agency and free speech rights for both progressives and traditionalists, is an incoherent ideal, and that any coherent and determinate account of political morality must either be progressive-authoritarian or traditionalist-authoritarian. According to the conceptual No Alternatives Argument, attempting to implement liberalism will result in the realisation of progressive-authoritarianism because of some kind of congruence, or affinity, between the incoherent ideal of liberalism and the coherent ideal of progressive-authoritarianism. By contrast, the empirical No Alternatives Argument accepts that liberalism is a coherent ideal but holds that, as a matter of predictable empirical regularity, it is unrealisable in actual regimes. It is this empirical version of the argument that I understood Deneen and Hazony to be making in the previous chapter. Some postliberals, however—most prominently Adrian Vermeule—place more emphasis on the conceptual No Alternatives Argument.

This chapter focuses on the conceptual No Alternatives Argument. I will first (Part I) reconstruct this argument from the writings of postliberal thinkers. I will focus my explicit discussion on Vermeule's writings, since, among postliberals, his discussion of the conceptual argument is by far the most explicit and extensive. Indeed, to my knowledge, no other prominent postliberal thinker explicitly makes the conceptual argument. I will then (Part II) evaluate the argument, and I will argue that it is unsound because liberalism is not an incoherent ideal. Vermeule, as I will demonstrate, presents arguments that may give some limited, suggestive support for the claim that versions of liberalism that reject all progressive or traditionalist perfectionism are incoherent (though, all things considered, I do not think these versions of liberalism are incoherent). His arguments do not, however, show that liberalism itself—specifically the protection of both traditionalists' and progressives' basic agency and free speech rights—is an entirely incoherent ideal.

Vermeule's arguments rely implicitly on his analysis of the "common good", specifically his belief that the coercive imposition of some kind of comprehensive conception of the common good that is itself dependent on a particular conception of human flourishing with determinate implications for the issues that divide progressives and traditionalists is conceptually necessary. I will therefore (Part III) demonstrate that this claim should not be accepted without qualification by retrieving from the work of recent 'new natural law' theorists a determinate and

precisely-specified conception of the common good, a conception which nevertheless avoids entailing the coercive imposition of either progressivism or traditionalism.⁴⁹⁵

While I believe that many versions of liberalism are coherent, not just the new natural law version or versions that centrally rely upon a conception of the common good, the new natural law version is particularly useful to examine because of the possibilities for a sophisticated and liberalism-compatible use of a traditionalism-grounded conception of the common good that it reveals. The new natural law conception of the common good provides a rationale for regarding the protection of negative liberties, including agency and free speech rights, as itself constitutive of the common good in some, but not all, domains; but this is not because the new natural law conception of the common good abstains from judgment about human flourishing in those domains. Rather, it is because negative liberty sometimes contributes directly to the common good by contributing to the realisation of basic goods constitutive of flourishing in individuals' lives. Restricting basic negative liberties can undermine the common good by destroying individual goods that require negative liberty for their realisation.⁴⁹⁶ I will show that the new natural law account of the common good is a traditionalist-perfectionist one, but prominent and plausible interpretations of it are compatible with minimal liberalism. We can confidently affirm that liberalism, as such, is *not* an incoherent ideal. The conceptual No Alternatives Argument should therefore be rejected.

I: The Conceptual No Alternatives Argument

In a series of journalistic articles and blog posts published from 2018 onwards, Vermeule has asserted that liberalism cannot, as a matter of conceptual necessity, be true to its self-presentation as avoiding the coercive imposition of any specific conception of human flourishing.⁴⁹⁷ In some of these posts, Vermeule directs readers to some of his academic works, notably *The Constitution of Risk*⁴⁹⁸ and *Common Good Constitutionalism*,⁴⁹⁹ which he thinks provides a theoretical justification for this claim about liberal incoherence. I will begin by reconstructing Vermeule's argument for liberal incoherence from these academic works as read in conjunction with the references Vermeule makes to them in his other writings, and presenting the argument in its strongest possible form.

The most explicit and direct statement of the conceptual No Alternatives Argument's key premise appears in a 2022 blog post by Vermeule entitled *Who Decides?* Vermeule writes: "The liberal ideal of law... of social order without the 'coercion' of some by others, is not merely

⁴⁹⁵ Such as (Moschella 2025; Finnis 2011)

⁴⁹⁶ See e.g. (George 2022)

⁴⁹⁷ (Vermeule 2018a, 2019, 2020, 2022a, 2022c, 2023a, 2024)

⁴⁹⁸ (Vermeule 2014, 25–88)

⁴⁹⁹ (Vermeule 2022b, 76–87; 159–91)

fantastic; it is a conceptual and logical impossibility”.⁵⁰⁰ Vermeule explains further that the “illusion” of liberals is their belief “that they can ‘believe X’... but need not ‘enforce X’”.⁵⁰¹ Before reconstructing Vermeule’s arguments for this claim about conceptual impossibility, I will first analytically unpack the claim and construct a formalised version of the conceptual No Alternatives Argument that relies upon it.

Vermeule thinks that the conceptual impossibility of liberalism, i.e., of avoiding coercion that is based upon some comprehensive conception of flourishing or other, shows that attempts to implement liberalism will in fact yield progressive-authoritarianism. Thus, Vermeule claims in a separate blog post entitled *Why I Lost Interest in the Liberalism Debate* that “there can be no such thing as liberal pluralism even in principle, because liberal pluralism is... just another monism — the special case of monism that relentlessly drives non-liberal comprehensive views from the public sphere, by coercion and the force of law if necessary”.⁵⁰² Here, Vermeule is asserting that, if reinterpreted to be conceptually coherent, liberalism is in fact a covert form of progressive-authoritarianism. In other words, interpretations of liberalism that involve the protection of basic rights for both traditionalists and progressives are incoherent, but liberalism can be made coherent through interpretations that transform it into progressive-authoritarianism and deny basic rights to traditionalists. Such interpretations, of course, are, in my terminology, not liberal at all but progressive-authoritarian.

Vermeule here clearly seems to be asserting that the liberal claim to endorse the protection of basic agency and free speech rights for both progressives and traditionalists is conceptually incoherent. I call this claim the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. This thesis holds that the only coherent interpretations of “liberalism” are substantively progressive-authoritarian.

I will later explain in more detail how Vermeule argues for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. Before engaging in more detailed exegesis, however, I will first present the formalised conceptual No Alternatives Argument, in which the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is the first premise, replacing the Liberal Decay Thesis of the generic version:

(P1 (Liberal Incoherence Thesis)): The only coherent, determinate interpretations of “liberalism” are substantively progressive-authoritarian. Interpretations that claim to protect the agency and free speech rights of both traditionalists and progressives are conceptually incoherent, so they cannot be supported by political theorists. Supporting a determinate and coherent conception of “liberalism” as a theory of political morality, therefore, entails supporting progressive-authoritarianism.

⁵⁰⁰ (Vermeule 2022c). Emphasis added. I assume that Vermeule does not mean to claim that liberalism purports to avoid *all* coercion (it presumably endorses coercion of would-be violators of individuals’ minimal agency rights, for instance), only the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of human flourishing.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid. I assume X refers to substantive beliefs about human flourishing.

⁵⁰² (Vermeule 2024). Emphasis added.

(P2): Therefore, “liberal” theories of political morality that support protecting the free speech and agency rights of both progressives and traditionalists simultaneously are either incoherent or in fact progressive-authoritarian rather than liberal.

(P3): If political theorists must (per P2) support restricting the basic agency and free speech rights of either traditionalists or progressives, they should make sure that they adopt the true conception of the good as the basis of this restriction of basic liberties, because the alternative would involve a risk of supporting removing the basic liberty to follow and express the truth, which is far worse than supporting removing the equivalent liberty to follow and express falsehood;

(P4): Traditionalist conceptions of the good (or some specific traditionalist conceptions of the good, e.g., conservative Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, etc.) are true (or more true than progressive ones), so, if forced to choose, we should support a traditionalist-authoritarian theory of political morality over a progressive-authoritarian one.

(C): Since theorists are (per P1 and P2) forced to choose between traditionalist- and progressive-authoritarianism, theorists should support traditionalist-authoritarianism.

The conceptual No Alternatives Argument is structurally parallel to the generic version of the argument. Like the generic version, the conceptual No Alternatives Argument is valid. It differs from the generic version in that it directly addresses the ideals that political theorists should support rather than features of the regimes that we should seek to bring about. The conceptual argument aims to show political theorists who are traditionalists that, if they wish to have a coherent view of political morality, they must support a traditionalist-authoritarian theory over ‘liberal’ theory because coherent versions of liberal theory turn out to be progressive-authoritarian.

The final two premises of the Conceptual No Alternatives Argument need not be contested for the same reasons that the final two premises of the generic version need not be contested. (P3) is trivially true, and (P4) is outside the scope of this thesis and of most liberal theory. (P1) provides a distinctive, conceptual reason for thinking (P2) is true. I will therefore focus on evaluating (P1) in this chapter.

II: The Liberal Incoherence Thesis

A reason for thinking (P1) might be true, and which appears congruent with the kind of comments postliberals often make, is the thought that any coherent theory of political morality cannot endorse protecting basic rights for both progressives and traditionalists because doing so would conflict with the theory’s (necessarily thick and substantive) conception of the common good. This thought, which seems to me to be implicit in the background of Vermeule’s discussion of the conceptual No Alternatives Argument, may be sketched as follows:

- (i) A coherent theory of political morality must rest on a substantive conception of the political community's common good;
- (ii) such a conception of the common good must, in turn, rest on a substantive conception of human flourishing;
- (iii) a theory of political morality based on a substantive conception of flourishing will not be liberal, i.e., will not support the protection of basic agency and free speech rights of both progressives and traditionalists.

I will call this loosely sketched thought the Common Good Thesis. I am not aware of any postliberal explicitly defending the Common Good Thesis, but, as we will shortly see, Vermeule makes two arguments for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis that appear congruent with the Common Good Thesis. These two arguments also plausibly depend on a tacit acceptance of something like the Common Good Thesis for their appeal. In Part III of this chapter, I will show that, even if parts (i) and (ii) of the Common Good Thesis are true, part (iii) of the Thesis is not. Before this, however, I will focus on rebutting the explicit arguments for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis offered by Vermeule. I will begin by reconstructing Vermeule's defences of the Liberal Incoherence Thesis's (P1) from his academic works, and presenting the defence in its strongest possible form.

Vermeule makes two main arguments in his academic works that appear to be intended to support the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. The first argument is made in the course of his critique of jurisprudential 'originalism' in *Common Good Constitutionalism*,⁵⁰³ and the second is made in the course of his discussion of constitutional mechanisms to manage the risk of abuse of power in *The Constitution of Risk*.⁵⁰⁴

Both Vermeule's arguments are, insofar as they can be reconstructed from Vermeule's explicit remarks, at least somewhat incomplete. However, Vermeule's first argument (drawing on the critique of originalism) is significantly more explicitly developed than his second (drawing on his discussion of the abuse of power in constitutional design).

I will not discuss Vermeule's second argument in detail here because it appears to be a very rough sketch of an argument, such that it would be unfair, and of limited value, to critique it. Immediately after asserting, in *Who Decides?*, that a non-coercive political order is a "conceptual and logical impossibility", Vermeule claims that "power and coercion may be shifted around, but not eliminated; power is conserved."⁵⁰⁵ The words "power is conserved" in *Who Decides?* link readers to Vermeule's academic book *The Constitution of Risk*. I therefore interpret Vermeule as claiming that his arguments in this book demonstrate the truth of his assertion that the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing can only be transferred between agents, not eliminated.

⁵⁰³ (Vermeule 2022b, 159-91)

⁵⁰⁴ (Vermeule 2014, 25-88)

⁵⁰⁵ (Vermeule 2022c). I assume Vermeule does not mean to claim that coercion of *all* kinds can only be shifted around but not eliminated; he means that the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing can be shifted around but not eliminated.

However, *The Constitution of Risk* does not explicitly defend, in detail, a claim in the close vicinity of the claim that the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing can only be transferred between agents, not eliminated. The book does defend the claim that the idea of minimising the risk of the abuse of power in constitutional design is incoherent, on the grounds that the kind of power that can potentially be abused can be shifted around but not reduced or eliminated.⁵⁰⁶ But it is hard to see, at least without further clarification from Vermeule, how we get from *this* claim to the claim that the *coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing* can also only be shifted around but not reduced or eliminated. If it is true that the *ex ante* risk of the abuse of power is invariant across constitutional systems, it does not follow that the degree to which these systems involve the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing is also invariant. There are many other ways in which power can be abused; and in any case, Vermeule does not regard the coercive imposition of particular conceptions of flourishing as always an abuse of power.

Because Vermeule's second argument seems to me to be a rough sketch, I will focus my discussion on his first argument, which builds on his critique of originalism. This argument, as we will see below, also seems to be somewhat incomplete; but Vermeule's implicit thoughts about the connection between the claims he makes about originalism and the Liberal Incoherence Thesis seem to me to be much more developed.

II.i: Originalism and Incoherence

In the previously-mentioned blog posts in which Vermeule most clearly asserts the Liberal Incoherence Thesis (*Who Decides?* and *Why I Lost Interest In The Liberalism Debate*), but especially in the former post, Vermeule makes several comments that strongly suggest that his academic critique of jurisprudential originalism is supposed to justify his assertions about the incoherence of any theory of political morality that does not involve the coercive imposition of a substantive conception of the common good, a conception which in turn essentially involves the coercive imposition of a substantive conception of human flourishing with determinate views on the issues dividing traditionalists and progressives.

In *Who Decides?*, Vermeule criticises “right-liberals”—his term for mainstream conservatives or libertarians—for a “power-skeptical” attitude, grounded in a “horror of living human authority”. Vermeule claims the belief of these “right-liberals” that “it is possible to refrain from coercion” is a “persistent conceptual illusion”.⁵⁰⁷ In this post, Vermeule refers to a review of a work of originalist legal theory as an exemplar of the kind of “right-liberal” conservatism he believes falls victim to this conceptual illusion.⁵⁰⁸ Vermeule's critique of originalism in *Common Good Constitutionalism* also contains the most detailed engagement, of all his writings, with the

⁵⁰⁶ (Vermeule 2014, 52–88)

⁵⁰⁷ Per footnote 8, *supra.*, I assume Vermeule is imputing to “right-liberals” the belief that it is possible to refrain from coercively imposing a substantive conception of human flourishing, not the belief that it is possible to refrain from all and any coercion.

⁵⁰⁸ (Vermeule 2022c). The review in question is (Grove 2021)

conceptual coherence of theories of political morality that purport to abstain from some kinds of coercion and/or of first-order moral judgment. For both these reasons, I will treat the argument that I will recover from Vermeule's chapter on originalism in *Common Good Constitutionalism* as intended by Vermeule to justify the abbreviated arguments about the incoherence of liberalism found in *Who Decides?* and *Why I Lost Interest In The Liberalism Debate*.

Vermeule's critique of originalism forms one chapter of his 2022 work of jurisprudential theory, *Common Good Constitutionalism*. The primary purpose of this work is not to critique liberalism but to develop and defend a substantive theory of constitutional interpretation grounded in a traditionalist, natural-law-based conception of the common good. In the course of defending his preferred theory of constitutional interpretation, Vermeule criticises the two dominant American approaches to constitutional jurisprudence, namely the substantively progressive "living constitutionalism" associated with the political left⁵⁰⁹ and the purportedly neutral "originalism" associated with the right.⁵¹⁰ In the course of his critique of originalism, Vermeule makes a number of claims that are relevant to the Liberal Incoherence Thesis.

Originalism comes in many variants, but its core idea is that the judiciary should interpret both constitutions and ordinary law in line with their "original" meaning at the time of promulgation or enactment. Originalists intend this interpretive method to allow the judge or legal scholar to avoid interpreting law in line with her substantive normative beliefs about what the law should be, and instead to defer to the substantive beliefs of the constitutional framers or the legislature.⁵¹¹ The variants of originalism differ principally in how they propose to conceptualise and identify the "original" meanings of constitutions and statutes.⁵¹²

Vermeule begins his critique of originalism by identifying two areas of ambiguity in originalist theory, which give rise to indeterminacy in the possible results of originalist reasoning. The first area of ambiguity is the "level of generality" at which the "original" meaning of a constitutional provision or statute is to be interpreted. A highly specific reading of a provision or law would identify its "meaning" with the "specific applications" or "expectations" of the framers or enactors, while more abstract readings identify meaning with general normative principles contained in or implied by the "abstract semantic content" of the provision or law.⁵¹³ The second area of ambiguity arises from the distinction, adopted by originalists, between the "interpretation" and the "construction" of law. "Interpretation" is supposed to determine the law's actual semantic meaning, a process which includes the identification of any areas of ambiguity in this meaning. "Construction" is then supposed to determine what the statute implies in these ambiguous areas. For originalists, construction may include references to substantive political morality, precisely because the strict meaning of the law 'runs out', so to speak, in these areas of ambiguity; but interpretation should be a purely formal exercise based on deference to the

⁵⁰⁹ (Vermeule 2022b, 200–220). There is no conceptual necessity for 'living constitutionalism' to be progressive, but in practice the term refers to a progressive-inflected method of legal interpretation.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 159–91

⁵¹¹ (Cornell Law School 2022)

⁵¹² (Solum 2011, 28–30)

⁵¹³ (Vermeule 2022b, 162)

intentions of the framers or lawmakers.⁵¹⁴ The core of Vermeule's critique consists of the argument that both the choice of levels of generality,⁵¹⁵ and the interpretation (not just construction) of the meaning of law, necessarily rely on substantive principles of political morality, and that originalism has no resources by which to choose which such principles to rely upon.⁵¹⁶

This critique is supposed, though Vermeule does not spell this out with full explicitness, to support his claim that liberalism, which purports to at least sometimes abstain from relying on fully substantive principles of political morality, at least if and insofar as those principles refer to comprehensive conceptions of flourishing, is also incoherent for the same reasons that originalism is. Thus, Vermeule's critique of originalism is supposed to contain or imply an argument for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. I will first construct Vermeule's argument for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis in its strongest possible form before explaining why I believe it does not succeed in the form in which Vermeule has thus far presented it.

Building on the two sources of indeterminacy in originalist theory mentioned above—in the level of generality at which to ascertain the original meaning of law, and in the interpretation of law's original meaning itself—Vermeule argues that it is conceptually impossible to determine the “original” meaning of a law without referring (explicitly or implicitly) to substantive principles of political morality. To demonstrate this point, Vermeule cites Dworkin's critique of originalism, with which he agrees, despite his profound disagreement with Dworkin about which substantive principles of political morality judges and legal scholars should refer to.⁵¹⁷

Vermeule, relying on Dworkin, argues that originalism is ambivalent as to whether “original” meaning should be ascertained by appeal to the specific “expected applications” that a law's makers intended or to “the principles embodied” in the law's “semantic content”.⁵¹⁸ Vermeule, still citing Dworkin, then claims that any choice between these two interpretive strategies (either in a particular case or as a general interpretive principle) can be made only on the basis of substantive “normative principles of political morality”.⁵¹⁹

Vermeule does not just argue that choosing between these interpretive strategies requires reference to substantive principles of political morality. He also claims that the strategies themselves are either indefensible (in the case of appeal to “specific expectations”) or collapse into direct reliance on substantive principles of political morality (in the case of appeal to principles embodied in semantic content). Appealing to the lawmaker's “specific expectations” provides no basis for extrapolating the law to “new cases” that the makers did not envisage, a result which Vermeule (reasonably enough) finds unacceptable. This extrapolation is only

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 162-3

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 165

⁵¹⁷ (Vermeule 2022b, 164-7). The relevant texts by Dworkin are (Dworkin 1990) and (Dworkin 2020 [1996])

⁵¹⁸ (Vermeule 2022b, 163). As I will explain shortly, I think that Vermeule has neglected an important third possibility.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 165

possible on the basis of “a theory about the point” of the law.⁵²⁰ Yet Vermeule argues (still relying on Dworkin) that if the originalist theorist accepts that such a theory about the law’s point must be appealed to, originalism collapses into a theory that relies upon substantive principles of political morality for its interpretive work, making it “originalist... only in the most nominal sense”.⁵²¹ And this result will hold true a fortiori for the other interpretive strategy, appealing directly and openly to “principles” in the law’s “semantic content”, because this strategy explicitly adverts to substantive “principles” of political morality in order to interpret law. Moreover, the reliance on the semantic content of the written legal text will not constrain the role of these substantive principles significantly. Even if we accept, argues Vermeule, that “words possess fixed and durable meanings over time”, the indeterminacy of the appropriate level of generality at which to interpret the words of a law (do the words refer to specific applications or more general principles? If they refer to principles, how general are the principles?) means that these fixed and durable meanings do not constrain the interpretive process sufficiently to avoid reliance on substantive theories of political morality.⁵²²

As I noted above, Vermeule appears to think, based upon the blog posts in which he asserts the Liberal Incoherence Thesis, that the argumentation contains in, or derivable from, his critique of originalism demonstrates, or at least strongly suggests, the Thesis’s truth. I will therefore now attempt to reconstruct the implicit stages of the argument in the strongest possible way.

The chain of reasoning on which Vermeule implicitly relies appears to proceed roughly as follows:

- i) The originalist claim to abstain from judgement about substantive principles of political morality is incoherent (at least if originalism is a theory capable of yielding actual legal judgements);
- ii) This originalist claim to abstention is analogous to the kind of claim to abstention that liberals sometimes make about judgements about human flourishing;
- iii) Therefore, by analogy, any liberal claims to abstention from judgement of first-order questions about human flourishing is also incoherent.
- iv) Liberalism’s endorsement of basic rights for both progressives and traditionalists can only be coherently understood with reference to a claim to abstention from judgement of at least some first-order questions about human flourishing;
- v) Liberalism’s endorsement of basic rights for both progressives and traditionalists is incoherent (thus, the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is true).

I noted when discussing Vermeule’s blog posts on the issue that he appears to treat originalism as a stand-in for theories of political morality that purport to abstain from judgment about at least some first-order moral questions. The purpose of the Dworkinian argument against originalism discussed above, then, seems to be to show that originalism, and by analogy other such abstemious theories, are incoherent insofar as they actually abstain from substantive, first-order

⁵²⁰ Ibid. Emphasis original.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 166

⁵²² Ibid., 168

moral judgment, and coherent, but no longer abstemious, insofar as they only rhetorically purport to abstain from such judgements but in fact implicitly rely upon them. Vermeule claims not only that actual abstinence in the case of originalism commits the legal theorist to an incoherent set of claims, but also that the theorist who abstains in this way is therefore unable to derive any verdicts. By analogy, I think Vermeule would also claim—and we should accept this claim—that if actual abstinence in the case of liberalism commits the political theorist to an incoherent set of claims, the political theorist is unable to derive any determinate judgements about political morality.⁵²³

Vermeule thinks, in other words, that he can infer from the fact that originalism must rely upon substantive judgments about first-order moral questions to be made coherent that liberalism must also rely upon such judgments to be made coherent. He thinks that relying upon such judgements is inconsistent with the liberal endorsement of basic rights for both progressives and traditionalists. Vermeule therefore concludes that the aspiration to a “social order without the ‘coercion’ of some by others” (meaning the coercive imposition of either progressivism or traditionalism) “is a conceptual and logical impossibility”.⁵²⁴

I believe that Vermeule’s argument, at least in the form in which I have reconstructed it, does not succeed for several distinct reasons. First, the argument is, at most, only as strong as Vermeule’s argument (which relies upon Dworkin) for the incoherence of the originalist claim to abstain from judgment about first-order questions of political morality. Yet *this* argument is not entirely persuasive.

While Vermeule is surely correct to identify the dilemma in originalist interpretation between specific expectations and extrapolation via purposive reading of the law’s “principles”, this does not vitiate the coherence of originalist claims to abstention. Relying upon the specific expectations of lawmakers and relying upon the law’s purposes as interpreted through the lawyer or legal theorist’s own preferred substantive principles of political morality do not exhaust the methodological possibilities. A third option, which Vermeule does not consider, is that the lawyer or legal theorist rely upon substantive principles of political morality, but not upon her own principles; instead, she could attempt to identify the substantive principles of political morality that the lawmakers believed to justify the law in question, while abstaining from judgment about the soundness of these principles. The lawyer or legal theorist would still need to decide at what level of generality to interpret these principles, but there is no reason (certainly none that Vermeule has provided) to think that she could not do so by attempting to identify the level of generality at which the thinking of the lawmakers themselves operated.

It is possible, of course, that Dworkin’s critique of originalism is sound despite the limitations of the critique in *Common Good Constitutionalism*, which relies upon Dworkin. Perhaps Dworkin makes additional, stronger arguments that Vermeule does not mention. I take no position here on the soundness of Dworkin’s critique of originalism. Yet even if it is true that Dworkin’s critique

⁵²³ An instance of *ex falso quodlibet*. From an incoherent set of claims, *anything* can follow; thus, nothing *determinate* follows.

⁵²⁴ (Vermeule 2022c).

succeeds, and that originalism is therefore incoherent, there are further reasons why Vermeule's argument for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis does not, in its current form, succeed.

The respects in which originalism and liberalism purport to abstain from moral judgement are very disanalogous, so the argument by analogy from originalist incoherence to liberal incoherence will not succeed. The second problem with Vermeule's argument for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is precisely that Vermeule does not appear to take sufficient account of this disanalogy. Step (ii) in the chain of reasoning from originalist incoherence to liberal incoherence is therefore unjustified.

Originalists claim that lawyers and legal theorists should abstain from judgement about the principles of political morality bearing on the inherent merits of a law when interpreting the law's meaning. Liberals make different claims. Some versions of liberal theory, such as Rawlsian liberalism, involve significant forms of abstention: Rawlsian lawmakers are supposed to abstain from judgment about overall comprehensive conceptions of human flourishing, and to make laws and political decisions (in at least some domains) solely on the basis of their contribution to the "primary goods" valued by all citizens irrespective of the conception of flourishing they affirm.⁵²⁵ Of course, Rawlsian lawmakers are not supposed to abstain from judgement about all substantive ideals of political morality; the ideals that justify the Rawlsian requirement to abstain from judgement about comprehensive conceptions of flourishing are themselves substantive principles of political morality. Thus, even forms of liberalism that involve significant forms of abstention are disanalogous to originalism in that they do not involve abstention (in any context) from judgement about all principles of political morality.

Other versions of liberal theory require far less abstention and permit perfectionist lawmaking. Perfectionism is compatible with minimal liberalism, provided perfectionist policies are pursued in non-coercive and non-discriminatory ways that respect citizens' minimal agency and free speech rights, as well as minimal egalitarianism. One might, with some at least *prima facie* plausibility, interpret the minimally liberal idea of respecting the free speech and agency rights of citizens irrespective of their conceptions of flourishing as involving a weak and limited form of abstention from judgment about those conceptions of flourishing (this is step (iv) of Vermeule's implicit reasoning). However, it is not obvious that this idea involves such abstention, and I take no position here as to whether this is the case and whether the premise contained in step (iv) is true.

Vermeule does not pitch his critique at Rawlsian liberalism, anti-perfectionist liberalism more generally, or some other specific version of liberal theory. Vermeule thinks that he can show the incoherence of a "social order without the 'coercion' of some by others".⁵²⁶ Thus, he aims his critique directly at the minimally liberal idea of agency rights. Even if the idea of agency rights *does* involve a weak kind of abstention from judgement about first-order moral questions, there

⁵²⁵ See (Rawls 2005, 39–40). Rawls clearly thinks that this abstention requirement applies to laws pertaining to "constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice" and is ambivalent as to whether this applies to other laws.

⁵²⁶ (Vermeule 2022c)

is no clear analogy between the abstention involved in originalism and the abstention involved in respecting agency rights. Originalist abstention concerns all substantive principles of political morality and is localised to the role-specific duties of judges; the liberal abstention involved in respecting agency rights involves (if it exists at all) some kind of abstention from judgement about human flourishing, but not about all substantive principles of political morality, and liberal abstention applies to lawmakers as well as judges (and for some liberals, also to ordinary citizens, activists, etc).

Thus, even if Vermeule's argument had successfully shown that originalist abstention from judgement—about the morality of the laws being interpreted—is incoherent, he not shown that Rawlsian or anti-perfectionist liberal abstention from judgement—about comprehensive conceptions of flourishing—is also incoherent. *A fortiori*, he has not shown that the abstention from judgement that may be involved in or implied by the minimally liberal idea of respecting everyone's agency and free speech rights regardless of the conception of flourishing they affirm is incoherent. Thus, even if the claim in step (iv) is true, the falsity of the claim in step (ii) (the analogy between originalist and liberal abstention from judgement) vitiates the reasoning.

For these reasons, I conclude that Vermeule's argument for the Liberal Incoherence Thesis by way of the critique of originalism, in its current form, does not succeed.

As I noted earlier, no other postliberal thinker, aside from Vermeule, appeals to detailed arguments that purport to justify the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. Nevertheless, the fact that no postliberal has demonstrated the thesis does not mean that the thesis is false. I noted above that a *prima facie* somewhat plausible reason for suspecting the thesis might be true is the worry that a coherent, determinate view of political morality might (i) necessarily rest on a conception of the common good that (ii) in turn rests on a particular conception of flourishing, which (iii) implies that this conception should be coercively imposed (I called this the Common Good Thesis).

Something like this thought seems to operate in the background of Vermeule's discussion of the Liberal Incoherence Thesis. Vermeule, and other postliberals, certainly think that the concept of the common good is and ought to be central to a defensible theory of political morality.⁵²⁷ Vermeule's belief in the necessity of relying on the concept of the common good seems to play an implicit role in motivating his rejection of originalism, since this rejection is intended by Vermeule persuade conservatives to embrace his alternative theory of 'common good constitutionalism' as a superior master framework for legal reasoning.⁵²⁸ Similarly, Vermeule's frequent references to The Constitution of Risk when discussing the Liberal Incoherence Thesis suggest that Vermeule thinks optimising constitutionalism is a part of, or at least congruent with, common good constitutionalism.

In the final part of this chapter, I will now aim to defeat this generic worry about the common good, and show that the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is false.

⁵²⁷ On the centrality of the common good to postliberalism, see (Borg 2025, 138–59)

⁵²⁸ See (Vermeule 2020)

III: The Common Good, Revisited

To show that the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is false, we must show that at least one coherent version of liberal theory, which is genuinely liberal and not covertly progressive-authoritarian, exists. It would, I think, be possible to show that most versions of liberal theory, including progressive-perfectionist, neutralist, and traditionalist-perfectionist varieties, are coherent (even if they still fall prey to the empirical No Alternatives Argument, and thus cannot be implemented in real-world regimes without decaying into progressive-authoritarianism—I will discuss this empirical version of the argument in the next chapter. For now, I bracket this worry about the practical realisability of a coherent version of liberal theory).

However, it would be particularly interesting if there existed a prominent traditionalist-perfectionist account of political morality, compatible with minimal liberalism (or at least plausibly interpretable as compatible with it), giving a central role to a conception of the common good, but on which postliberals do not focus in detail. The account in question is that of the theory of “new natural law” (NNL). This section shows that the NNL theory of political morality (i) rests on a substantive conception of the common good that (ii) in turn rests on a substantive (and traditionalist) conception of human flourishing, but that it (contra (iii)) can be plausibly interpreted as compatible with the minimal liberal ideal of avoiding the coercive imposition of this substantive conception of flourishing. Thus, I will show that the postliberal appeal to the purported necessity of political morality’s reliance on the common good, and thence on particular conceptions of flourishing, does not show that liberalism is an incoherent ideal. Indeed, I aim to hoist these postliberals by their own petard: I will show that relying on the concept of the common good, and in turn on a substantive conception of flourishing, can in fact be a means of justifying liberalism in a robust and coherent fashion. Thus, even if steps (i) and (ii) of the Common Good Thesis are justified, step (iii) is not.

The NNL theory is the most prominent and sophisticated academic theory of political morality developed by traditionalists in recent decades.⁵²⁹ NNL differs from ‘classical’ natural law theories, which purport to derive moral and political norms from a teleological conception of ‘nature’, in that it abstains (or purports to abstain) from reliance upon controversial metaphysical claims.⁵³⁰ Rather, NNL theorists believe that the reality of several incommensurable, ultimate, and intrinsically valuable ‘basic goods’ can be demonstrated dialectically: denying the value of these basic goods entails performative contradiction since it is impossible for human agents to act consistently with this denial over time.⁵³¹ NNL theorists then derive determinate norms of personal and political morality from these basic goods. The foundational moral principle of NNL is that we should act always consistently with a will towards realising all basic goods for all

⁵²⁹ For a brief, accessible summary of the theory see (Moschella 2025). For a far longer, comprehensive, and theologically-inflected summary see (Grisez 1983-1997). For a mid-length, sophisticated discussion of some of the theory’s key elements, see (Finnis 2011).

⁵³⁰ New natural law theorists typically claim that this approach is in fact faithful to medieval natural law theorists like Aquinas (see e.g. Moschella 2025, 37-43). I am not interested in whether this claim is true; readers who are may consult (Finnis 1998) and compare it with Aquinas’s works.

⁵³¹ For instance, a person who claims knowledge has no value must decide whether she claims to ‘know’ this, and whether it matters that she does. See (Finnis 2011, 73–78)

people; from this, other norms, like the rule against destroying basic goods, the Golden Rule, or (more derivatively) rules directing the political authority to protect certain civil liberties, are derived.⁵³² The theory is traditionalist because the basic goods are taken to include “marriage”, conceived of as sexual union conducive to the rearing of children, and “religion”, conceived of as the pursuit of harmony with any higher power(s) that may exist.⁵³³ The moral principles that govern responses to the basic goods therefore involve at least some role for the ‘strong evaluation’ of human desires.⁵³⁴

The common good is the central normative concept in both Vermeule’s substantive theory of political morality and the NNL theory of political morality. Vermeule describes the view that “law should be... a reasoned ordering to the common good” as “the centerpiece of the classical legal tradition”, i.e., the tradition he defends.⁵³⁵ Similarly, Melissa Moschella’s recent defence of NNL theory asserts that “natural law directs us to form political communities”, and that “communities are defined by the common good for which they exist”.⁵³⁶

A coherent and fully determinate conception of the common good needs to address several conceptual issues—issues that, I will argue, Vermeule’s conception of the common good, in its current form, does not fully address, but which are far more clearly addressed by the NNL conception.

To date, few scholars have attempted to provide a detailed conceptual analysis of the ways in which conceptions of the common good can vary. One of the few such analyses to have been published, that of Mark Murphy, distinguishes between “instrumentalist”, “distinctive good”, and “aggregative” conceptions. Instrumentalist conceptions identify the common good with communally-provided *means* to individual flourishing. Distinctive good conceptions identify it with a good not reducible to either the individual flourishing of the community’s members or the means to this flourishing. Aggregative conceptions identify it with the aggregate flourishing of the community’s individual members.⁵³⁷

Murphy’s framework leaves several important ways in which conceptions of the common good vary unaddressed. The framework leaves unanalysed several variables that, in any given conception of the common good, need to be specified in order to yield a fully determinate conception. In a previously published paper analysing postliberal ideology, I provided a framework for analysing conceptions of the common good along four dimensions.⁵³⁸ I believe these dimensions are exhaustive of the variables that need to be specified to yield a fully

⁵³² (Moschella 2025, 51–64; Finnis 2011, 108–141)

⁵³³ (Moschella 2025, 20–21)

⁵³⁴ I do not think NNL theory *necessarily* endorses or relies upon epistemic deference. Thus, NNL theory as such is not *paradigmatically* traditionalist. Still, the theory *does* necessarily endorse strong evaluation, so it is traditionalist to some extent.

⁵³⁵ (Vermeule 2022b, 11). Emphasis added.

⁵³⁶ (Moschella 2025, 120)

⁵³⁷ (Murphy 2006, 61–3)

⁵³⁸ See (Williams 2025a, 107–8). Some passages in the following four paragraphs are reproduced or adapted from my earlier work here.

determinate conception of the common good. Since, to my knowledge, no other academic literature has attempted such a properly exhaustive analysis, I will rely on my framework in the following demonstration of the greater determinacy and coherence of the NNL conception of the common good vis-a-vis Vermeule's conception.

I approach the analysis of conceptions of the common good by noting, initially, the scalar distinction between holistic and individualistic conceptions. A maximally holistic conception would identify the common good with entirely free-floating collective values that do not supervene on individual goods in any way, and which override individual goods in importance whenever there is a conflict. For instance, we might identify the common good with a value like 'civilisational greatness', and identify this value with a set of rituals in whose value individuals are not viewed as participating,⁵³⁹ and that are not conceived of as improving individuals' lives. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a radically individualistic view would conceive of the common good as a simple summation of all the individual goods of the community's members. For instance, one interpretation of classical utilitarianism could claim that all individuals have a relational duty to collectively promote the overall welfare of all members of the community, deriving from everyone's "interest" in the overall welfare of everyone else.

Since most theorists will probably find both extreme views of the holistic-individualistic question—the common good as consisting of overwhelming, free-floating collective goods, and the common good as mere summation of all individual goods—implausible, most interesting questions about how to conceptualise the common good arise from the dimensions along which intermediate conceptions can vary.

There are four such dimensions. The first dimension concerns the *scope* of the common good—whether it incorporates all the goods of the individuals in the community, or only some of them, leaving some goods with a purely individual locus. Do all members of the community have a relational duty to collectively promote all the interests of all individual members of the community, or are some interests left out of this duty? For instance, is all of an individual's economic welfare, including their ability to afford creature comforts, a part of the common good, or are some aspects of individual welfare purely 'private' goods that members of the community lack a relational duty to collectively promote?

The second dimension concerns the kind of *operation* by which those individual goods that do comprise the common good are related. Does the common good simply aggregate certain individual goods or use some more complex distributive function like the difference principle?⁵⁴⁰ We can phrase this question as asking how collective duties entailed by distributive or

⁵³⁹ Rituals cannot occur without individuals participating in them, of course. But the *value* of the rituals could be thought of as floating entirely free of the interests of the individuals participating.

⁵⁴⁰ Admittedly, the difference principle only concerns the common good in a fairly weak sense. It will be fairly easy (some may think too easy) to show that many theories of political morality rely upon a conception of the common good in this weak sense. But this result will not affect any substantive conclusion of this chapter, since I am prepared to concede step (i) of the Common Good Thesis for the sake of argument; if step (i) is false, all my claims about the Liberal Incoherence Thesis remain true *a fortiori*.

communal conceptions of the common good, which are duties deriving ultimately from individual interests that members of the community have relational duties to promote, are to be derived from those interests: do we have duties to maximise the fulfilment of those interests, or to prioritise some over others for reasons of justice? If both distributive functions and aggregation factor into the specification of the duties, we can further ask how we should weight the sum of individual goods against distributive relationships (e.g., are distributive constraints lexically prior to aggregative considerations, as in the difference principle, or merely weightier in a non-absolute sense)?

Third, we need to consider the role that duties derived from interests in irreducibly *relational* goods play within the common good. For instance, what is the role in the common good of goods like flourishing relationships between friends, colleagues, or family members, that plausibly cannot be reduced to the individual goods of specific friends, colleagues, etc.? Does our conception of the common good imply that relational duties to collectively promote interests held by all members of the community relate to interests in relational goods in a different manner to interests in individual goods? And does fulfilling our relational duty to promote the common good through providing the relevant facilities itself constitute an intrinsically valuable relational good of a distinct type and value, or is it merely instrumentally valuable?

Finally, we should ask: how, if at all, does the common good *reflexively* impinge on the goods of individuals? If the common good in some sense supervenes on other, individual or relational, goods, is an individual's good, in turn, reflexively enhanced to some extent simply by virtue of belonging to a community whose common good is flourishing? In other words, if relational duties to promote interests held by all members of the community are being fulfilled effectively, does this automatically, by virtue of conceptual necessity, make the lives of individuals within the community better; and if so, to what degree does it make them better?

A fully coherent and determinate conception of the common good must imply a determinate position on each of these four dimensions. I will now show that, in contrast to Vermeule, NNL theory possesses such a coherent and determinate conception of the common good. I will also show that this conception of the common good depends on a particular, substantive conception of flourishing, but that NNL theory is nonetheless plausibly interpretable as compatible with minimal liberalism.

Vermeule emphasises that the common good is not the mere “sum of separate private utilities”, but this does not tell us a great deal.⁵⁴¹ This is a clear rejection of an extreme, reductive individualism and a crude summative approach to the dimension of *operation*; but it does not fully address the four dimensions on which the relationship between individual and common goods can be assessed. Vermeule also makes a strong claim about reflexivity: he asserts that individual flourishing is “essentially... dependent upon” the common good of the political community and that this communal flourishing is the individual's “highest good”.⁵⁴² Vermeule's conception of the common good is mostly indeterminate with respect to the first three

⁵⁴¹ (Vermeule 2022b, 56)

⁵⁴² Ibid., 59

dimensions along which conceptions of the common good vary (scope, operation, and role of relational goods). His conception's precise implications for reflexivity are also far from fully clear. We know that Vermeule rejects a summative view of operation and that he endorses a strong reflexivity claim (that the common good is also the highest good of individuals, in some sense). Aside from these two points about which Vermeule is explicit, the rest of his conception of the common good has not been fully worked out in an explicit and determinate way.

By contrast, Moschella's recent exposition of NNL theory provides a conception of the common good with very determinate and explicit implications along all four dimensions (scope, operation, role of relational goods, and reflexivity).

First, the *scope* of the common good in NNL theory is limited. I noted above that NNL theory begins with the incommensurable basic goods that contribute to the good of individuals, then derives moral and political norms from these. Various forms of community, Moschella argues, are necessary to secure the basic goods for individuals. Among these communities is the coercive community of the state. The state's role, however, is not to promote the "all-inclusive common good" but only the "specifically political common good", which is that part of the common good which the state is competent to promote.⁵⁴³ This part of the common good consists of "the conditions that enable the community's members to pursue their own flourishing", where this flourishing is defined as individual participation in the various basic goods.⁵⁴⁴

Second, though space does not permit a full exposition here, NNL provides a framework for working out the *operation* by which duties deriving from interests in individual goods are factored into the common good. Because the various basic goods are incommensurable, the goodness of an individual's life cannot be quantified, so there is no sense in speaking of aggregating individual goods. However, the only intrinsic goods in NNL theory are basic goods that can necessarily be enjoyed only by individuals,⁵⁴⁵ and this is why the common good consists merely of "the conditions that enable" individuals to "pursue their own" basic goods.⁵⁴⁶ Provisionally, then, even without a full exposition of the operation that links individual goods and the common good in NNL theory, we can say that the common good stands in a subsidiary relationship to individual goods, consisting of the political community's collective fulfilment of a duty to realise a set of conditions that permit individuals to pursue their own goods.

Third, NNL theory offers a precise and well-developed account of *relational* goods and their role in the common good. Of the seven basic goods usually recognised by NNL theorists, two of them ("friendship" and "marriage") are relational goods between persons.⁵⁴⁷ Although, as I noted above, the political community in NNL theory is for the most part subsidiary and instrumental to

⁵⁴³ (Moschella 2025, 20–21)

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 134. Emphasis original.

⁵⁴⁵ Though some of these goods, like "marriage", cannot be enjoyed by individuals *alone*.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19–20. Finnis does not include "marriage" but includes "play". See (Finnis 2011, 95–6). The reasons for this are tangential to our discussion here.

individual goods, it can also intrinsically realise the basic and intrinsic relational good of friendship in a limited way.⁵⁴⁸

Finally, NNL theory has clear implications for the question of *reflexivity*. Since, for the most part, the political common good is subsidiary and instrumental to individual goods, the realisation of the political common good contributes to the goodness of individuals' lives only instrumentally and not intrinsically. The exception to this is the intrinsic goodness of the "friendship" that the political community can, in a limited way, realise; here, the flourishing of the political community is also an intrinsic, but very limited, part of the good of individuals, so individuals' goods are reflexively dependent on the common good to this limited extent.

The above, I think, suffices to show that the NNL theory has a coherent and determinate conception of the common good. I already noted that the NNL theory of political morality gives a central role to its substantive conception of the common good. This is consistent with part (i) of the Common Good Thesis, which holds that all coherent theories of political morality rely on a substantive conception of the common good. Because the common good is subsidiary to individual goods, which are defined by NNL as the basic goods that practical reason must purportedly recognise on pain of self-inconsistency, the NNL conception of the common good is dependent on a substantive conception of human flourishing. This is consistent with part (ii) of the Common Good Thesis, which holds that all coherent and determinate conceptions of the common good must depend on particular conceptions of human flourishing. In what follows, I will show that the NNL theory is nevertheless plausibly interpretable as consistent with the minimal liberal requirement to respect basic agency and free speech rights for both progressives and traditionalists, thereby showing that it is a counterexample to part (iii) of the Common Good Thesis, which holds that any conception of political morality ultimately dependent on a substantive conception of human flourishing must be illiberal in virtue of endorsing the coercive imposition of that conception. Thus, the plausible compatibility of the perfectionist, common good-centric NNL theory with minimal liberalism vitiates the Common Good Thesis and shows that the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is false even if we grant parts (i) and (ii) of the Common Good Thesis.

Most NNL theorists who have addressed the topic think that the theory provides compelling rationales for protecting the basic agency and free speech rights of both traditionalists and progressives; and all such theorists believe that it provides a compelling rationale for protecting most of the civil and political liberties familiar from liberal regimes.⁵⁴⁹ Disagreement among these theorists exists over whether the theory permits paternalistic restrictions on basic agency rights when restricting these rights is a prudent means of bringing about cultural conditions in which it is easier for individuals to choose to respond to the basic goods, rather than to fail to respond to them.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ (Moschella 2025, 155–6). Cf. the idea of "civic friendship" in (Leland 2019)

⁵⁴⁹ (Moschella 2025, 142–54; Finnis 2001, 6; Tollefsen 2013; George 1995, 189–229)

⁵⁵⁰ On the anti-paternalist side, see (Tollefsen 2013; Finnis 2001, 6). On the pro-paternalist side, see (George 2000, 31)

The NNL rationale for protecting basic agency rights arises from the subsidiary nature of the limited political common good that the state exists to secure. As I explained above, the specifically political common good has a “restricted scope” because of the normative primacy that NNL theory gives to individual goods.⁵⁵¹ Only individual goods are of ultimate and intrinsic value. Individuals need various types of community to secure these goods, and the authority of these communities arises from these needs. The need for a specifically political community, i.e., the state, arises from the need for families and voluntary associations to coordinate their actions, resolve disputes, provide for public goods including security, and ensure the vulnerable are cared for when families and voluntary associations cannot provide this care.⁵⁵² Public goods, on this schema, are not limited to material public goods like infrastructure but can also include “public morality”, defined as the community’s material and cultural environment insofar as it influences individuals’ choices to respond appropriately to, or not to respond appropriately to, the basic goods.⁵⁵³

Because all the basic goods are, intrinsically, individual goods (though in the case of marriage and friendship, they are relational goods), and not collective goods, and the existence of communities, including political communities, is justified only by their contribution to these individual goods, the state has no legitimate authority to act beyond its subsidiary role in promoting those aspects of the common good (coordination, dispute resolution, public goods, social welfare) that families and voluntary associations cannot effectively promote without its help.⁵⁵⁴ This subsidiary nature of state authority means that the state has no legitimate authority to interfere with individuals’ choices except when doing so is a much more effective and efficient means of protecting one or more of the aspects of the political common good outlined above than relying on the action of individuals, families, or voluntary associations. The details are beyond the scope of this chapter; but, from this restriction on government authority, NNL theorists derive rationales for most of the civil liberties familiar from liberal regimes.

Disagreement among NNL theorists about paternalistic restrictions on basic agency rights arises from disagreement about the scope of the “public morality” aspect of the state’s public goods-provision function. For John Finnis, the subsidiary nature of the political community means that its legitimate concern for public morality can extend only to the regulation of public behaviour, and not to punishing “secret and truly consensual adult acts of vice”.⁵⁵⁵ Finnis’s view would permit the government, by virtue of its legitimate role in upholding public morality, to restrict “advertising or marketing” of services deemed to involve the undermining of basic goods, but not to directly prohibit behaviour deemed to do so, if it is carried out in private and therefore does not affect the community’s public morality.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵¹ (Moschella 2025, 142)

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 136-7

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 134; (George 2000). For instance, pornography affects a community’s moral ecology if and insofar as its availability influences individuals’ choices to pursue, or not pursue, the good of marriage. See (George 1999)

⁵⁵⁴ (Moschella 2025, 144–50)

⁵⁵⁵ (Finnis 2001, 8). By “vice”, Finnis here simply means the kind of act that undermines the realisation of basic goods; the argument does not depend on any wider virtue-ethical claims.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

Robert P. George challenges this view and argues that no “strict principle of justice excludes the criminal prohibition” of such private or secret acts that undermine the realisation of basic goods,⁵⁵⁷ since “‘secret’ vices have a way of not staying secret”; they therefore, for George, have a way of impinging on the community’s public morality even if performed only in private between consenting adults. In other words, just because a vicious action is performed in private and seen by nobody but the consenting adult participants, it does not follow that it will have no impact on the norms and expectations of the community as a whole. When such vices are unpunished, George argues, they are likely to become at least tacit public knowledge even if practiced in secret, and therefore also likely to become accepted as morally permissible and thereby to transform a community’s public morality.⁵⁵⁸

Finnis’s perfectionist but anti-paternalist position would render the implications of NNL theory consistent with minimal liberalism, because the prohibition on criminalising private vice would protect the basic agency rights of progressives to engage in actions that traditionalists deem vicious (because undermining of basic goods, or for other reasons). George’s paternalist position is inconsistent with minimal liberalism.⁵⁵⁹ In this chapter, I take no position as to whether George or Finnis has more correctly ascertained the implications of NNL theory for the moral legitimacy of paternalism.⁵⁶⁰

Even if Finnis’s position is incorrect, however, it is not internally incoherent, and it does not render NNL as understood by Finnis internally incoherent. It would merely add to the theory a superfluous prohibition on criminalising private vice for which the theory can supply no adequate rationale. This would, of course, make NNL-based liberalism dependent on some kind of rational mistake, but this would not be a problem for my purposes. Here, as throughout this thesis, I take no position on the overall soundness of liberalism as a view of political morality. I have no need to defend the soundness of any argument for minimal liberalism, NNL-based or otherwise. I have aimed here only to demonstrate that NNL can plausibly be interpreted as providing a coherent and determinate, common-good centric, traditionalist-perfectionist account of political morality that is nevertheless compatible with minimal liberalism. I think the above argumentation has met this burden fully. Thus, I conclude that NNL theory provides a counterexample to the Liberal Incoherence Thesis and a refutation of the Common Good Thesis that appears to be the most *prima facie* plausible background reason for supporting the Liberal Incoherence Thesis.

⁵⁵⁷ (George 2000, 26). Emphasis original.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 31

⁵⁵⁹ George’s view of political morality is, in my terminology, a traditionalist-authoritarian one. But because George thinks there are usually strong *prudential* reasons not to criminalise private acts of vice; because he defends the other components (minimal egalitarianism, minimal accountable government, minimal welfare rights) of minimal liberalism; and because he defends *most* of the civil liberties that protect minimal agency and free speech rights (see George 1995, 189-229), his in-principle endorsement of a paternalist qualification of certain minimal agency rights makes his view a fairly *mild* kind of traditionalist-authoritarianism.

⁵⁶⁰ Moschella (2025, 144) sides with Finnis in this debate. Personally, I am persuaded by George’s argument, but think there are other good, principled reasons to avoid criminalising at least certain kinds of private vice.

Therefore, as I argued above, even if Vermeule is correct that every coherent view of political morality must be based on some thick conception of the common good that itself depends on a particular conception of human flourishing, it does not follow that every coherent view of political morality must be anti-liberal. I have provided a counterexample to this universal claim about liberal theory; therefore, I conclude that the Thesis is false.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the Liberal Incoherence Thesis is false and the conceptual No Alternatives Argument is therefore unsound. Coherent liberal accounts of political morality exist. The conceptual No Alternatives Argument should be rejected. Perhaps a better version of the argument could be developed that would respond to my argument against the Common Good Thesis; until that time, we are warranted in assuming that liberalism as a theory is not incoherent.

Having rejected the conceptual No Alternatives Argument as resting on a false premise, I will now turn, in the next chapter, to the empirical version of the argument. Just because the claim that there is no alternative to progressive or traditionalist authoritarianism is not conceptually true, it does not follow that it is false; it might be empirically true, in virtue of facts about the predictable consequences of trying to apply the (coherent) ideal of liberalism in real-world regimes. I now turn to address this possibility directly.

Chapter 5: The Empirical No Alternatives Argument

This chapter will evaluate the empirical arguments advanced by postliberals for the Liberal Decay Thesis and thereby for the soundness of the No Alternatives Argument. As we will recall from Chapter 2, the Liberal Decay Thesis holds that no regime can stably and durably protect the basic negative liberties—specifically the agency and free speech rights necessary to order one's life by, and to act on, one's conception of human flourishing—of both progressives and traditionalists, because liberal regimes will necessarily decay into progressive-authoritarian ones.⁵⁶¹ If the Liberal Decay Thesis is true, the No Alternatives Argument for postliberalism is sound, because, forced to choose between progressive-authoritarianism and some version of

⁵⁶¹ See Introduction, Part II.iii on 'regimes' and Part II.iv on progressivism and traditionalism).

traditionalist-authoritarianism, traditionalists should opt for a version of the latter,⁵⁶² so that political authoritarianism does not remove the basic liberties of citizens to profess and act on the *true* conception of flourishing.⁵⁶³

Postliberals advance two main types of argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis. The previous chapter has evaluated *conceptual* arguments aiming to show that no theoretically coherent account of political morality avoids both progressive-authoritarianism and traditionalist-authoritarianism, and I found that these arguments fail entirely. This chapter will, assuming that there *is* such a theoretically coherent account of political morality, evaluate *empirical* arguments that it is nevertheless true, as a matter of fact, that no regime can stably and durably avoid both progressive-authoritarianism and traditionalist-authoritarianism with respect to personal ethics, religion, and sexuality. These arguments, advanced by some postliberals, appeal to claims about the causes of particular characteristics of political regimes. These arguments claim that any realisable liberal regime has an overwhelming likelihood of decaying into progressive-authoritarianism with respect to these issues, and that therefore only traditionalist-authoritarian regimes can avert the threat of progressive-authoritarianism.

Any empirical argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis must be inductive in character. It must infer, from evidence about the causes of the relevant features of current or past political regimes, that there exist causal regularities that make it near-impossible to durably realise the protection of basic liberties of both progressives and traditionalists, with respect to the abovementioned issues that divide them, in any regime. It would impose an unreasonably high epistemic burden to insist that a successful inductive argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis must demonstrate the strict *inevitability* of the decay of liberalism into progressive-authoritarianism, but it must do more than show that this decay is *probable* in order to *automatically* justify traditionalists, by their own standards, in being traditionalist-authoritarians. To render the No Alternatives Argument fully persuasive to its intended audience, i.e. traditionalists who find liberalism attractive, the empirical arguments must show that the Liberal Decay Thesis is *overwhelmingly probable*.

This chapter will not engage in first-order, original argumentation about the causes of various trends in liberal states. However, it will review the best available evidence, adduced by postliberals and others, that bears on the Liberal Decay Thesis and determine the extent to which this evidence makes the thesis probable. I will argue that the evidence does not suggest that the decay of liberal regimes into progressive-authoritarianism is *overwhelmingly probable*, as postliberals claim. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to judge that it will, probably, prove *difficult but not impossible* to counteract the tendency of liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarianism. The No Alternatives Argument fails on its own terms, but nevertheless shows that there are good *pro tanto* reasons to be concerned about a possible decay of liberal regimes into progressive-authoritarianism.

⁵⁶² The precise version of traditionalist-authoritarian they opt for will depend on the specific version of traditionalism they affirm.

⁵⁶³ See Chapter 2, Part II for a discussion of the No Alternatives Argument

Indeed, some traditionalists may regard the mere risk of liberal decay into progressive-authoritarianism as sufficient to warrant rejecting liberalism, and decide that traditionalist-authoritarianism is a better regime type overall because it avoids the risk of this plausible and extremely bad outcome. I will discuss how traditionalists should respond to the risk of decay into progressive-authoritarianism and the assurance problem it creates in the introduction to Part 3 of this thesis.

This chapter will evaluate a series of claims that serve as premises in the argument for the Liberal Decay Thesis. This Thesis applies, as I have previously noted, to the universe of realisable liberal regimes. This universe contains both existing liberal regimes and (if any have existed) historic liberal regimes, as well as hypothetical liberal regimes that have never existed. Nothing can be known, directly and empirically, about hypothetical regimes that have never existed. We could only know about such regimes empirically by inference from empirical evidence about existing or historic liberal regimes that do or did exist. I will therefore focus on three issues: (1) the tendency of *actually-existing* liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarianism (discussed in Part I), (2) the tendency of *historic liberal* regimes to do so, if any have existed (discussed in Part II), and (3) the correct inductive inferences to draw from our best assessment of (I) and (II) (discussed in the Conclusion).

Therefore, Part I of this chapter evaluates the claim made by postliberals that *existing* liberal regimes contain powerful structural forces tending to make progressive-authoritarianism likely to emerge. I call this claim, interpreted in this chapter as specifically referring to existing liberal regimes and *not* the universe of possible liberal regimes, the Coercive Liberalism Thesis. Part II then evaluates the claim, also made by postliberals, that no *historic* regime has ever been stably liberal and not decayed into progressive-authoritarianism (here, I will argue that it is probable that no premodern regime has ever been liberal at all). The conclusion will then evaluate the claim that we can inductively infer from the claims about existing and historic regimes that the decay of any realisable liberal regime into progressive-authoritarianism is *overwhelmingly probable*.

I will argue in this chapter the Coercive Liberalism Thesis (discussed in Part I) is *probably true*, and that the claim that no historic regime has ever been liberal (discussed in Part II) is also *probably true*. I will argue in the conclusion, however, that it is *unwarranted* to inductively infer from these *probably true* descriptive claims that the Liberal Decay Thesis is *overwhelmingly likely* to be true, i.e., that it is *overwhelmingly likely* that the structural forces tending to make progressive-authoritarianism more probable will necessarily eventually produce a decay of *any* existing or realisable liberal regime into full-fledged progressive-authoritarianism. Rather, the most warranted inference from the *probable truth* of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes and the *probable truth* of the claim that no historic regime was stably liberal is the conclusion that it will be *possible, but difficult* to counteract the tendency of extant liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarianism. This is the most warranted inference because the most probable mechanism underpinning the decay of liberal regimes into progressive-authoritarian ones is a mechanism that could, in principle, be mitigated by relatively feasible policy changes (some of which I will discuss in Part 3 of this thesis).

For the most part, the postliberal defenders of the empirical No Alternatives Argument do not appeal to social scientific evidence in a systematic way. In part, this reflects the difficulty in scientifically evaluating the kind of sweeping claims about present and past societies on which the empirical No Alternatives Argument rests. Nevertheless, where possible, I will evaluate the social scientific evidence adduced by postliberal and postliberal-adjacent thinkers,⁵⁶⁴ as well as other evidence that seems to be relevant. As we will see shortly, the various types of evidence adduced by postliberals and adjacent thinkers for the Coercive Liberalism Thesis and the Liberal Decay Thesis fall into the domains of several different academic fields, including sociology, history, political science, and anthropology. Since my aim is not to pass judgement on specialised debates in these fields but rather to evaluate the plausibility of a few broad generalisations deployed by postliberals and adjacent writers, and specifically to determine whether the claims are sufficiently plausible to support the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, i.e. the claim that existing liberal regimes have a deep, *overwhelmingly probable* structural tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism unavoidable, I will not require any highly specialised methodological tools to make these judgements. I will simply review the results of relevant specialist research in various fields and interpret their relevance to the Theses in question.

I: Coercive Liberalism in Existing Liberal Regimes

In order for the empirical case for the Liberal Decay Thesis (which applies to the universe of *possible* liberal regimes) to get off the ground, postliberals need to prove what I have called the Coercive Liberalism Thesis: that *extant* liberal regimes, because of their liberalism, contain powerful structural tendencies towards the decay into progressive-authoritarianism. If the Coercive Liberalism Thesis is false, the Liberal Decay Thesis automatically fails because the unavoidability of authoritarianism would simply be refuted by the reality of stable liberalism in contemporary liberal regimes with respect to the issues dividing progressives and traditionalists.

The Coercive Liberalism Thesis may be decomposed into two component claims: (i) that support for, and occurrence of, progressive-authoritarianism in contemporary liberal regimes is rising; and (ii) that this support is strongly driven by deep *structural features* of these liberal regimes that are *connected to their liberalism*.⁵⁶⁵ If both (i) and (ii) are true, it follows that progressive-authoritarianism will continue to gain ground, and eventually replace liberalism, if liberal regimes preserve any form of liberalism (the truth of (i) and (ii) would thus make liberalism self-undermining over a long enough time horizon). We saw in Chapter 4 that Koppelman—at the time of writing, the liberal theorist who has engaged most systematically with the Coercive Liberalism Thesis—concedes the truth of (i) but denies the truth of (ii), arguing that observed trends towards progressive-authoritarian are more a historical “blip” than a

⁵⁶⁴ By adjacent thinkers, I mean thinkers who share many concerns with postliberals, but who may not consistently identify themselves as postliberals.

⁵⁶⁵ At least to the kind of liberalism presently instantiated in these regimes. I do not claim these deep structural causes will persist if *any* kind of liberalism is instantiated in these regimes.

reflection of the liberal regime's deep structural dynamics.⁵⁶⁶ Other liberals deny the truth of (i).⁵⁶⁷ I will argue that the existing empirical evidence suggests that (i) is *almost certainly true* and that (ii) is less certain but still *probably true*. The Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes is therefore, overall, *probably true*.

I.i: Trends in Progressive-Authoritarianism

Recall that progressive-authoritarianism refers specifically to the denial of basic agency and free speech rights to traditionalists with respect to traditionalists' distinctive conceptions of flourishing. Traditionalism, as explained in the this thesis's introduction, is a scalar concept identifying the degree to which a conception of the good supports, on the one hand, the *strong evaluation* of desires and preferences (i.e., evaluation using criteria that entirely transcend desire or preference), and, on the other hand, *epistemic deference* to particular persons or institutions when making judgements about the good (for instance, the conservative Catholic belief that one should defer to Magisterial teaching) on the other hand.

Both academic and popular arguments about progressive-authoritarianism tend to cause confusion by conflating traditionalism with right-of-centre beliefs about political justice, often especially the cluster of beliefs that this thesis's introduction labelled 'nationalism'. Typically, discussions about the 'woke' movement or the 'illiberal left' describe the people whose basic liberties are purportedly under threat very vaguely, using loose terms like 'religious believers' or 'social conservatives'.⁵⁶⁸ Authors unsympathetic to progressive-authoritarianism's purported victims often use pejorative terms (X-ist, Y-phobic).⁵⁶⁹

Thus, much of the evidence appealed to in popular discussion of progressive-authoritarianism consists of evidence of persons or institutions appearing to be censored or sanctioned—whether legally or socially—for expressing or acting on two categories of views, namely socially conservative views of *personal ethics* and right-of-centre views of *national identity*. Traditionalism, however, refers only to the first category of beliefs, about *personal ethics*. Views of human flourishing—such as conservative interpretations of the Abrahamic religions—that ascribe value to moral constraints in these areas, whose function is not reducible to protecting the compossible expression of individuals' desires, are necessarily traditionalist.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁶ (Koppelman 2022, 1549)

⁵⁶⁷ I am not aware of scholarly arguments that argue for the falsity of (i), but the claim is widespread in popular commentary. See e.g. (Mirza 2021)

⁵⁶⁸ E.g. (McArdle 2019; Milbank 2023)

⁵⁶⁹ E.g. (Salmon 2019)

⁵⁷⁰ This implies that 'objective list' theories of the good are traditionalist unless the 'objective' list is somehow indexed to what people desire. Such lists obviously need not imply traditionalist views on family, sexuality, etc such as those affirmed by conservative interpretations of the Abrahamic religions. The fact that political issues around family, sexuality, and religion are the salient ones impinging on the progressive/traditionalist divide in contemporary liberal regimes is to a large extent a historical and cultural contingency. We could imagine a different set of 'culture wars' around, say, intoxicants and artistic excellence rather than family, sexuality, and religion.

As I showed in the Introduction, there is no necessary link between traditionalism and right-of-centre views of national identity. There is a degree of congruence between these two sets of views insofar as traditionalism is congruent with communitarianism, but traditionalists do not have to identify the nation-state as the normative locus of community. The purported censorship of right-of-centre views of national identity is an important issue, but it is not the topic of this chapter.⁵⁷¹ The Coercive Liberalism Thesis is about traditionalism, not right-of-centre views of national identity. Of course, it is possible that progressive-authoritarians might be motivated by the same ideological beliefs that also motivate restricting free speech rights regarding right-of-centre views of national identity. Nevertheless, there is no need to rely on indirect evidence like restrictions on the free speech of nationalists in order to identify progressive-authoritarianism that targets traditionalists. We can focus on the direct evidence concerning this possibility.

The focus of my discussion of the empirical evidence for progressive-authoritarianism, then, will be evidence of the denial, or burdening, of basic agency and free speech rights with respect to traditionalist beliefs about bioethics, sexual ethics, gender, and family structures. To sharpen the issue further, I distinguish between three forms of burden purportedly placed on traditionalists that are conflated by much of the popular literature. The first form of burden is direct *legal restriction*. Instances of legal restriction of the relevant views are, necessarily, instances of progressive-authoritarianism. For instance, a law declaring that assertion of the intrinsically heterosexual nature of marriage automatically constitutes legally prohibited hate speech would legally restrict the expression of traditionalist views about marriage and thus qualify as a denial of traditionalists' basic free expression rights. Similarly, a law that forces religious institutions to affirm non-conventional gender identities by using individuals' preferred pronouns in their internal affairs would legally restrict persons from ordering their lives in accordance with traditionalist beliefs about gender and thus constitute a denial of traditionalists' basic agency rights.⁵⁷² Direct legal restrictions on traditionalists' basic agency and free speech rights are obviously instances of progressive-authoritarianism.

However, there are two ways in which the liberal regime might unequally burden traditionalists over progressives that do not obviously and automatically constitute progressive-authoritarianism. These are (a) *preferential weighting* and (b) *social sanctioning*. *Preferential weighting* involves systematically giving more weight to interests in expressing and living in accordance with progressive doctrines than traditionalist ones, when these interests conflict. Where two values, whose *pro tanto* force both traditionalists and progressives can, consistently with their respective conceptions of flourishing, acknowledge, come into conflict—for instance, in the potential conflict between protection from anti-LGBT discrimination and religious freedom for traditionalists⁵⁷³—*preferential weighting* systematically gives more weight to the value that demands the burdening of the free speech and agency rights of

⁵⁷¹ See Introduction, Part II.iv

⁵⁷² A law requiring use of preferred pronouns in externally-facing communications would probably be construable as a regulation of the 'time, manner, and/or place' of speech and thus as compatible with minimal free speech rights.

⁵⁷³ As in legal disputes like ("Lee (Respondent) v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and Others (Appellants) (Northern Ireland)" 2024, 303 *Creative LLC v. Elenis* 2023)

traditionalists than that which demands the burdening of progressives. *Social sanctioning* occurs when individuals and institutions attempt to punish the expression or following of traditionalist views without using legal coercion.⁵⁷⁴ *Social sanctioning* thus includes the patterns of denunciation, disinvitation, disruptive protest, dismissal from employment, and other phenomena often aggregated under the label ‘cancel culture’, when these are directed against traditionalists in virtue of their holding socially conservative views on personal ethics, etc.⁵⁷⁵

I.i.a: Social Sanctioning and Preferential Weighting

Whether either preferential weighting or social sanctioning constitute progressive-authoritarianism is reasonably contestable. Plausible arguments could be given, consistent with minimal liberalism, on both sides of this question. Some readers may judge that social sanctions and preferential weighting can burden traditionalists’ agency and free speech sufficiently to constitute a denial of those rights, while others may judge that these phenomena can only reduce the ‘value’ of these rights for traditionalists, in a manner consistent with the protections required by minimal liberalism. In Rawlsian terms, some reasonable political conceptions of justice will include in their schemes of basic liberties protections and immunities against some forms of preferential weighting and social sanctioning. These conceptions of justice will hold that some instances of these phenomena therefore constitute violations of basic liberties. Other reasonable conceptions of justice will hold that, because the degree and kind of coercion these phenomena impose is different to that imposed by legal restriction, citizens’ interests in avoiding unfavourable preferential weighting and social sanctioning are part of what Rawls calls the “general good” but not part of citizens’ basic rights.⁵⁷⁶ These conceptions of justice will therefore hold that the state may legitimately practice preferential weighting and encourage social sanctioning if it judges that doing so will advance overall social welfare or increase the ‘value’ of some people’s basic rights.⁵⁷⁷

I will take no position as to whether preferential weighting and social sanctioning ever constitute violations of basic liberties, and therefore no position on whether the purported increase in the degree to which traditionalists are subjected to these phenomena constitutes direct evidence for an increase in progressive-authoritarianism. I do not wish to make this chapter’s argument contingent on a contested view of the legitimacy of preferential weighting or social sanctioning. However, even if preferential weighting and social sanctioning never constitute progressive-authoritarianism, they may still provide indirect evidence of progressive-authoritarianism. If the increasing prevalence of preferential weighting and social sanctioning is caused by mechanisms that are also likely to produce increasing legal restriction

⁵⁷⁴ For a discussion of “social coercion” in general, see (Elford 2021)

⁵⁷⁵ On ‘cancel culture’, see (Dershowitz 2020; Lukianoff and Schlott 2023)

⁵⁷⁶ (Rawls 1997, 774)

⁵⁷⁷ On the requirements of a reasonable political conception of justice, see (Rawls 1997, 774). For a discussion of the normative wrongs involved in *social sanctioning* see (Elford 2021). For a defence of the view that *social sanctioning* should be the subject of serious normative analysis see (Radzik 2020)

on traditionalists in the near future, then the prevalence of these first two phenomena is evidence of a mechanism likely to cause the increasing prevalence of the third.

I will therefore place more weight in this discussion on direct evidence of growing legal restriction. However, I will also argue that preferential weighting and social sanctioning are increasing, and that the trends in prevalence of all three of these phenomena have a common, structural cause that is plausibly likely to increase the prevalence of progressive-authoritarianism in the future. Readers who think preferential weighting and social sanctioning can constitute progressive-authoritarianism will find nothing to disagree with, and may consider my conclusions overdetermined, while readers who think preferential weighting and social sanctioning cannot constitute progressive-authoritarianism will still be able to accept my argumentation.

Some of the more prominent arguments purporting to show the structural growth of progressive-authoritarianism appeal only to evidence of growing social sanctioning and preferential weighting. The occasion for the original coining of the term “coercive liberalism” by Edward Oakes was in fact a perception of growing preferential weighting.⁵⁷⁸ In a more systematic attempt to demonstrate the existence of growing progressive-authoritarianism, the postliberal-adjacent political scientist Darel Paul⁵⁷⁹ argues that debates over balancing LGBT rights protections and religious freedom are increasingly regarded by progressives as a “zero sum game”, and that this shows they have embraced progressive-authoritarianism. However, Paul addresses only questions about this balance that pertain to weighting the competing rights in the management of public accommodations.⁵⁸⁰ For Paul’s argument to show the increasing prevalence of legal restriction and thence progressive-authoritarianism, as opposed to merely the increasing preferential weighting of anti-LGBT discrimination above religious freedom for traditionalists in public accommodations, he would have to show that progressives also seek to control what traditionalists may do or say within their own *private* families or religious organisations. Paul does not attempt to do this

Similarly, Steven D. Smith’s *Pagans and Christians in the City*, a work often cited by postliberal-adjacent writers to defend the claim that progressive-authoritarianism is increasing, does not address legal restriction directly.⁵⁸¹ Smith argues that prevailing progressive rationales for according religious freedom to traditionalists can justify tolerating traditionalism only “in a shrinking domain outside the city walls”, beyond “an ever-expanding public sphere”; but he concedes progressives still have strong rationales for refraining from seeking to altogether “extinguish...” traditionalism.⁵⁸² Smith seems to think progressives are thus still committed to preserving enough of a ‘private’ sphere to protect at least basic rights for traditionalists. Smith’s arguments, like Paul’s, therefore do not provide *direct* evidence for the increasing prevalence of progressive-authoritarianism. I will return to the question of whether they provide *indirect*

⁵⁷⁸ (Oakes 2011b)

⁵⁷⁹ Paul writes for *Postliberal Order*, run by leading postliberal thinkers. See (Paul 2023)

⁵⁸⁰ (Paul 2018, 178–197)

⁵⁸¹ E.g. (Perry 2023)

⁵⁸² (Smith 2021, 365)

evidence for this trend later, when assessing prevailing rationales for progressive-authoritarianism and for preferential weighting and social sanctioning. Whether Paul or Smith succeed in demonstrating structural mechanisms for the trend towards progressive-authoritarianism will depend on what rationales motivate and justify the phenomena they identify.

First, I will address the question: are the social sanctioning of traditionalist views and unfavourable preferential weighting of traditionalists' interests in living by and expressing those views increasing in prevalence?

The evidence that social sanctioning is increasing is fairly clear. Attempts to measure so-called 'cancel culture' have found that instances of attempted sanctioning of traditionalist opinions in academia, journalism, and other professions have increased sharply over the last fifteen years.⁵⁸³ Similarly, a longitudinal study of attitudes towards the social sanctioning of traditionalists in these professions—for instance, support for disciplining or dismissing employees, or 'no platforming' speakers at universities, for expressing traditionalist beliefs about homosexuality—showed sharp rises in support over the same time period.⁵⁸⁴

While there has been a decline in instances of (attempted) sanctioning of traditionalist opinions in these professions since 2020, the most recent data suggests the decline is very small relative to the increase that occurred during the 2010s, leaving the current (2025) frequency many multiples higher than the 2010 baseline.⁵⁸⁵ Social sanctioning, then, is clearly increasing.

Assessing preferential weighting requires analysis of developments in legal doctrine and case law, since legislative change bearing on the relevant weightings is infrequent, and legislation itself tends to be vague and capable of significantly divergent interpretations. Though it is plausible that preferential weighting increased during the notable legal victories won by the LGBT rights movement,⁵⁸⁶ in recent years the trend appears to have reversed in the UK and the US. Julian Rivers has carried out what is plausibly the most systematic study of relevant legal doctrines in the UK. In 2020, he worried that legal doctrine could conceivably evolve towards progressive-authoritarianism, through the erection of a "confessional state... based on the implausible religion of self-worship", but nevertheless concluded that this did not appear to be the interpretive path chosen by the courts.⁵⁸⁷ Since Rivers's study, more recent developments in British law clearly show a move towards the explicit protection of liberties for traditionalists, even when they appear to be in tension with some conceptions of LGBT rights.⁵⁸⁸ The case law in the US shows an even clearer trend towards the protection of the liberties of traditionalists, with the

⁵⁸³ (Lukianoff and Schlott 2023, 22, 59)

⁵⁸⁴ (Voorhes and Lendler 2018, 4). To my knowledge, this is the only extant longitudinal study addressing this question.

⁵⁸⁵ (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression 2023, 9)

⁵⁸⁶ This was the occasion for the alarm of scholars like Paul and Smith.

⁵⁸⁷ (Rivers 2020, 193). The "religion of self worship" clearly captures my concept of progressivism, describing a conception of flourishing that rejects strong evaluation (thus, one's desires are the ultimate criterion of ultimate value, or 'worship').

⁵⁸⁸ E.g. (*Forstater v. CGD Europe*) 2021, (*Higgs v. Farmor's School*) 2025)

Supreme Court prioritising the right of traditionalists to decline to provide services where doing so would involve expressing affirmative beliefs about LGBT relationships that these traditionalists reject.⁵⁸⁹ These legal developments seem to have cut off any slide towards greater preferential weighting for the time being.

Overall, the major English-speaking liberal regimes are witnessing medium-term increases in social sanctioning (despite moderate short-term declines) but stabilisation in preferential weighting. The present stabilisation of preferential weighing does not strongly speak against the plausibility of the claim that progressive-authoritarianism is rising. This is because preferential weighting, due to its close links to judicial doctrine, is a poor indicator of long-term structural trends in public attitudes. Whereas social sanctioning is largely an organic, bottom-up phenomenon,⁵⁹⁰ preferential weighting can only be implemented by judicial and political decisions—usually, given the infrequency of new legislation on these issues, judicial ones. Because the ideological composition of the judiciary in contemporary liberal regimes tends to change only slowly over time, and these changes are often not directly responsive to changes in public opinion, changes in preferential weighting should not be used as a test for changes in underlying background attitudes towards traditionalists' basic agency and free speech rights over short and medium-term horizons. It is, of course, true that, over long enough time periods, the views of the judiciary will be influenced by larger social forces that are often connected to changes in public opinion,⁵⁹¹ but in the medium-term we can not infer from stabilisation in preferential weighting that progressive-authoritarianism, or support for progressive-authoritarianism, has also stabilised or is not increasing.

I.i.b: Legal Restriction

If medium-term trends are towards increasing social sanctioning and stable preferential weighting, what about legal restriction?

I noted above that the most prominent arguments cited by postliberals—specifically, those of Paul and Smith—purporting to show an increase in progressive-authoritarianism are of limited force because they treat preferential weighting and social sanctioning as direct evidence of progressive-authoritarianism. Readers who do not consider these phenomena ever to constitute denials of basic liberties will not be convinced by these arguments. We need to assess evidence

⁵⁸⁹ E.g. (*303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* 2023). Although in this case, the relevant actions of the traditionalist service providers were construed as speech; it is less clear what the Court would conclude in cases where this construal is not possible.

⁵⁹⁰ See (Kaufmann 2024a, 30, 77). Progressive-authoritarianism is a major component of the “woke” “progressive extremism” that Kaufmann’s book analyses. Of course, the bottom-up nature of social sanctioning does not necessarily mean it is driven by trends in majority opinion, as opposed to trends in the attitudes of vocal minorities or in the relative vocality and power of different groups.

⁵⁹¹ There is obviously *some* link between public opinion and judicial doctrine, especially where judges are elected or appointed by elected officials and where judges’ judicial philosophies are a salient factor in such election and appointment processes (e.g. the US Supreme Court), but the link is an indirect one, mediated by many other factors.

for increasing legal restriction to settle the question of the *direct* evidence for trends in progressive-authoritarianism without appealing to controversial claims about the injustice of preferential weighting and social sanctioning, even if these two phenomena can sometimes be *indirect* evidence of progressive-authoritarian attitudes.

In at least one area of law, we have clear and direct evidence for the increasing prevalence of legal restriction. This evidence concerns campaigns to ban so-called anti-LGBT ‘conversion therapy’, campaigns in which many activists and politicians have expressed clear support for outright legal restriction of certain traditionalist views of sexuality.⁵⁹²

In the UK, the ‘Ban Conversion Therapy Coalition’ explicitly calls for the criminalisation of “casual conversations” and “private prayer”, when these conversations or prayers have the “predetermined purpose” of changing a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵⁹³ The Coalition’s chair, Jayne Ozanne, described an existing ban in Victoria, Australia, as a legislative “gold standard”.⁵⁹⁴ Official legal guidance in Victoria identifies advising an LGBT person to pursue “...celibacy, or abstinence” as a crime.⁵⁹⁵ The campaign thus explicitly aims to criminalise non-coercively advising LGBT people to follow the view, held by some traditionalists, that celibacy is morally preferable to actively engaging in non-heterosexual sexual relationships.⁵⁹⁶

This campaign, in the form it has taken in the UK and parts of Australia, therefore clearly aims at instantiating a form of progressive-authoritarianism with respect to views on LGBT sexual conduct. The express intent to ban “casual conversations” and “private prayer” is qualitatively distinct from Smith’s worries about a “shrinking domain” of negative liberty: when casual and private conversations and activities are illegal, the domain no longer exists at all. Nor does this campaign merely evince preferential weighting against traditionalists, for it expressly aims at criminalising a specific form of advice or counsel even if given in paradigmatically private settings, such as a meeting between a religious leader and a parishioner seeking spiritual counsel.

I am not aware of any other widely-supported progressive campaigns that clearly and unequivocally constitute progressive-authoritarianism. A possible objection against drawing inferences about wider trends from the campaigns to ban ‘conversion therapy’ is that these campaigns evince an highly unusual form of overreach for reasons that are contingent and specific to the issue of ‘conversion therapy’. I will respond to this argument shortly when discussing the causes of the trends towards progressive-authoritarianism.

Another hypothetical form of progressive-authoritarianism that is the subject of significant (in this case, academic) debate is the proposal to abolish the ‘ministerial exception’ from anti-discrimination laws, and thereby force religious institutions that do not wish to hire women

⁵⁹² Nothing in what I say here implies that criminalising more paradigmatic forms of anti-LGBT “conversion therapy”, like abusive and un-evidenced medical treatments, constitutes progressive-authoritarianism.

⁵⁹³ (Coalition 2024)

⁵⁹⁴ (Christian Institute 2024, 4)

⁵⁹⁵ (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 2022)

⁵⁹⁶ (Williams 2024b)

or sexual minorities as ministers to do so against their will. Abolishing this exception would be a form of progressive-authoritarianism because it would make it legally impossible for many traditionalist religious communities to organise themselves in line with particular traditionalist beliefs about the metaphysical and theological significance of sex, gender, and sexuality. Some liberal theorists, such as Clare Chambers, have supported the abolition of the ‘ministerial exception’;⁵⁹⁷ some others, such as Lori Watson and Christie Hartley, have endorsed preserving it only when the religion in question does not have a level of influence over society that the theorists deem likely to excessively affect wider social norms and attitudes to women and sexual minorities.⁵⁹⁸ However, unlike the case of ‘conversion therapy’ bans, abolishing the ministerial exception does not appear to be the object of any significant and influential real-world political campaign in the major English-speaking liberal democracies. It appears, then, that the contemporary broad and sweeping campaigns against ‘conversion therapy’ constitute the only major campaigns currently aiming at unambiguous forms of progressive-authoritarianism via legal restriction in the major English-speaking democracies.

To sum up the empirical situation as appraised thus far: social sanctioning is undergoing a medium-term (c. 15-year) increase, but a modest short-term (c. 5-year) decline; and preferential weighting is currently fairly stable (for the last c. 5 years), albeit after a previous period of increase. Regarding legal restriction, a small number of contemporary and novel (since c. 2020) campaigns in several liberal polities evince, on the issue of ‘conversion therapy’ bans, direct and unequivocal support for this legal restriction and thus for progressive-authoritarianism. The recent growth of these campaigns and the unpopularity of other forms of legal restriction like abolishing the ministerial exception suggests that there is a trend to increasing support for progressive-authoritarianism from important actors in liberal regimes, but from a very low baseline.

Having appraised the empirical facts about trends in these areas, we should now assess what we can infer from these trends about the (1) *rationales* on the basis of which people come to support social sanctioning, preferential weighting, and outright progressive-authoritarianism; and (2) the *causes* of acceptance of these rationales.

If we understand *what* people who support *social sanctioning*, *preferential weighting*, and/or outright progressive-authoritarianism believe justifies their support, and *why* they find these justifications compelling, we will be in the best position possible to answer the question of the following section (ii). This question asks whether the various trends towards the greater burdening of traditionalists discussed above are connected to deep structural features of contemporary liberal regimes, connected to these regimes’ liberalism, that tend to produce greater progressive-authoritarianism over time; or, conversely, whether these trends constitute a mere “blip” driven by highly contingent features of these regimes that are largely unrelated to their ways in which their structures manifest liberalism. In other words, does the empirical evidence described above support the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, and if so, to what degree?

⁵⁹⁷ (Chambers 2018, 138–45)

⁵⁹⁸ (Watson and Hartley 2018, 123–4)

I.ii: Are the Trends Structural?

I.ii.a: Rationales

Whether the evidence above supports the claim that there is a deep structural cause, connected to the liberalism of liberal regimes, responsible for the trends I have identified, depends on the *rationales* that motivate, or are used to justify, legal restriction, preferential weighting, and social sanctioning of traditionalists by power-holders in the regime or by ordinary citizens.

If those rationales, when analysed carefully, imply that more radical legal restrictions on traditionalists than currently exist should be introduced, and if belief in those rationales is plausibly linked to a deep structural feature of liberal regimes connected to their liberalism, then it will be plausible that there is a structural tendency for liberal regimes to increasingly decay into progressive-authoritarianism. This will vindicate the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes.

Some postliberal-adjacent thinkers, who have distinguished preferential weighting and social sanctioning from incontestable progressive-authoritarianism, have attempted to argue that these two phenomena have structural causes that will lead to greater progressive-authoritarianism via legal restriction in the future, because they are caused by ideological commitments to rationales that imply that this legal restriction is all-things-considered desirable, i.e., rationales that imply reasons to support legal restriction while not implying sufficiently strong countervailing reasons. Rod Dreher, for instance, describes these two phenomena as “soft totalitarianism”, and argues they are driven by an ideology that contains within it rationales for ‘hard’ coercion of traditionalists.⁵⁹⁹ While Dreher’s argument is crude and imprecise, I think its core claim is highly plausible, as I will attempt to show below.

To assess whether prevailing rationales for preferential weighting or social sanctioning also contain or imply a rationale for uncontestable progressive-authoritarianism via legal restriction, we may present a rationale as an argument and analyse its premises. If those premises imply that greater uncontestable progressive-authoritarianism than presently exists is desirable, then—regardless of whether the individuals affirming the rationale recognise this implication—we have identified the kind of structural cause of progressive-authoritarianism that postliberals believe exists. If people’s affirming this rationale is plausibly *caused* by the liberal regime’s liberalism, we have confirmed the plausibility of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes. I will argue that it is *plausible* but not *overwhelmingly probable* that rationales with the relevant characteristics exist and that belief in them is caused by the liberal regime’s liberalism.

As with the rationales for any complex social and political phenomenon, people are inclined to affirm multiple overlapping rationales for supporting social sanctioning, preferential weighting, and legal restriction of traditionalists, and these rationales often stand in tension with each other.

⁵⁹⁹ (Dreher 2020, 55–76)

To show that the trend toward support for progressive-authoritarianism is structural and caused by liberal regime's liberalism, we need to identify the most salient rationales that have the relevant features. The rationales should be *believed* by persons who support social sanctioning, preferential weighting, and/or legal restriction, and should be *radicalising*, i.e., should imply that significantly more progressive-authoritarianism than currently exists is desirable.

Since, as we saw with the 'conversion therapy' issue, it is in cases where LGBT rights stand in tension with the free speech and agency rights of traditionalists that we see the greatest explicit support for progressive-authoritarianism, I will start by examining rationales for progressive-authoritarianism affirmed by left-of-centre participants—i.e., those who prioritise LGBT rights above the rights of traditionalists when tension exists—in debates about this topic.⁶⁰⁰ The most systematic scholarly attempt to assess whether the rationales for this prioritisation are radicalising is found in a 2011 paper by legal scholar Douglas Laycock.⁶⁰¹

Laycock cites the testimony of the LGBT rights activist and legal scholar Chai Feldblum.⁶⁰² Feldblum argues that laws against anti-LGBT discrimination—both in public accommodations and elsewhere—impose a morally significant burden on service providers with traditionalist views of gender and sexuality, and that imposing this burden must be carefully justified in each case. She nevertheless holds that it is all-things-considered right to impose the burden in the vast majority of cases.⁶⁰³ I will not comment here on the substantive merit of Feldblum's view. Her view does not appear to rely upon a radicalising rationale. What is notable, however, is that her view is—by her own admission—rejected by the “vast majority” of LGBT rights activists in favour of views that rely on far more radicalising rationales.⁶⁰⁴

This “vast majority” of LGBT rights activists, according to both Feldblum and Laycock, reject the view that laws against anti-LGBT discrimination impose any morally significant burden on traditionalist service providers.⁶⁰⁵ Rather, this majority believes—according to both scholars—that the free speech and agency rights of these traditionalist service providers does not have *any* moral weight in evaluating the merits of laws against anti-LGBT discrimination. For this “vast majority” of LGBT rights activists, the interests of these traditionalists in negative liberty do not constitute even a *pro tanto* reason—defeatable by other, more weighty reasons, as in Feldblum's view—to protect those liberties. These interests simply do not matter at all.

In other words, this “vast majority” believes that, if, for instance, a bakery run by conservative Evangelicals or Muslims, who believe it is inconsistent with their deepest religious values to make a cake celebrating a same-sex marriage, is required by law to produce the cake anyway, it is not the case that the bakery owner's interest in free speech and agency liberties is defeated by a more weighty interest against discrimination held by the same-sex couple. Rather, in the

⁶⁰⁰ I use “left-of-centre” stipulatively, to mean people who prioritise LGBT rights over the rights of traditionalists where they are in tension.

⁶⁰¹ (Laycock 2011)

⁶⁰² (Ibid., 416–417)

⁶⁰³ (Feldblum 2006, 103–4, 120)

⁶⁰⁴ Remarks by Feldblum at Becket Fund Conference, 2005 (cited in Laycock 2011, 417).

⁶⁰⁵ (Ibid.)

opinion of the “vast majority” of LGBT rights activists, the owner simply has no relevant, valid interest in these free speech and agency rights at all.⁶⁰⁶ The negative liberty not to be forced to either bake cakes celebrating same-sex marriages or to cease to be a baker is simply *of no value whatsoever* in the opinion of these activists. This fairly drastically anti-traditionalist view looks like a good candidate for one which might have a radicalising rationale. I will now investigate whether we are right to suspect the presence of such a rationale.

Koppelman’s 2020 book on LGBT rights and religious freedom contains the most systematic scholarly attempt to identify the rationales behind this anti-traditionalist view. Koppelman explains that there is a “ubiquitous” belief among LGBT rights activists, and the political left more broadly, that “heterosexist” views—such as the belief that sex outside opposite-sex marriage is morally disvaluable—are morally equivalent to the views of “religious racists” (such as the belief that social mingling between ‘races’ is displeasing to God). Koppelman, citing a wide-ranging set of comments by politicians, campaigners, and journalists, thus identifies a “growing consensus on the left that heterosexism is as evil as racism, and that it should be treated with comparable disdain”.⁶⁰⁷ We should note that Koppelman himself believes that ‘heterosexist’ views are “obviously wrong” and “the cause of enormous harm”,⁶⁰⁸ but he nevertheless explains that they “are not about gay people” but “focused on the value of a certain kind of heterosexual union”, or—in the case of the belief that homosexual sex is always wrong—they purport to provide reasons why celibacy “is in the deepest interest of gay people themselves”.⁶⁰⁹ In other words, Koppelman does *not* claim that these traditionalist ‘heterosexist’ beliefs are reducible to mere animus or bigotry, or that these views assert or imply that gay people are less intrinsically valuable than heterosexual people. Koppelman is right to make this concession—a concession which in no way stands in tension with his belief that the ‘heterosexist’ views are obviously wrong and harmful—because it is repeatedly confirmed by many traditionalist scholars who defend the ‘heterosexist’ view that homosexual sex is in some ways less morally valuable than heterosexual sex.⁶¹⁰

I am not aware of any academic study that has attempted to test Koppelman’s claim that the belief in the equivalence of ‘heterosexist’ and ‘racist’ views is “ubiquitous” on the political left, but it seems extremely plausible.⁶¹¹ Granting that Koppelman is right about this claim, or at least

⁶⁰⁶ This does not imply these activists think that liberties such as freedom of speech and religion, in general, do not create valid interests, just that they do not do so with respect to practices/beliefs the activists deem sufficiently abhorrent. Cf. the argument in (Laborde 2017, 209) that integrity-protecting commitments lack any *pro tanto* value where the relevant act is morally abhorrent (though Laborde does not say that the cases discussed here, involving same-sex wedding cakes, involve any morally abhorrent acts on the part of the traditionalist bakers.)

⁶⁰⁷ (Koppelman 2020, 109)

⁶⁰⁸ (Ibid., 110–111)

⁶⁰⁹ (Ibid., 111)

⁶¹⁰ For instance, see (George and Bradley 1995). No part of their argument for the wrongness of sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage implies that gay, i.e. consistently and exclusively same-sex-attracted, people are *intrinsically* less valuable than other people.

⁶¹¹ Liberal theorists, who typically identify with the ‘left’ in some broad way, are divided on the issue of the analogy’s soundness (compare (Gilreath and Ward 2016, 7–12) and (Wilson 2008, 101)); but the balance of opinion of liberal theorists cannot be taken as indicative of the balance of opinion in the non-academic political left.

nearly right—maybe the view is not quite “ubiquitous” but still pretty widespread and influential on the left—we are now in a position to identify and reconstruct a rationale for a particular kind of progressive-authoritarian attitude that appears to be widely held and influential among LGBT rights activists as well as left-of-centre politicians, journalists, and perhaps academics.

To identify this rationale, we need to understand why these activists and political actors view ‘heterosexist’ beliefs as profoundly morally repugnant and unworthy of respect. The obvious reason, consistent with the rhetoric of these activists and political actors, is that they think these beliefs contradict a conviction that appears to be widely and deeply held by nearly all persons in contemporary liberal regimes across nearly all parts of the political spectrum: namely, the belief in *equal citizenship*, which I called in Chapter 1 “minimal egalitarianism”; in other words, the conviction that all citizens should have formally equal rights and liabilities under the law.

Broadly speaking, most left-of-centre political actors believe that ‘heterosexism’ contradicts *equal citizenship*, and most right-of-centre actors disagree. In what follows, I will argue that, in fact, ‘heterosexism’ does not contradict equal citizenship. Arguments from equal citizenship to the wrongness of ‘heterosexism’ rely upon an additional, suppressed premise. I will identify the suppressed premise in arguments for the wrongness of ‘heterosexism’ as *sexual expressivism*, the belief that a particular kind of strong evaluation of a person’s sexual behaviour is inconsistent with recognizing their equal citizenship. I will then argue that the usually implicit belief in sexual expressivism that is widespread (if not “ubiquitous”) on the left is the crucial, usually suppressed, premise in arguments against the *pro tanto* value of traditionalists’ agency and free speech rights in cases where these are in tension with LGBT rights. It is therefore the crucial premise in a widely-believed, salient, and radicalising rationale for progressive-authoritarianism. I will then (in the sub-section on “Causation”) argue that it is highly *plausible*, but not *overwhelmingly probable*, that belief in sexual expressivism among political actors and ordinary citizens is driven by some of the core structural features of liberal regimes that render them liberal.

Equal citizenship is a claim about the normative legal status that citizens of a state should have. Its precise formulation and contents are controversial, but serious discussions of the principle agree that it implies that all humans share some property that makes some ways of treating any human being always and equally wrong.⁶¹² For instance, any plausible formulation of equal citizenship implies that murder is always wrong, and that it is equally wrong regardless of who is murdering whom. Equal citizenship is, of course, entailed by the idea of minimal formal equality that is a part of minimal liberalism, and affirming equal citizenship therefore is itself a part of minimal liberalism.

However, no plausible formulation of equal citizenship *automatically* implies the wrongness—let alone the obvious wrongness, harmfulness, or abhorrence—of ‘heterosexist’ views. ‘Heterosexism’ does not, in itself, have any political content; and it certainly does not, in itself, imply that gay sexual acts should be coercively prevented. It is even possible to affirm ‘heterosexism’ as a moral principle while also supporting the legal recognition of same-sex

⁶¹² E.g. (Waldron 2004, 1–20); (Darwall 2009, 14)

marriage. 'Heterosexism' comes in different variations and degrees, but its essential principle is the ascription of less value to homo- than heterosexual acts and/or relationships. A particularly strong form of 'heterosexism', which few traditionalists have found appealing, would hold that gay sexual acts are always a grave moral wrong and consensual heterosexual acts are never a moral wrong. A maximally weak and qualified form of 'heterosexism', would hold that, *ceteris paribus*, homosexual acts and relationships are less morally valuable than heterosexual ones, but that this relative disvalue is fairly unimportant when evaluating the overall value of a person's character and/or choices.⁶¹³

Even maximally strong 'heterosexism' does not imply that gay people have less of the property that makes some ways of treating any human being always and equally wrong. Maximally strong 'heterosexism' does not imply that, for instance, murdering a sexually active or celibate gay person is less wrong than murdering a heterosexual person. Some 'heterosexists' at particular times and places have, of course, supported punishing some homosexual acts with death (and sometimes also supported punishing some non-marital heterosexual acts with death), but this view in no way follows from even maximally strong 'heterosexism' without the addition of other premises. 'Heterosexism', in itself, has *no political implications at all*, let alone anti-liberal ones, since it is entirely possible to believe 'heterosexism' to be true as part of one's conception of flourishing while also endorsing an anti-perfectionist political conception of justice.

'Heterosexism', then, is compatible with equal citizenship because it does not entail that gay people should be treated in a way that contradicts this status as equal citizens. Only with additional, hidden premises can we infer from 'heterosexism' any belief that does contradict equal citizenship. Yet, as we inferred from Koppelman's analysis, many, perhaps nearly all, political actors that Koppelman identifies with the broadly-defined political left believe there is an inherent conflict between the two beliefs. Why?

As I have argued above, to answer this question, we must search for a hidden premise in the reasoning of these political actors. I will do this by analysing the left-liberal legal theorist Corey Brettschneider's discussion of the US Supreme Court case *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*.⁶¹⁴ In this discussion, Brettschneider attempts to balance the state's interest in promoting LGBT equality against the agency and free speech rights of a 'heterosexist' student group. Brettschneider concludes that public universities should have the right to refuse to "subsidize a discriminatory student group".⁶¹⁵ Careful attention to Brettschneider's reasoning will allow us to identify a hidden premise on which he plausibly relies. Below, I will identify this premise, which I will call *sexual expressivism*, and show how Brettschneider's argument is sound if this premise is relied on but unsound otherwise. I do not claim *sexual expressivism* is the only hidden premise that could render Brettschneider's argument sound. Whether Brettschneider in fact relies upon this hidden premise, or some other hidden premise, is a fact

⁶¹³ A more commonly held view among traditionalists would hold that homosexual acts have the same (impermissible) moral status as all sexual acts outside of marriage, which itself is inherently heterosexual. See e.g. (Lee and George 1997) for a defense of this view.

⁶¹⁴ (*Christian Legal Society v. Martinez* 2010). See (Brettschneider 2012, 118–23)

⁶¹⁵ (Brettschneider 2012, 118).

about his psychology that I am unqualified to determine. Nevertheless, I claim that *sexual expressivism*, if assumed to be the hidden premise underlying arguments like Brettschneider's made by other left-of-centre scholars and LGBT rights activists who agree with the conclusion of Brettschneider's argument, provides a powerful explanation for the assumption of these scholars and activists that belief in 'heterosexism' contradicts recognition of equal citizenship.⁶¹⁶

I have selected Brettschneider's work because he engages in a very careful and detailed discussion of possible objections to the left-of-centre view that 'heterosexism' contradicts equal citizenship. He therefore explicitly acknowledges the distinction that opponents of this left-of-centre view draw between sexual 'orientation' and sexual 'conduct'; the manner in which he attempts to rebut objections that draw on this distinction reveals the hidden premises on which he relies. The background to Brettschneider's discussion is his attempt, in the 2012 book in which the discussion appears, to articulate what he calls "value democracy", which is an account of how a liberal-democratic state should engage in non-coercive "democratic persuasion" to promote "the democratic values of freedom and equality for all citizens".⁶¹⁷

In *Christian Legal Society*, a student group (the 'Christian Legal Society') claimed that its free speech and free association rights were violated by the decision of the University of California's Hastings College of the Law to refuse to officially recognise the group. The rationale for the university's decision was the Christian Legal Society's requirement that members abstain from what the Society called "unrepentant homosexual conduct".⁶¹⁸ Brettschneider argues that the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the right of the College to deny the Society official recognition was correct, on the grounds that the College "should be allowed" and "has an obligation... to respect the ideal of free and equal citizenship".⁶¹⁹ For Brettschneider, the Society's rule against "unrepentant homosexual conduct" shows that "discrimination... is fundamental to its expressive purpose".⁶²⁰ Brettschneider therefore considers that the Society's "viewpoint" lacked "respect for free and equal citizenship".⁶²¹ He concludes that public universities' "duties to criticize... discriminatory views, and promote the ideal of free and equal citizenship", which is part of his ideal of value democracy, justifies their right to refuse recognition to "discriminatory" groups like the Christian Legal Society that fail to respect this free and equal citizenship.⁶²²

Brettschneider then responds to a possible objection to this argument. According to this objection, requiring members to avoid "unrepentant homosexual conduct" does not contradict the equal citizenship of gay people because this policy does not discriminate based on gay people's sexual 'orientation', only on the basis of 'conduct' that a person could, in principle, engage in, or not engage in, regardless of their sexual 'orientation' (a heterosexual man could,

⁶¹⁶ A belief clearly evinced by the activists described by Feldblum and Laycock above and by the anti-conversion therapy campaign in the UK (also see above).

⁶¹⁷ (Brettschneider 2012, 14-15)

⁶¹⁸ (*Christian Legal Society v. Martinez* 2010, 661)

⁶¹⁹ (Brettschneider 2012, 120)

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 118

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 119

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 118

in principle, have sex with another man, just as a gay man could abstain from having sex with other men.) Thus, according to this objection, the Society “was not engaged in.. an attempt to diminish the entitlements and rights of... gays as a group”.⁶²³ This objection therefore argues that the Christian Legal Society’s requirements did not in any way contradict respect for the equal citizenship of gay people

Brettschneider responds to the objection by arguing that “such an attempted distinction between status and choice of behavior” contradicts “the ideal of free and equal citizenship”. Because “it is not a choice to be gay”, he argues, “discrimination against gay citizens, based... on their actions... amounts to status discrimination”.⁶²⁴ To see where Brettschneider relies on a hidden premise here, let us assume it is true (I think it *is* true) that it is not a choice to be gay. It does not follow that a rule against “unrepentant homosexual conduct” discriminates “against gay citizens, either “based... on their actions” or in any other way. Homosexual *conduct*, i.e., gay sex, is not an action in which all, or only, homosexual *people* engage. Some homosexual people are celibate or have only heterosexual sex. Some heterosexual people have gay sex, for a variety of reasons.⁶²⁵

Of course, there is an important link between homosexual identity and homosexual conduct. A person who is stably and exclusively sexually attracted to people of the same sex cannot derive sexual satisfaction from non-homosexual sex. Therefore, such people (who overlap, but not perfectly, with people who identify as homosexual) cannot derive sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex if they follow the Christian Legal Society’s rule against “unrepentant homosexual conduct”.⁶²⁶ Nevertheless, if we wish, as we should wish, to be conceptually precise about the matter, we should not say, as Brettschneider says, that the rule discriminates against gay citizens based on their actions. We should say that the rule discriminates against all citizens, gay or otherwise, who engage in a certain type of action, where that type of action is one that a large number of gay people cannot abstain from permanently without giving up on deriving sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex.

Brettschneider seems to infer, then, from the fact that the Society’s rule, if followed, has the effect of preventing most homosexual people from deriving sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex, that the rule denies the free and equal citizenship of these homosexual people. Why would we draw such an inference? We can certainly think that the ability to derive sexual satisfaction from sex is an important human interest without thinking that protecting this ability is the same as protecting a person’s interest in being treated as a free and equal citizen. The hidden premise appears to be something like this:

⁶²³ Ibid., 120

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ (Lok 2021)

⁶²⁶ They might engage in homosexual conduct anyway but repent afterwards and comply with the rule. However, they still cannot *plan* to derive sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex *regularly*. It is implausible that one can genuinely repent from an action while planning to do it again.

Asking someone to abstain from deriving sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex is inconsistent with respecting their basic needs or dignity, and therefore inconsistent with treating them as a free and equal citizen.

This belief is what I call *sexual expressivism*: the belief that respect for a person's equal citizenship requires respecting their expression of their sexual desires, i.e., their attempts to achieve sexual satisfaction from sex.

Sexual expressivism is the rationale for the key hidden premise in Brettschneider's argument for the inconsistency of rules against unrepentant homosexual conduct with respect for gay people's free and equal citizenship. His view makes sense if we assume *sexual expressivism* is true, but is obviously false if we do not.

I take no position here as to whether *sexual expressivism* is true. It is clear, however, that many traditionalists think it is false without *thinking* that they thereby deny the equal citizenship of gay people. Believing *sexual expressivism* to be true furnishes a powerful rationale for various kinds of social sanctioning, preferential weighting, and progressive-authoritarianism. If *sexual expressivism* is true, many traditionalist beliefs and practices, not just 'heterosexist' ones, will turn out to be incompatible with respecting people's equal citizenship. Plausibly, for instance, the belief held by some traditionalists that people should abstain from pre-marital sex will be incompatible, or at least tension, with respecting people's equal citizenship if *sexual expressivism* is true.⁶²⁷

Brettschneider, as we have seen, relies upon *sexual expressivism* as a hidden premise in his argument for a certain kind of preferential weighting of LGBT rights above the expressive liberty of a traditionalist student group. Brettschneider is not unique among liberal theorists, or among left-liberal political actors. I believe that a similar analysis of hidden premises in their arguments and assertions would uncover the same reliance on *sexual expressivism*; I have chosen Brettschneider's work only because of the unusual directness with which it engages with the objection from the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual conduct.

Sexual expressivism also plausibly implies that 'conversion therapy', even forms comprising "casual conversations" and "private prayer", should be banned (and, as such, positing that many LGBT rights activists believe in *sexual expressivism* explains their holding this belief about banning such conversations and prayers). If *sexual expressivism* is true, it is plausible that asking people, through such casual conversations or private prayer, to abstain from ever pursuing sexual satisfaction, is inconsistent with respecting their basic interests or dignity and therefore inconsistent with respecting their equal citizenship. An analogous argument for the inconsistency with respecting equal citizenship of, say, a religious organisation merely *teaching* in general terms that gay sex is morally wrong would also appear to be plausible if *sexual expressivism* is true. *Sexual expressivism* therefore seems to be capable of yielding the

⁶²⁷ This will depend on whether *sexual expressivism* asserts that asking someone to *temporarily* abstain from deriving sexual satisfaction from any kind of sex is incompatible with respecting their equal citizenship, or only that asking someone to do so *permanently* is inconsistent with this respect.

conclusion that a great deal more progressive-authoritarianism than currently exists is needed to secure the value of equal citizenship for all.

Sexual expressivism, then, appears to be the rationale I have been looking for: a widely-believed, salient, and radicalising rationale for preferential weighting and social sanctioning that would supply a rationale for progressive-authoritarianism, i.e., would imply that much more progressive-authoritarianism should exist than currently exists.

I.ii.b: Causation

We have shown, then, that belief in *sexual expressivism* is the widely-believed, salient, and radicalising rationale for progressive-authoritarianism. The widespread acceptance and salience of this belief, underpinning existing campaigns for legal restriction as well as for social sanctioning and preferential weighting, allows us to infer from trends towards rising incidence of and/or support for social sanctioning and preferential weighting that structural dynamics—arising from people’s realisation of the implications of *sexual expressivism*—exist that create pressure towards greater support for unambiguous progressive-authoritarianism, irrespective of the correct view on whether social sanctioning and/or preferential weighting can themselves constitute progressive-authoritarianism. To show that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis (i.e., the claim that extant liberal regimes contain powerful structural tendencies, connected to their liberalism, towards the decay into progressive-authoritarianism) is true, however, we still need to identify a reason to think it is plausible that such a structural feature exists, connected to these regimes’ liberalism, that *causes* more people to embrace this widely-believed, salient, and radicalising rationale over time.

Is there a plausible reason for believing in such a mechanism? We can start by considering why *sexual expressivism* appears plausible to many progressives and liberals in contemporary liberal regimes. I suggest that belief in the *inappropriateness of strong evaluation of sexuality* does much of the work of explaining the appeal of *sexual expressivism* to many progressives and liberals. This purported inappropriateness, it should be apparent, is one of the issues at stake in disagreements between progressives and (many) traditionalists. If we find strong evaluation of human sexuality intuitively absurd and hard to comprehend, we will find the overwhelming obviousness of the falsity of the relevant strong evaluations affirmed by ‘heterosexist’ and other traditionalists plausible. However, if we find strong evaluation of human sexuality to be at least sometimes reasonable, we will find it much easier to imagine why the moral insignificance of particular forms of sexuality, and the truth of *sexual expressivism*, is *not* obvious to some people, even if we do not ourselves affirm the specific strong evaluations at issue, or if we think that *sexual expressivism* is true.

In this section, I will argue that it is plausible to think that there are causal, structural mechanisms by which the liberal commitments of contemporary liberal regimes tend to make the strong evaluation of sexuality appear overwhelmingly obviously morally wrong and mistaken, and to make *sexual expressivism* appear obviously true, to an increasing number of

citizens over time. I do not claim that these causal, structural mechanisms definitely exist, but I do claim that, on the balance of existing evidence, they *probably* exist, and that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes is therefore also *probably true*.

One of the most long-standing and ubiquitous claims about liberalism made by anti-liberals—not just by postliberals—is that liberal societies (or regimes)⁶²⁸ somehow tend to promote an ethos of radical autonomy and individualism among their citizens.⁶²⁹ Something about living under a liberal regime, anti-liberals have long claimed, tends to make the idea of ‘expressive individualism’—that the good, for each individual, ultimately consists in the ‘expression’ of one’s deeply felt intuitions and intimations—seem intuitively plausible.⁶³⁰ As I explained in Chapter 3, this claim must not be conflated with the quite different claim that liberal theorists endorse expressive individualism. For the most part, they do not.

I will argue that it is plausible that this anti-liberal claim about expressive individualism is true and applies with particular force to the perceived overwhelming obviousness of the falseness of strong evaluations of sexuality and thus to support for *sexual expressivism*. It is plausible that there exists a mechanism whereby the liberal regime’s commitment to liberalism induces citizens to embrace *sexual expressivism*. Crucially, if this mechanism exists, it does not influence citizens to embrace *sexual expressivism* on the basis of any explicit *argument* somehow addressed by the regime to its citizens, but rather on the basis of a particular kind of socio-cultural *formation* of the regime’s citizens. This is why the rightness of the rejection of strong evaluation of sexuality and the truth of *sexual expressivism* tends so easily, once accepted by citizens, to be hard for citizens to question through reasoned argument: citizens are induced to embrace *sexual expressivism* not by arguments but by powerful forces of socio-cultural formation.⁶³¹

Thus, the various ways in which the ‘burdens of judgement’ apply to arguments about the human good are often rendered opaque to citizens with respect to views on these strong evaluations of human sexuality.⁶³² To paraphrase an apocryphal quotation from Jonathan Swift: citizens cannot easily be reasoned out of positions—or even reasoned into seeing the fallibility of positions—that they were not reasoned into in the first place.⁶³³

How, then, might liberal regimes, in virtue of their commitment to liberalism, sub-rationally promote belief in *sexual expressivism* among their citizens; and why should we believe it is plausible that they do so? To assess the evidence, we first need to note the often-overlooked

⁶²⁸ Again, on regimes, see this thesis’s Introduction, Part II.iii

⁶²⁹ (Holmes 1996) traces this claim from nineteenth-century Continental reactionaries like Maistre to contemporaneous thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Christopher Lasch. Today’s postliberals pick up the torch and often cite these earlier anti-liberals (see e.g. (Barron 2024)).

⁶³⁰ See (Bellah 1985, 333)

⁶³¹ I only claim that things one comes to believe through socio-cultural formation are usually harder to critically distance oneself from than things one comes to believe through explicit rational reflection, not that it is impossible to critically distance oneself from beliefs arrived at through such formation.

⁶³² On the burdens of judgement, see (Rawls 2005, 54–5)

⁶³³ (Ratcliffe 2011, 270)

recency of the emergence of liberal regimes. The conventional historical story, usually accepted by both liberals and their critics, holds that liberalism had come to dominate at least some Western regimes by the early nineteenth century. This conventional story, as Koppelman rightly observes, makes it hard to justify any claim about the long-term structural dynamics of liberal regimes that, like the claim in question about promotion of *sexual expressivism*, purports to explain phenomena largely observed only in the last few decades. “If this is the inevitable deep logic of liberalism”, writes Koppelman, “it took its time getting here.”⁶³⁴

Yet if we distinguish more carefully—as Hazony, unusually among postliberals, does⁶³⁵—between constitutional democracy, religious tolerance, and liberalism proper,⁶³⁶ the case becomes very strong that full-fledged liberal regimes in fact emerged only in the *last third of the twentieth century*. Until the late 1960s, almost all of today’s liberal regimes, including all of the English-speaking democracies, practiced significant forms of legal coercion on the basis of traditionalist conceptions of flourishing. Contraception and divorce were heavily legally restricted; media were systematically censored for ‘obscenity’ and (often) blasphemy; private homosexual acts, and in some jurisdictions also non-marital heterosexual acts, were criminalised.⁶³⁷ Even if we ignore the massive presence of racist legal coercion in the United States—coercion which was not necessarily traditionalist—many clearly traditionalist features of these regimes were incompatible with ‘minimal liberalism’ because they violated citizens’ minimal agency rights. This is most obviously true of the widespread criminalisation of private homosexual acts.⁶³⁸

Nor was this legal coercion a mere vestigial hangover from the preliberal past. Social historians have shown that this coercion was based on a vigorous and widespread ideology. Hugh McLeod has shown that an ideology of “Christian civilisation”, thought by its adherents to imply an extensive role for the state in “regulating morality” on the basis of “Christian ethics”, was hegemonic in the public life of the English-speaking democracies in the 1950s.⁶³⁹ Callum Brown has, in the case of 1950s Britain, documented the vigorous “moral vigilantism” which sat “astride the dominant public religious culture of the nation”.⁶⁴⁰ From a different perspective, Samuel Moyn also notes that prevailing conceptions of human dignity in this period were bound up with traditionalist beliefs about the family.⁶⁴¹ The coercive traditionalist laws of this period, then, were not vestigial but part of a vigorous, hegemonic ideology that was only displaced with the progressive cultural upheaval of the 1960s. We should think of today’s liberal regimes as being,

⁶³⁴ (Koppelman 2022, 1549).

⁶³⁵ (Hazony 2022, 288–97)

⁶³⁶ ‘Minimal’ liberalism includes certain agency rights, saliently rights against coercion in private sexual conduct. See this thesis’s Chapter 1, Part II.

⁶³⁷ (Brown 2019, 3–6)

⁶³⁸ Perhaps a regime of at-fault divorce, restrictions on at least the publicly-funded provision of contraceptives, and/or some forms of media censorship of obscenity/blasphemy, are compatible with minimal liberalism (see Chapter 1, Part II), but criminalising private sexual acts can never be compatible with minimal liberalism.

⁶³⁹ (McLeod 2007, 215)

⁶⁴⁰ (Brown 2019, 9–11)

⁶⁴¹ (Moyn 2015, 42–46)

as recently as sixty-five years ago, not liberal but *hybrid* regimes with elements of liberalism in their political practices alongside strong and vigorous elements of traditionalist-authoritarianism.

In some parts of some of these regimes, traditionalist-authoritarianism persisted even longer. If the decriminalisation of private homosexual acts—as I mentioned above, the most unambiguous traditionalist violation of minimal liberalism in the recent past—is a useful index, traditionalist-authoritarianism persisted into the 1980s in New Zealand,⁶⁴² the 1990s in parts of Australia,⁶⁴³ and until 2003 in fourteen states of the US.⁶⁴⁴ If traditionalist-authoritarianism was wholly displaced by liberalism only by the end of the twentieth century, the recency of the rise of progressive-authoritarianism is far *less* incongruous with longstanding historical trends under liberal regimes, and explaining it poses far less of a challenge for postliberals than Koppelman suggests.

No academic studies of which I am aware have attempted to test the claim that the displacement of traditionalist-authoritarianism by liberalism has *caused* a growth of expressive individualism in general, or *sexual expressivism* specifically, among liberal regimes' citizens. Nevertheless, the claim is supported by two pieces of evidence that render it plausible: first, that the growth of expressive individualism in general, and belief in *sexual expressivism* in particular, has coincided with the collapse of traditionalist-authoritarianism; second, that there is a plausible mechanism linking these two occurrences. This does not prove that the link is certainly causal, but it means that the existence of this causal link is plausible and worth taking seriously.

The temporal coincidence of the beginning of the rise of expressive individualism with the collapse of traditionalist-authoritarianism is uncontroversial. It is extremely widely observed that traditionalist beliefs about family and sexuality among the populations of the English-speaking democracies began a steady long-term decline, or entered a substantial acceleration in long-term decline, in the nineteen-sixties, coinciding with the beginning of the collapse of traditionalist-authoritarianism. Conversely, belief in *sexual expressivism* began a long-term rise at the same time, which is shown by consistently rising numbers of citizens who appear to reject strong evaluation of sexuality and to adopt thick interpretations of the requirements of equal citizenship with respect to attitudes to sexuality.⁶⁴⁵

What, then, is the plausibly operative mechanism for a casual connection between this long-term rise in belief in *sexual expressivism* and the collapse of traditionalist-authoritarianism, and establishment of fully liberal regimes, from the nineteen-sixties onwards?

The postliberal and integralist philosopher Thomas Pink has recently proposed such a plausible mechanism. This mechanism arises from the way in which the law, and changes in the law, are frequently experienced by citizens as enacting *moral instruction* about the good. Pink describes state coercion ("*coercitio*") as the state's use of "legal direction to provide witness" of important

⁶⁴² (New Zealand History 2006)

⁶⁴³ (ABC News 2015)

⁶⁴⁴ (Alliance of Sodomy Supporters 1998)

⁶⁴⁵ E.g. (Pennington 2003; Saad 2019; Gallup, Inc 2007)

purported truths and of the harm caused to the social order by their denial.⁶⁴⁶ Pink's discussion of coercion is part of a metaphysical argument for the capacity and permissibility of public authorities to coercively punish the expression of false beliefs without thereby bypassing—but rather, educating—the faculty by which people freely judge the truth of the beliefs in question.⁶⁴⁷ This larger question about the legitimacy of coercing belief is tangential to our discussion, for what I wish to argue here is simply that the changes in patterns of legal coercion that constituted the collapse of traditionalist-authoritarian were, on the whole, plausibly intended by the political actors responsible to constitute, and plausibly experienced by large numbers of citizens as constituting, a *witnessing* of important purported truths, namely progressive beliefs about human sexuality in general and *sexual expressivism* in particular.

Pink's claim, that the law and changes in the law are often experienced as enacting moral instruction about the good, is plausible in part because of its congruence with “expressive” theories of law. Expressive theories of law claim, among other claims, that the law often expresses the political community's collective attitude to a particular first-order moral issue.⁶⁴⁸ There is some controversy among legal theorists over the extent to which it is appropriate to attribute *attitudes* to such issues to collective entities like states.⁶⁴⁹ However, even if it is not appropriate to attribute such attitudes to states, it is still plausible that citizens often subjectively *experience* the law, or legal changes, as providing moral instruction.

Pink does not provide a systematic method for identifying the beliefs that a particular act of coercion is experienced by citizens as witnessing to. In some cases, as when public expression of moral belief P is simply illegal,⁶⁵⁰ this is quite obvious; in other cases, it is less obvious. As McLeod's historical analysis of the moral culture of the 1950s has shown, the coercive laws regulating human sexuality that existed in today's liberal democracies until the late twentieth century were viewed by citizens as providing witness of the purported truth of particular traditionalist beliefs about human sexuality.⁶⁵¹ McLeod also argues convincingly that the abolition of these laws was, for the most part, experienced by citizens as the state's witnessing to the purported truth of opposing, progressive beliefs to the traditionalist ones that were previously witnessed to. For example, McLeod's analysis of the British Parliamentary debates on the 1960s “legislative revolution”, which largely ended legal practices of traditionalist-authoritarianism with respect to human sexuality, shows how, although some legislators and campaigners distinguished between their views of personal morality and views of political justice, most of these legislators and campaigners viewed the legislative change they were enacting as *intending* to express a new, at least somewhat more progressive message about the intrinsic moral status of (for instance) divorce or homosexual acts, and this intent was

⁶⁴⁶ (Pink 2024c)

⁶⁴⁷ It is also part of a defence of Catholic integralism and the legitimacy of coercively restricting heresy and apostasy (on integralism, see Chapter 2, Part I.i.c), but this is tangential to the purpose for which I am using Pink's insight.

⁶⁴⁸ See (Anderson and Pildes 2000)

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1506-27

⁶⁵⁰ (Pink 2024) mentions laws against Holocaust denial.

⁶⁵¹ (McLeod 2007, 31–59)

also understood by citizens as witnessing to this kind of message.⁶⁵² Similarly, the US Supreme Court's 1972 *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, which found a Constitutional right for unmarried persons to access contraceptives, contains reasoning that could very plausibly be understood by citizens as explicit affirmation of progressive beliefs about human sexuality, asserting that there is no rational reason to treat non-marital and marital use of contraceptives differently.⁶⁵³

Callum Brown's social history provides further corroborating evidence that these legal reforms were experienced by citizens as witnessing to the truth of progressive beliefs about sexuality. Brown argues that, a few decades after the beginning of these legal reforms, the new sexual liberties were interpreted by younger generations as "inalienable rights".⁶⁵⁴ The cognitive act, demanded by neutralist liberalism, of separating a belief that the *legal* right to ϕ is of immense and obvious import from a belief that the *moral* permissibility of ϕ ing is of similar immense and obvious import, is moderately intellectually taxing. Clearly, it is not beyond the intellectual ken of most citizens. Nevertheless, where a legal position is not accompanied by a clear and unambiguous rationale that demands this separation, it is safe to assume that most citizens do not make the effort. McLeod's aforementioned analysis of the British anti-traditionalist-authoritarian "legislative revolution" in the 1960s shows that no such clear and unambiguous rationale was provided; rather, a multiplicity of competing and often unclear rationales, most of them at least somewhat perfectionist, were articulated by different political actors. It is therefore very plausible that many of the citizens Brown describes as viewing sexual liberties as inalienable rights understood these as *moral* rights, not just legal ones.

It is, of course, conceptually possible to believe a person has a moral right (specifically, a *moral* claim-right against certain types of interference) to do something that is morally wrong, but making this subtle distinction (like the distinction between moral and legal rights) is moderately intellectually demanding. Since such a distinction was not (as we saw above) communicated by the agents of legal change in any consistent or clear way, we should also assume citizens conflate the moral *right* to sexual autonomy with the moral *goodness* of exercising first-order sexual autonomy. And affirming the moral goodness of exercising first-order sexual autonomy is inconsistent with the strong evaluation of sexuality. We may therefore assume that the expressive effect of the 1960s cessation of traditionalist legal coercion with respect to sex was to communicate to citizens that affirming the strong evaluation of sexuality is inconsistent with affirming a moral right, and also a legal right, to sexual autonomy. Thus, if citizens also believed (plausibly) that denying a *legal* right to sexual autonomy is inconsistent with legal citizenship, the overall effect of the cessation of this legal coercion was to communicate to citizens that the strong evaluation of sexuality is inconsistent with equal citizenship: in other words, to *witness* to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism*.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 219–31. For instance, many campaigners and legislators argued that divorce is always morally bad, but not so morally bad that the moral cost of permitting it outweighs the potential harm to the happiness of couples in dysfunctional marriages of not permitting it (in at least some cases). This is not a fully progressive belief, but it is clearly a 'comprehensive' belief about the good, and clearly more progressive than the view that divorce is so morally bad that the moral cost of permitting it always outweighs any benefit of doing so.

⁶⁵³ (*Eisenstadt v. Baird* 1972, 450–55)

⁶⁵⁴ (Brown 2019, 295)

Moreover, the argument that the abolition of traditionalist-authoritarian laws on sexuality in liberal regimes tended (whatever the lawmakers' intentions) to be experienced by citizens as witnessing to the purported truth of progressive beliefs about sexuality is also supported by much of the theoretical literature on liberalism, civic education, and moral psychology. While the effect of civic education lies outside the mechanism I am defending, some of the ways in which certain liberal theorists have argued that liberal civic education tends to shift citizens' beliefs about sexuality in a progressive direction through largely sub-rational means can serve to make the operation of the less-explored mechanism that I am defending more familiar and plausible.

Though not specifically about comprehensive views of sexuality, Stephen Macedo's (in)famous claim that "liberalism holds out the promise, or the threat, of making the whole world like California"⁶⁵⁵ suggests a conviction that the implementation of neutralist liberalism will have major, pervasive spillover effects on citizens' conceptions of the good, in part via the influence of liberal civic education.⁶⁵⁶ Paul Weithman, while arguing that civic education can teach students to reason autonomously about the good without undermining their commitment to particular religious and cultural traditions, also holds that this is a "task of extraordinary complexity".⁶⁵⁷ This is because, as Weithman shows through careful appeal to sociological evidence, the practical effect of teaching students to subject beliefs about the good to the critical scrutiny required by autonomy is very often that these students assume that they cannot be warranted in retaining beliefs about the good that are controversial among their peers and that cannot be justified through a rough kind of Scanlonian contractualism.⁶⁵⁸ This would presumably (though Weithman does not indicate explicitly) apply to controversial traditionalist beliefs about human sexuality. If it is difficult for even carefully designed civic education programmes to teach students to act on autonomous critical reflection (which, of course, requires *legal* rights to act on the results of one's reflection) without also communicating anything about the *moral* truth about traditionalist/progressive beliefs about sexuality, it is surely even more plausible to think that large, society-wide legal changes supported by often-confused or inarticulate rationales, and which (as McLeod showed) were intended by many of the political actors responsible to implement (even if they did not necessarily intend to *witness*) at least moderately progressive views about human sexuality, might also have a powerful effect in shifting citizens' views on this topic in a progressive direction.

From all the foregoing analysis, it seems plausible that citizens experienced the introduction of the permissive liberal legal regime on sexuality as an implicit endorsement of *moral* permissiveness, and thus of a progressive view of human sexuality. This progressive view is, roughly, *sexual expressivism*, the view that respect for people's equal citizenship requires respect for their expression of their sexual desires.

⁶⁵⁵ (Macedo 1992, 224)

⁶⁵⁶ See (Macedo 1995)

⁶⁵⁷ (Weithman 2014, 256)

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 244-250

The introduction of this permissive legal regime, then, was plausibly experienced by many citizens as *implicitly* witnessing to the truth of *sexual expressivism*, because the states in question did not explicitly teach anything particularly clear (although, as mentioned above, many significant actors responsible for the permissive liberal regime *did* justify the reforms on the basis of moderately progressive conceptions of flourishing), and because cognitively separating moral and legal permissibility from one another, and moral permissibility from the impermissibility of all strong evaluation, are efforts that, plausibly, most citizens are unlikely to spontaneously undertake. Obviously, the state's witnessing is not the only mechanism influencing citizens' belief formation in the relevant domains, but in the absence of strong countervailing influences—such as different teachings from family or religious communities—the state's witnessing is, plausibly, likely to be highly influential.

Corroborating these general claims, the postliberal-aligned political scientist Darel Paul has provided a detailed empirical analysis of the state's witnessing to the purported truth of progressive truths about the good in the case of the legal implementation of same-sex marriage. Paul argues that the educated elites who led the move in the US towards support for the implementation of same-sex marriage overwhelmingly supported the policy with the express purpose of using the state to *witness to the positive goodness* of same-sex relationships, and not out of a neutralist liberal belief that legal equality should be extended to same-sex relationships for anti-perfectionist reasons.⁶⁵⁹ In analysis of public opinion surveys, Paul finds the proportion of the most educated sections of the US population who personally disapprove of same-sex relationships but support the legal implementation of same-sex marriage is almost negligible (less than 5%).⁶⁶⁰ Paul also engages in extensive qualitative analysis of the discourse of advocates for same-sex marriage and finds that neutralist reasons for supporting same-sex marriage are very rarely articulated.⁶⁶¹ Given that, as Paul also shows, this express intent of using the state to *witness to the positive goodness* of same-sex relationships was widely publicised by supporters of same-sex marriage, it is highly likely that the introduction of same-sex marriage was also *experienced* by citizens as affirming this truth.

If Paul is correct (and I find the argument highly persuasive), the witnessing process in the case of same-sex marriage differs somewhat from what I have earlier argued (citing McLeod and others) occurred in the case of the removal of traditionalist-authoritarian laws with respect to sexuality in the late twentieth century, because it involves greater deliberateness. It is hardly surprising, or a problem for postliberals, if witnessing operates in different ways with respect to different legal reforms. Paul's careful study of the state's witnessing to the purported truth of progressive beliefs about sexuality in a different context is important corroborating evidence for the more general argument that the state implementation of neutral laws—as in the case of the late-twentieth-century abolition of traditionalist-authoritarian laws—tends to be experienced by citizens as witnessing to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism*.

⁶⁵⁹ (Paul 2018, 91–114)

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 96

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 101–5

As a brief caveat, the above claims are purely sociological. They imply nothing about the *correct* justification, if any, for the late-twentieth-century abolition of traditionalist-authoritarian laws: liberals who are committed to state neutrality of *intent* (but not of *effect*) with respect to the human good may still think the abolition was justified for anti-perfectionist reasons despite the effect the abolition plausibly had in witnessing to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism*. I am also not claiming that these coercive laws could not have been abolished in a different way that might have avoided witnessing to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism*.⁶⁶² Nevertheless, while many neutralist liberals attach little or no intrinsic weight to the neutrality of *effect* of political action, if it is true that certain particular ways of abolishing laws that are not neutral in *intent* has the predictable *effect* of significantly increasing the risk of progressive-authoritarianism (or any other kind of illiberalism) in the future, this gives neutralist liberals strong instrumental reasons to care about the *effect* of abolishing laws that are not neutral in *intent* in these particular ways, and gives these liberals at least *pro tanto* reasons to care about mitigating these effects.⁶⁶³ If the abolition of traditionalist-authoritarian laws on sexuality has had the effect that I have claimed it plausibly had, therefore, neutralist liberals may have *pro tanto* reasons to care about mitigating these effects.

To return to the central point that this discussion of causation has sought to demonstrate: it is plausible that citizens of the major liberal regimes since the 1960s have been raised and formed in an environment in which the state powerfully witnesses to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism*, but never explicitly presents *reasons* for the truth of this view; and that there have been few comparatively strong countervailing influences on their beliefs.⁶⁶⁴ It is therefore also plausible that an increasing proportion of citizens, over time, have come to find the truth of *sexual expressivism* evident while struggling to articulate why they find it to be evident. This belief has simply become part of the horizon of their background moral culture, or way of life.⁶⁶⁵

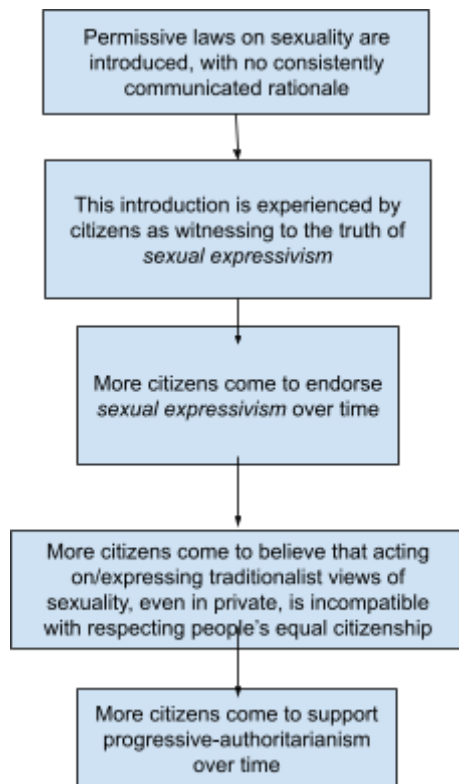
The causal mechanism that I have claimed plausibly operates in extant liberal regime may be represented as follows:

⁶⁶² This possibility will be discussed in Chapter 7. If it is true that neutralist laws could be enacted in a way that avoids (some of) the witnessing under discussion, this undermines the inference from the causal link, which holds between the abolition of traditionalist-authoritarian in actual liberal regimes and rising support for progressive-authoritarian in these regimes, to the Liberal Decay Thesis.

⁶⁶³ Although cf. (Tomasi 2021, 73–4), who offers a neutralist liberal argument for attaching (some) intrinsic weight to “spillover” effects of neutrally-intended policies on traditionalists’ ability to live in accordance with their conceptions of flourishing. (Tahzib 2018) also argues for ascribing at least some weight to neutrality of effect.

⁶⁶⁴ There may be strong countervailing influences from traditionalist citizens and institutions they control. But suppose at T1 (say, 1960), citizens’ views on traditionalist/progressive views of sexuality are stable because the various influences are in balance. If the state then abolishes traditionalist-authoritarian laws, and nothing else changes, then the balance is broken, and at each subsequent T more citizens will adopt progressive views, and the countervailing influences from traditionalist citizens and their institutions will (*ceteris paribus*) weaken.

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. the discussion of Lefebvre (2024) in Chapter 3, Part I.ii



(Figure 3: mechanism by which the liberal regime's liberalism increases support for progressive-authoritarian)

The foregoing discussion has shown that this mechanism *probably* operates in extant liberal regimes; and that, thereby, a core aspect of the liberalism of the liberal regime—specifically, its commitment to rejecting traditionalist-authoritarianism in the domain of sexuality—causes more citizens to saliently embrace a radicalising rationale for preferential weighting, social sanctioning, and legal restriction of traditionalist views of sexuality, family, etc., over time. This shows that the Coercive Liberal Thesis about extant liberal regimes is *probably true*. However, it does not show that the Liberal Decay Thesis, about all possible liberal regimes, is also probably true. The Liberal Decay Thesis will turn out to be *probably true* if two further conditions are met: (1) no historical liberal regimes existed prior to the nineteen-sixties creation of modern liberal regimes that I have been discussing; and (2) it is warranted to inductively infer from the Coercive Liberalism Thesis's probable truth and the truth of this claim about historical liberal regimes that the Liberal Decay Thesis is also true. Part (II) of this chapter will show that the first condition is met; finally, my conclusion will show that the second, however, is *not* met.

II: Historic Regimes: Social Order as Sacred Order?

Whereas the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes is highly controversial but (I have argued) plausible, the case for the claim that no historic regime has ever been liberal is less controversial.

Of course, it is still crucial that postliberals take care here, for a *single* significant example of a stably liberal and non-authoritarian society prior to emergence of modern liberal regimes in the late-twentieth-century would mean we cannot infer from the truth of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes that the Liberal Decay Thesis about the universe of possible liberal regimes is also true.⁶⁶⁶

To support the claim that no pre-modern liberal societies ever existed, postliberals often make fairly casual use of anthropological evidence. The postliberal theologian Chad Pecknold,⁶⁶⁷ for instance, appeals to Fustel de Coulanges's nineteenth-century study *The Ancient City*, which illustrated the ways in which ancient, pre-Christian polities were deeply enmeshed in coercively enforcing traditionalist conceptions of the sacred linked to family and clan-based religious cults.⁶⁶⁸ Philip Rieff's *Sacred Order/Social Order*, a work also often cited by postliberal-adjacent writers,⁶⁶⁹ asserts that every society until the emergence of liberal regimes in the late-twentieth-century coercively upheld a particular vision of the "sacred", connected to a system of (primarily sexual) "interdicts".⁶⁷⁰ All premodern societies, according to Rieff, thus coercively upheld some kind of "sacred order"⁶⁷¹ comprising a particular traditionalist conception of flourishing, saliently (but not exclusively) concerning sexuality.⁶⁷²

While these postliberal uses of sociology and anthropology do not constitute a systematic empirical survey, it would be easy enough to enumerate all the major premodern civilisations and describe the ways in which they instantiated versions of traditionalist-authoritarianism. I will assume it is not controversial that all these civilisations—the various major Christian, Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Native American civilisations—upheld some kind of traditionalist-authoritarianism. For instance, the medieval Church claimed and sometimes exercised the right to violently suppress heresy, while premodern European states would coercively enforce their preferred views of sexual conduct. Premodern Islamicate states would typically appoint a public official, the *muhtasib*, to oversee personal morality, including by enforcing sexual interdicts and interdicts against intoxicants.⁶⁷³ It should be uncontroversial that all the major premodern, state-based civilisations practiced traditionalist-authoritarianism of some kind.

⁶⁶⁶ "Significant" because the existence of a very small, highly localised, or exceptional non-authoritarian society prior to modern liberalism might be compatible with judging authoritarianism to be not-quite inevitable but still *overwhelmingly probable*, which would allow the Liberal Decay Thesis to go through

⁶⁶⁷ Pecknold is an editor of *Postliberal Order* and also a self-identified Catholic integralist (see (Patterson 2022))

⁶⁶⁸ (Pecknold 2022b)

⁶⁶⁹ E.g. (Dreher 2019)

⁶⁷⁰ (Rieff 2006, 161)

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, front matter. Cf. (Berger 2011) on the "sacred canopy".

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷³ (Al-Mawardi 2000, 60–71)

Perhaps there are examples of premodern liberal regimes among more isolated and smaller-scale cultures, outside the influence of the major civilisations? The available anthropological evidence suggests it is extremely unlikely such regimes existed on any significant scale. I am not aware of any anthropological studies attempting to use concepts like liberalism, neutrality, and other concepts associated with liberal political theory to analyse the structure of premodern, small-scale, non-state societies. However, strongly suggestive evidence arises from (i) the consensus among anthropologists that ‘religion’ of some kind,⁶⁷⁴ and an associated identification of some features of the world as representing sacred values that at least in part transcend the compossible fulfilment of human desires and intimations (i.e., traditionalist values), is as close to a human universal as any aspect of culture;⁶⁷⁵ and (ii) from the extremely plausible assumption that in small-scale, non-state societies, prevailing ‘religious’ traditionalist beliefs about sacred values were to some degree instantiated in collective social institutions which did not attempt to abstain from relying on these beliefs when exercising coercion over their members.

If, as is surely overwhelmingly plausible and supported by the available anthropological evidence, these smaller-scale non-state societies—to various degrees and in various ways—coercively enforced beliefs (for instance about purity, corruption, spirits, ‘high gods’, reverence for ancestors, sacred lands, and so forth) that made demands on their members not reducible to the compossible fulfilment of their members’ deepest desires and intimations (i.e., they coercively enforced traditionalist beliefs), then these societies were, to that degree, like the major premodern state-based civilisations, also traditionalist-authoritarian regimes. Thus, Vallier, a critic of postliberalism, nevertheless observes that “societies that separate faith and politics are the [modern, liberal] outliers”.⁶⁷⁶

I take it that the above has established that the claim that no premodern liberal regimes existed, prior to the emergence of modern liberal regimes in the late-twentieth-century is almost certainly true. Thus far, then, I have shown that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis about extant liberal regimes is *probably true* and the claim that no premodern liberal regimes existed is also probably true. Can we infer from these claims that the Liberal Decay Thesis about the universe of possible liberal regimes is probably true? This chapter’s conclusion will address this question.

Conclusion

It is *probably true* that *extant* liberal regimes have a tendency, inextricably linked to their liberalism, to increase support for progressive-authoritarianism among their citizens and thereby

⁶⁷⁴ Anthropological controversies about the meaning and validity of the concept of “religion” can be set aside here. See e.g. (Geertz 2017 [1973], 87–125); (Asad 1983)

⁶⁷⁵ Summarising this consensus, (Dunbar 2023, xi) notes that “There is no known culture for which we have an ethnographic or an archeological record that does not have some religion”.

⁶⁷⁶ (Vallier 2023c, 2)

to decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes. It is also *probably true* that no liberal regimes existed prior to the emergence of modern liberal regimes, which, as I showed above, occurred from the nineteen-sixties onwards.

From this, does it follow that we warranted to infer that the Liberal Decay Thesis is true (or *overwhelmingly likely* to be true), i.e., that all possible liberal regimes from the universe of such regimes will exhibit a structural tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes?

The feature of *extant* liberal regimes in virtue of which they have a tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes—namely, their rejection of traditionalist-authoritarian restrictions on basic agency rights with respect to sexuality—is essential to liberalism. Nevertheless, it might be possible for liberal regimes to instantiate this rejection of traditionalist-authoritarianism without activating the mechanism from figure (3) for the tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism—i.e., the tendency of the instantiation of this rejection to be experienced by citizens as witnessing to the purported truth of *sexual expressivism* and thereby to increase support for progressive-authoritarianism over time. It might therefore be possible for liberal regimes to instantiate this rejection of traditionalist-authoritarianism without exhibiting the tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism that the Liberal Decay Thesis claims is found in all possible liberal regimes in the universe of such regimes.

Therefore, we *cannot* justifiably inductively infer from the probable truth of the Coercive Liberalism Thesis that the Liberal Decay Thesis is equally or similarly likely to be true. Nevertheless, it remains *plausible* that the Liberal Decay Thesis is in fact true. The foregoing discussion has identified one mechanism that plausibly operates to cause liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes over time, and I have observed that this mechanism need not exist in *every* possible liberal regime. But nothing in this chapter has asserted or implies that there are not *other* such mechanisms. There may well be. It may well, therefore, be true that there are other features of liberal regimes, essential to their liberalism, that tend to cause their decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes, that this chapter has not identified; and it may be true that the effects of some of these features, individually or jointly, are very difficult or impossible to mitigate, even if it is possible to mitigate the effect of the mechanism I have discussed in this chapter.

I conclude from this that the Liberal Decay Thesis about the universe of possible liberal regimes is *plausible*. We do not know how likely it is to be true, and we are not warranted in inferring that it is more likely to be true than not, but the likelihood is far from *negligible*. There is a significant chance that all liberal regimes from the universe of possible liberal regimes will *necessarily* decay into progressive-authoritarian regimes. Postliberals are wrong to claim that we know that the Liberal Decay Thesis is true; we do not. Strictly speaking, the empirical No Alternatives Argument fails on its own terms. Nevertheless, it is highly *plausible* that extant liberal regimes have a strong tendency, inseparable from their liberalism, to decay into progressive-authoritarianism; and it is also *plausible* that all liberal regimes necessarily have such a tendency.

In other words: postliberals are wrong to say that we can know that liberalism's decay into progressive-authoritarianism is near-unavoidable. It may be avoidable. But the discussion of the empirical dynamics to which postliberals draw our attention has shown that their claims are not fanciful. There is a real, *plausible* possibility that they are right. We must contend with this uncertainty. The final part of my thesis, therefore, explores how we might thus contend, in particular by exploring how traditionalists, by their own standards, should respond to the *possibility* that the postliberals are right about liberalism's unavoidable decay into progressive-authoritarianism across the universe of possible liberal regimes.

How should traditionalists navigate the liberal regime in the light of this possibility? I will argue that traditionalists have a plausible chance of achieving more of their distinctive constructive vision of political morality, *and* of mitigating the tendency of extant liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarianism, by working *within* the liberal regime than postliberals or their critics have thus far assumed. Since there is a plausible chance the decay is unavoidable, the mitigation may not prove possible. I therefore make no claims about the all-things-considered right course of action for traditionalists. However, I do claim that they ought to be more favourably disposed to the liberal regime than postliberals claim they ought to be. Part 3 of this thesis (Chapters 6 and 7) will now explain why.

Part 3: Responding to the Postliberal Critique of Liberalism

Introduction to Part 3

Part 2 of this thesis has now completed my analysis of the conceptual and empirical No Alternatives Arguments. The conceptual argument is wholly unsound. The empirical argument shows that the Liberal Decay Thesis, the claim that any liberal regime from the universe of possible liberal regimes has an unavoidable tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism, is *plausibly* true; but we are nevertheless *not* warranted in inferring that it is *overwhelmingly likely* to be true. We therefore cannot be warranted in having the confidence in the Liberal Decay Thesis that would be required for the empirical No Alternatives Argument to succeed; but we *are* warranted in taking seriously the *possibility* that the Liberal Decay Thesis is true. We are *also* warranted in taking seriously the possibility that the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, about *extant* liberal regimes having a structural tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarian ones, is true, but that the Liberal Decay Thesis, about the universe of *possible* liberal regimes *unavoidably* undergoing this decay, is not true. In *this* case, we should consider strategies to mitigate the tendency of extant liberal regimes to decay into progressive-authoritarian ones.

If the Coercive Liberalism Thesis is true, and the Liberal Decay Thesis *might* be true but might not be, traditionalists face a problem in committing to supporting liberalism, because in doing so they expose themselves to a *plausible* chance that their basic agency rights to order their lives by their traditionalist convictions, and their free speech rights to express these convictions, could be removed. This chance, as judged from the epistemic standpoint of real agents (who do not know if the Liberal Decay Thesis is true, for the reasons explained in Chapter 5), will be reduced, but not eliminated, if strategies to mitigate the tendency of extant liberal regimes to decay in this way are successfully implemented. (The chance will not be eliminated because some unknowable portion of this chance stems from the possibility that some mechanism for this decay other than the one discussed in Chapter 5 will exist in *all* possible liberal regimes).

This decay would, of course, be a catastrophically bad outcome for traditionalists because they would lose the ability to, legally, act on and express their most fundamental beliefs about human flourishing. Some traditionalists see acting on and expressing some of these beliefs as a religious obligation, and some believe that failing to satisfy this obligation has eternal consequences.

Progressives who are also liberals, and who therefore think the risk of traditionalists losing these basic rights is, intrinsically, at least *pro tanto* disvaluable, should care about the problem that the plausible risk of liberal decay into progressive-authoritarianism poses for traditionalists for *intrinsic* reasons. Both progressives who are also liberals and those who are *not* also liberals should care about this risk for *instrumental* reasons. In a liberal regime with a significant and/or influential population of traditionalist citizens, the loyalty of those citizens to the regime matters for the regime's stability. If traditionalists attempt, out of fear of the regime's possible decay into progressive-authoritarianism, to institute some form of traditionalist-authoritarianism, the outcome, whether they succeed or fail, is quite likely to be worse than liberalism even for

anti-liberal progressives. Traditionalist-authoritarianism would obviously be worse than liberalism for anti-liberal progressives because it would deny these progressives basic agency and free speech rights. A failed attempt to institute traditionalist-authoritarianism could plausibly lead to political chaos and disorder, perhaps even large-scale violent disruption of the political order, which is also likely to be worse even for anti-liberal progressives than a stable and peaceful liberal regime.

Progressives, both liberal and anti-liberal, should therefore care about what their traditionalist fellow-citizens think about the liberal regime. They should be motivated to reason from “conjecture” on behalf of these traditionalists to work out how these traditionalists should, by their own standards, regard a liberal regime that has a plausible chance of decaying into progressive-authoritarianism.⁶⁷⁷

Part 3 of this thesis addresses this question from the perspective of traditionalists. There are several approaches one could take to the question, and addressing all of them would be far beyond the possible scope of one thesis. The dilemma for traditionalists consists in evaluating the relative goodness of three regime types across two modalities: an actually-existing liberalism with a *plausible* but uncertain risk of decaying into progressive-authoritarianism, and an actually-existing traditionalist-authoritarianism.⁶⁷⁸ There are, therefore, two broad ways in which this dilemma can be evaluated from the perspective of traditionalists: (1) evaluating the relative value of liberalism and traditionalist-authoritarianism, or of various kinds of these two broad regime-types; and (2) evaluating the magnitude of the *plausible* risk of liberalism’s decay into progressive-authoritarianism, including ways of reducing this risk. A promising research agenda addressing issue (2) would attempt to assess which types of possible liberal regime have a *smaller* chance of witnessing this decay than others.

However, I will choose to focus on a particular aspect of issue (1). Many factors affect the relative value of liberalism and traditionalist-authoritarianism for traditionalists. One of these factors is the extent to which traditionalists can achieve policy goals that they often care a great deal about within liberal regimes. There are many such policy goals, and space does not permit me to assess the prospects of traditionalists achieving *all* of them within liberal regimes.

I will focus on policy goals that are highly important to postliberals in particular, because by doing so, Part 3 of this thesis will make an important contribution to the debate on postliberalism: it will demonstrate that, contrary to the usually-unexamined assumptions of both liberals and postliberals, the *postliberals’ two most important and distinctive policy goals can, with reasonable chance of success, be pursued within the liberal regime.*

These two policy goals are (i) the introduction of effective public support and encouragement for the married family and (ii) the introduction of effective public support and encouragement of various organised religion(s). One strategy for demonstrating that these goals can plausibly be

⁶⁷⁷ On “reasoning from conjecture”, see (Rawls 1997, 783)

⁶⁷⁸ Many traditionalist-authoritarian regimes exist in the world, but no uncontestedly progressive-authoritarian ones exist at time of writing.

achieved within the liberal regime would be to show that there are plausible *perfectionist* arguments for these policies that are consistent with minimal liberalism. I do not think this would be much of a challenge: a perfectionist policy for encouraging marriage, for example, would be consistent with minimal liberalism if it used means that respected the minimal agency rights of people who prefer not to get married. While there may be many plausible perfectionist arguments for these two policy goals that are consistent with minimal liberalism, relying on plausible *anti-perfectionist* arguments is likely to be a more effective strategy for traditionalists, because it permits them to make arguments that may seem plausible to *non*-traditionalists. The persuasive force of perfectionist arguments that rely on premises about the intrinsic value of marriage or religion will be limited to other citizens who share these views of intrinsic value (and thus, often, to other traditionalists), which will severely limit the chances of these arguments prevailing in the decision-making of actually existing liberal regimes.

Another potential benefit for postliberals of implementing the policies I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7 is that doing so may plausibly also help with issue (2), by reducing the risk of the liberal regime decaying into traditionalist-authoritarianism. If, as I showed in Chapter 5, a mechanism underpinning extant liberal regimes' structural tendency to undergo this decay operates via the mechanism of changing citizens' views on sexual ethics in a progressive direction, the effective public promotion of marriage and of religion (which often has traditionalist views on sexual ethics) is plausibly likely to interfere with this mechanism to some degree. This, if it occurs, will be an additional benefit for postliberals of achieving (what are for postliberals) the independently-desirable goals of promoting marriage and public religion.

Therefore, Chapters 6 and 7 will investigate whether there are plausible anti-perfectionist arguments for the postliberal policy goals of encouraging marriage and religion. I will argue that, in both cases, highly plausible arguments exist. The argument for encouraging marriage appeals to the well-documented empirical evidence of the economic, social, and psychological benefits for children of being raised by married parents.⁶⁷⁹ All of these benefits can be conceptualised in terms of children's present and future access to "primary goods" valued by all persons regardless of their conceptions of flourishing; appealing to them is therefore anti-perfectionist.⁶⁸⁰ The argument for encouraging religion appeals to religion's utility as a functional competitor with progressive-authoritarianism and therefore as a means of "containing" a powerful anti-liberal (progressive-authoritarian) doctrines that threaten the stability of the liberal regime.⁶⁸¹

In the following two chapters, I will show that there exist anti-perfectionist arguments for encouraging marriage of religion, which are (by virtue of their anti-perfectionism, as well as their compatibility with affirming minimal liberalism) *legitimate* by the standards of a wide range of versions of liberal theory (most saliently, Rawlsian liberalism). These versions of liberal theory also, I think, capture the rough and inchoate liberal intuitions about legitimacy held by most mainstream political actors in contemporary liberal regimes. I acknowledge that many liberal

⁶⁷⁹ E.g. (Kearney 2023)

⁶⁸⁰ On "primary goods", see (Rawls 2001, 169)

⁶⁸¹ On "containment" of anti-liberal doctrines, see (Badano and Nuti 2024)

theorists, while conceding the *legitimacy* of encouraging marriage and religion by the means that I propose, will nevertheless think that doing so is *unjust*.

However, I think that showing the policies are legitimate by the standards of a theory that captures the rough and inchoate liberal intuitions about legitimacy held by most mainstream political actors in contemporary liberal regimes nevertheless *suggests* that many mainstream political actors in the real-world might also be persuaded of the policies' justice. This is because academic political theorists—even if we count only those who are liberals, as opposed to self-proclaimed progressive-authoritarians of various kinds—tend to hold *far* more left-of-centre views of political justice than real-world political actors.⁶⁸² The compatibility of the policies in question with liberal *theory* shows mainstream actors can be expected to regard them as *legitimate*. The fact that many (most?) liberal theorists will probably, nevertheless regard the policies as unjust does *not* show that mainstream political actors will regard them as unjust because academic political theorists are, on the whole, much more 'left-wing' (less positively disposed to political encouragement of marriage or religion) than real-world political actors.

I will now turn to discuss, first, the argument for promoting marriage.

⁶⁸² Data broken down by academic discipline is hard to come by. However, surveys typically find upwards of 80% (in some cases 90 to 95%) of academics express a preference for left-of-centre parties. See e.g. (Simpson and Kaufmann 2019, 46). There is no reason to think political theorists are an exception to this pattern.

Chapter 6: ‘Orderly Reproduction’: Can a Liberal State Support Marriage?

Rawls’s *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* mentions in passing that the “orderly production and reproduction of society” is among the legitimate concerns of a liberal state.⁶⁸³ This chapter demonstrates that a Rawlsian liberal state may indeed legitimately take non-coercive steps to encourage the orderly reproduction of society through the married family, by subsidising marriage in the manner recommended (despite what I will demonstrate to be its compatibility with liberalism) by anti-liberal postliberals like Deneen, Pappin, and Pecknold, and recently practiced by Victor Orbán’s government in Hungary.

As the previous section has indicated, this chapter will thus demonstrate that one of the most important postliberal policy goals, namely that of subsidising marriage, can be supported by plausible arguments that are consistent with Rawlsian political liberalism, and thus that are also anti-perfectionist arguments. As I noted in Chapter 1, Rawlsian political liberalism is the most appropriate version of liberalism with which to assess the compatibility of postliberal policies. While it would be quite easy to demonstrate that marriage subsidies are compatible with minimal liberalism, this conclusion would be less significant than the conclusion that I will defend in this chapter.

In the introduction to Part 3 of this thesis, I indicated that I would aim to demonstrate that there are plausible anti-perfectionist arguments for the two most important and distinctive policy goals affirmed by anti-liberal postliberals. I will do so—in this chapter, on marriage, and in the final chapter, on public religion—by demonstrating that there are plausible *Rawlsian* arguments for these policy goals, i.e., arguments that meet the conditions required by Rawlsian public reason. Demonstrating the existence of plausible anti-perfectionist arguments will show that the anti-liberal postliberals’ preferred policy goals can plausibly be achieved within the liberal regime, because they could plausibly be supported by a wide constituency, spanning beyond traditionalist-perfectionists, conservatives, and postliberals.

The dialectical function of this argument is to show anti-liberal postliberals that they should be more supportive of the liberal regime than they currently are, because they are more able to achieve their most important goals within it than they assume. By demonstrating the existence specifically of plausible Rawlsian arguments (arguments which are also, by virtue of being Rawlsian, anti-perfectionist) for these policy goals, I will also show the compatibility of the most important and distinctive policy goals of anti-liberal postliberals with what is arguably the most central and widely affirmed version of liberal theory among academics, and certainly *among* the most central and widely affirmed versions.

⁶⁸³ (Rawls 1997, 793)

The argument that I will develop in this chapter will serve different purposes for each of several ideological constituencies. I address (1) *postliberals* and other *anti-liberal traditionalists*, who reject minimal liberalism in favour of traditionalist-authoritarianism, and who likely already support marriage subsidies for perfectionist reasons, since—as I will shortly demonstrate—the policy has become a totemic symbol of postliberalism. For this group, I intend the argument of this chapter to be useful as a means of persuading *others* of the justice of marriage subsidies. By showing that other constituencies can support marriage subsidies, I hope to show postliberals and other anti-liberal traditionalists that they can more easily achieve their most prized goals within the liberal regime than they assume.

The same holds for (2) *liberal traditionalist-perfectionists*, who are committed to minimal liberalism in conjunction with non-coercive perfectionist policies based on traditionalist conceptions of flourishing.⁶⁸⁴ It should be evident that marriage subsidies are compatible with minimal liberalism. However, many traditionalist-perfectionists seem to believe that dominant strands of liberal theory are inherently and necessarily hostile to pro-family public policies. Scott Yenor, a conservative scholar of the family, is representative of non-postliberal traditionalist-perfectionists when he claims that even modest pro-marriage policies inevitably meet with liberalism's unrelenting hostility.⁶⁸⁵ I aim to show that traditionalist-perfectionists like Yenor are mistaken, whether we treat his claim as addressing liberal theory or the real-world liberal regime: not only are there plausible anti-perfectionist liberal arguments for subsidising marriage, but these arguments are sufficiently plausible to a wide range of constituencies for these policies to have a reasonable chance of success in the liberal regime.

The third group to which I address this argument is (3) *anti-perfectionist liberals*.⁶⁸⁶ Such liberals may hold traditionalist or progressive conceptions of the good but are committed to anti-perfectionism in politics. I aim to convince this group that there is a plausible anti-perfectionist case for *marriage subsidies* with significant *pro tanto* weight. I do not claim that the argument will be seen as all-things-considered compelling by every good-willed reader, because this will depend on the weighting of many different values and on predictions of the consequences of policies about which we cannot make any certain judgement. I do claim that anti-perfectionist liberals should take the case for marriage subsidies seriously. The argument will be plausible enough that a significant number of anti-perfectionist liberals—whether progressives or traditionalists—should find it to be all-things-considered compelling.

Finally, I hope that the argument will also be persuasive to (4) a non-negligible number of *progressive-perfectionists*.⁶⁸⁷ Progressives who think that the state should promote the overall human good as conceptualised by a progressive view of flourishing should nevertheless be able

⁶⁸⁴ This group includes natural law theorists like (Finnis 2001; Moschella 2025) and some fusionist conservatives.

⁶⁸⁵ (Yenor 2021, 58–84)

⁶⁸⁶ This includes Rawlsian liberals and other anti-perfectionist liberals like followers of Dworkin. Anti-perfectionist liberalism can be 'political' or 'comprehensive' (see (Quong 2011, 16)).

⁶⁸⁷ Most perfectionist liberals fall into this category, but they are rarely explicit about the progressivism contained within their perfectionism. Anti-liberal progressive-perfectionists are also included; this encompasses many Marxists, radical feminists, and critical theorists.

to recognise the significant respects in which marriage subsidies can contribute to conditions for human flourishing that are recognised by both progressives and traditionalists. These progressives will find that there is a trade-off between the values to which this chapter appeals and the progressive-perfectionist values—like a thick conception of human autonomy, sexual liberty, or gender equality—that marriage subsidies may undermine. I hope, however, to show at least that the positive values to which marriage subsidies contribute have significant weight even for many progressive-perfectionists.

By showing groups (2-4) that the anti-perfectionist case for marriage subsidies is plausible, I hope to show group (1), who probably already believe that marriage subsidies are just for perfectionist reasons, that they have a plausible chance of successfully achieving this policy goal within the confines of the liberal regime by appealing to other ideological constituencies with anti-perfectionist arguments. This result will therefore increase the positive value of the liberal regime for all traditionalist-perfectionists. It will therefore increase the value of the liberal regime vis-à-vis a traditionalist-authoritarian one for traditionalists who worry about the plausible risk of the liberal regime decaying into progressive-authoritarianism, i.e., traditionalists who are tempted by postliberalism and by the No Alternatives Argument. This will, in turn, increase the presumed stability of the liberal regime, which matters to everyone who prefers the liberal regime to traditionalist-authoritarianism. In this way, this chapter, along with chapter 7, contributes to telling us how to respond to postliberal arguments that demonstrate the liberal regime's *plausible* decay into progressive-authoritarianism, and to the central argument of this thesis's third part, namely that traditionalists who are worried about progressive-authoritarianism and tempted by postliberal arguments for traditionalist-authoritarianism should be more significantly more positively disposed to the liberal regime than postliberals currently are.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I first (I) demonstrate that marriage subsidies are a central and distinctive policy goal of anti-liberal postliberals. I then (II) outline the conditions for an argument's compatibility with Rawlsian public reason. In Part (III), I review the existing literature by Rawlsian liberals that is relevant to the issue and then identify, from among the arguments for marriage subsidies recovered from this literature that are *prima facie* compatible with Rawlsian public reason, the most promising argument as the *child-welfare argument*. I also respond to Clare Chambers's argument that state recognition of marriage (and *a fortiori* subsidising marriage) is incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism. I then develop and formalise the child-welfare argument and defend the claim that the argument is plausible against possible objections.

I: Postliberalism and Marriage Subsidies

I define "marriage subsidies" as any form of public provision of transfer payments, subsidised loans, or tax relief for persons who choose to marry or stay married. Marriage subsidies are often promoted, by postliberals and adjacent thinkers, as part of a wider package of pro-family policies. These policies often include redesigning the welfare state to incentivise family

formation and stability, as well as subsidising childbirth.⁶⁸⁸ They sometimes also include policies that aim to improve the “moral ecology” or “public morality” of society, i.e. the environment in which individuals make moral choices, through means that exhibit varying degrees of coerciveness.⁶⁸⁹ For instance, prominent among postliberals is the argument that legal restrictions on pornography will change social norms such that individuals’ preferences and desires will shift in a pro-marriage and pro-natal direction.⁶⁹⁰

I choose to focus on *marriage subsidies* specifically for two reasons. First, they raise more new and important theoretical questions than those raised by other kinds of pro-family policy. Substantial literatures already exist that are relevant to the justice of pronatalism⁶⁹¹ and of moral-ecological paternalism.⁶⁹² The case of marriage subsidies is different. While a significant empirical literature exists on the effect of taxation and welfare programmes on marriage rates,⁶⁹³ I am aware of no political theory literature directly exploring the justice of paying persons to marry or stay married.

Second, marriage subsidies have acquired a totemic status as a symbol of postliberalism. This is in large part because of their association with Victor Orbán’s Fidesz government in Hungary, which is frequently lauded by anti-liberal postliberal public intellectuals as a model for the English-speaking democracies to follow. The second Orbán government, elected in 2010 and in office at the time of writing, introduced a series of pro-family policies from 2011 onwards. These included tax breaks and housing subsidies, as well as direct marriage subsidies.⁶⁹⁴ From 2019, however, direct subsidies took on a particular central and symbolic role in the Orbán government’s domestic and foreign reputation. In that year, the Hungarian government introduced a subsidised loan of around €30,000 for newly married couples, available if the bride is forty years old or younger and marrying for the first time.⁶⁹⁵ The government publicised this policy, and its apparent success, widely in English-language media.⁶⁹⁶ This success appears to have been real, with family scholars agreeing with the Hungarian government that the loan was the main cause of a 2019 jump in the Hungarian marriage rate of over 20%. Family scholars have also argued that the wider package of pro-family policies introduced since 2010 is largely responsible for a near-doubling of Hungary’s marriage rate, which is now the highest in Europe, between 2010 and 2021.⁶⁹⁷ The Fidesz government, which has close ties to English-speaking postliberal thinkers, has publicised this success as a symbol of Hungary’s domestic policy agenda, which purportedly represents an example of successful ‘actually-existing postliberalism’.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁸⁸ See e.g. (Sherman 2025)

⁶⁸⁹ On “public morality” see (George 2000)

⁶⁹⁰ E.g. (Schiffano 2023)

⁶⁹¹ E.g. (Morland and Pilkington 2023; McTernan 2015)

⁶⁹² See (George 1995; Wall 2023)

⁶⁹³ E.g. (Halla et al. 2013; Bitler et al. 2004; Rector 2025)

⁶⁹⁴ (Fűrész 2024)

⁶⁹⁵ (Than 2019). Hungary does not recognise same-sex marriages. A third of the loan is forgiven for couples who have two children, and all of it is forgiven for those who have three or more children.

⁶⁹⁶ (DeRose 2023)

⁶⁹⁷ (Benson 2022)

⁶⁹⁸ See e.g. (Scheffer 2025a; Bráder 2025)

This has also made marriage subsidies central to postliberal family policy proposals in the English-speaking liberal democracies. Many prominent Anglophone postliberal public intellectuals are closely linked to research institutes and think tanks funded by the Hungarian government. At the time of writing, Gladden Pappin is President of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, a pro-Fidesz think tank and research institute,⁶⁹⁹ which also employs the postliberal economist Philip Pilkington.⁷⁰⁰ Patrick Deneen and Chad Pecknold have spoken at public events organised by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, an important Fidesz-aligned educational institute,⁷⁰¹ and have been prominently featured in the pro-Fidesz magazine *The Hungarian Conservative*.⁷⁰² Deneen also held a private audience with Orbán to discuss *Why Liberalism Failed*,⁷⁰³ and Orbán himself was prominently interviewed by Yoram Hazony at the 2024 National Conservatism conference in Brussels.⁷⁰⁴

Encouraged by these close ties to the Fidesz government, and the symbolic importance of marriage subsidies to its ideological legitimisation, postliberal public intellectuals have made marriage subsidies a central plank of their policy proposals. Pappin has called for the US to learn “from Hungary’s example” by introducing a similar system of subsidised loans.⁷⁰⁵ Deneen’s *Regime Change* calls for the US to introduce “policies rewarding marriage”, which would learn from “comparable efforts... undertaken by Hungary’s Ministry of Family Affairs.”⁷⁰⁶ Marriage subsidies also seem to be important to National Conservatives. Hazony has not produced specific policy proposals in this area, but has praised the Hungarian government’s approach to family policy in more general terms,⁷⁰⁷ and the National Conservative *Statement of Principles* calls for “greater support from public policy” for “the traditional family”.⁷⁰⁸

Seemingly mirroring the symbolic importance of marriage subsidies to postliberals, liberal and progressive thinkers who have discussed Hungarian marriage subsidies typically assume that the policy is inherently anti-liberal, and their analysis often elides the policy with other—perhaps more evidently anti-liberal—measures introduced by the Fidesz government. For instance, Eva Fodor’s 2022 *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary* presents Fidesz’s purportedly “anti-liberal authoritarian rule” as inseparable from the “logic of social citizenship” created by the “subsidies” provided to married families.⁷⁰⁹

⁶⁹⁹ (Dobrai 2023)

⁷⁰⁰ (MKI 2023)

⁷⁰¹ (Scheffer 2025c)

⁷⁰² (Scheffer 2025b) (Lukács 2025)

⁷⁰³ (Hungary 2019)

⁷⁰⁴ (National Conservatism 2024)

⁷⁰⁵ (Pappin 2021b, 2021a). Together with the economist Maria Molla, Pappin has also developed detailed proposals for a “FamilyPay” scheme to subsidise childcare which would provide cash transfers of up to nearly \$40,000 per household depending on the number of children present. See (Pappin and Molla 2019)

⁷⁰⁶ (Deneen 2023b, 202)

⁷⁰⁷ (Hazony 2021)

⁷⁰⁸ (National Conservatism 2022)

⁷⁰⁹ (Fodor 2021, 1, 36, 39–41). For another example of this elision, see (Linnamäki 2022)

In addition to addressing the various ideological constituencies in the ways I described in the introduction, therefore, the argument of this chapter will also directly challenge an often-unexamined assumption of both liberal and/or progressive thinkers on the one hand and postliberal thinkers on the other: namely, the assumption that marriage subsidies are inherently anti-liberal. I will demonstrate that not only are the kind of marriage subsidies introduced by Fidesz and advocated by postliberal public intellectuals compatible with liberalism, but that introducing them is in fact supported by plausible, Rawlsian, anti-perfectionist liberal arguments. One can be a Rawlsian liberal, committed to prescinding from judgment about comprehensive doctrines, and also an advocate of marriage subsidies and an enthusiast for central planks of Orbán's family policy.

II: Rawlsian Legitimacy

My starting point for outlining the conditions that an argument must meet to be admissible under Rawlsian public reason is the mature view of public reason outlined in Rawls's later writings. This mature view, as outlined in *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, allows for the existence of "a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice,"⁷¹⁰ which are also (by virtue of being 'reasonable') liberal conceptions of justice. The structure of Rawls's position creates a clear distinction between *justice* and *legitimacy*. Policies affirmed by at least one of these reasonable conceptions of justice are legitimate, in that a state that implements them does not cease thereby to be a liberal state. Such policies may nevertheless be unjust if they are not affirmed by the particular reasonable conception of justice that is in fact the best such conception. Rawls expects liberals to disagree about which such conception is best, indefinitely. This section will outline the detailed conditions for a policy's being legitimate under Rawlsian liberalism, while making no comments about justice. It will then argue that marriage subsidies do not violate any of the conditions of legitimacy.

For my argument to fail, it must be shown that there is *no* plausible interpretation of the detailed conditions of a policy's consistency with Rawlsian liberalism that is inconsistent state subsidising of marriage. I need not show that *every* plausible interpretation, or the *best* interpretation, of the six conditions will permit marriage subsidies.

Rawls identifies two sets of conditions that a conception of justice must satisfy to qualify as a reasonable conception of justice. First, it must meet three structural conditions which make a conception of justice 'political':

(S1) the direct subject of the conception of justice must be the "basic structure" of society, not the various associations within it;⁷¹¹

⁷¹⁰ (Rawls 1997, 767)

⁷¹¹ Ibid., 776

(S2) the conception must not depend on specific “comprehensive doctrines of any kind” (i.e. any particular accounts of the overall human good);⁷¹²

(S3) the conception must express “ideas... implicit in the public political culture of a constitutional regime”.⁷¹³

Marriage subsidies can easily satisfy (S1) and (S3). The policy of subsidising marriage concerns how economic resources should be allocated and how the state should regard a particular legal structure, i.e., the legal institution of marriage. Supporting marriage subsidies does not imply any view of how any individual family should manage their affairs, or whether any individual citizen should marry or not, only that, across the whole of society, some good is achieved if the number of citizens who choose to marry increases. Advocating marriage subsidies is therefore compatible with (S1) and its requirement that a conception of justice apply directly only to society’s basic structure (like the general family law regime or welfare system), and not directly to specific institutions within society (like individual families). (S3) is rarely discussed in the literature. Most theorists seem to assume that it is automatically satisfied if the other conditions for a conception of justice’s reasonableness are satisfied. If a policy is otherwise legitimate, it will also thereby express “ideas... implicit in the public political culture of a [liberal] constitutional regime”.⁷¹⁴ I will adopt this assumption and, therefore, not discuss (S3) further.

Second, a reasonable conception of justice must meet three content-related conditions that make it ‘liberal’:

(C1) the conception must specify basic “rights, liberties, and opportunities... familiar from democratic regimes”;⁷¹⁵

(C2) the conception must (C2) prioritise these rights and opportunities above “the general good and... perfectionist values”;⁷¹⁶

(C3) the conception must provide “adequate all-purpose means” for all citizens to “make effective use” of these rights and opportunities.⁷¹⁷

(C1) requires the protection of formal individual negative rights such as rights to freedom of speech, worship, and privacy, as well as a right to formal equality of economic opportunity.⁷¹⁸ These requirements roughly correspond to the minimal agency and free speech rights and minimal egalitarianism that are part of minimal liberalism.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ (Rawls 1997, 774)

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Rawls gives examples such as “liberty of conscience” (ibid., 783)

Marriage subsidies are evidently compatible with (C1). If the state coerced Betty into marrying (or not marrying), it would obviously violate a basic negative right. But when the state taxes Alf in order to subsidise Betty's marriage, it only coerces Alf into paying taxes, and the coercive imposition of taxes does not violate any basic right. Of course, we might think it problematic that it coerces Alf for the particular *reason* of subsidising Betty's marriage, but this concern will affect (C2), not (C1). Betty is also the object of what Robert Audi calls "second-order" coercion with respect to marriage, because her being incentivised to marry is inseparable from someone else's being first-order coerced (i.e., Alf's being first-order coerced into paying taxes).⁷¹⁹ But second-order coercion does not violate any basic negative right.

(C3) roughly corresponds to the minimal welfare rights that are part of minimal liberalism. Rawls intends (C3) to ensure that the formal rights protected by (C1) are valuable even for the poorest in society.

Marriage subsidies can easily satisfy (C3). The state can easily direct a small percentage of GDP towards subsidising marriage and still provide the necessary socio-economic minimum.

The potential challenges to the compatibility of marriage subsidies with the conditions of Rawlsian legitimacy, therefore, will centre wholly around (C2) and (S2).

(C2) requires that formal negative rights are not limited on the basis of "perfectionist values", i.e., values derived from a view of the overall good or flourishing of human life. (C2) also requires formal rights to be prioritised above the "general good". There are two possible interpretations of the anti-perfectionism expressed by (C2). Weak anti-perfectionism holds that perfectionist policies are illegitimate only if they limit the exercise of basic rights and liberties; strong anti-perfectionism holds that perfectionist policies are always illegitimate, even when they do not limit the exercise of basic rights and liberties. Some theorists of political liberalism have defended weak anti-perfectionism.⁷²⁰ If weak anti-perfectionism were correct, then a policy of marriage subsidies, based explicitly on perfectionist reasons, would be legitimate if it did not limit the exercise of basic rights and liberties. In that case, marriage subsidies could quite easily satisfy (C2).

However, even if weak anti-perfectionism is the correct interpretation of (C2), combining (C2) with (S2) (the freestandingness requirement) would generate a position close to strong anti-perfectionism. If, per (S2), a reasonable conception of justice must be freestanding of any particular conception of the good or set of such conceptions, perfectionism is never legitimate if it relies on views of human flourishing that are rejected by at least some conceptions of the good. Any plausible perfectionist consideration relevant to marriage subsidies, such as the purported intrinsic value of monogamy or commitment, is unlikely to be converged on in this way. Effectively, then, strong anti-perfectionism is required by Rawlsian liberalism except in cases (like, perhaps, preventing drug addiction) where citizens converge on the same perfectionist values for independent reasons, *even* if weak anti-perfectionism is the correct

⁷¹⁹ (Audi 2014, 11)

⁷²⁰ E.g. (Chan 2000, 14–5).

interpretation of (C2). Since, clearly, many citizens do not value marriage, marriage subsidies can only be legitimate if based on an anti-perfectionist rationale.⁷²¹

Thus, the conjunction of (C2) and (S2) generates the following requirement: for marriage subsidies to be legitimate, there must be at least one plausible anti-perfectionist rationale for marriage subsidies that is freestanding, i.e., independent of any specific comprehensive doctrine or set of doctrines. We may call this the *neutrality requirement*. The rationale cannot appeal to a conception of rights that is inseparable from a specific comprehensive doctrine; rather, it must appeal to primary goods (which include the rights protected by C1) potentially valued by all citizens regardless of their various conceptions of the good. Marriage subsidies can easily, as we have seen, satisfy (C1), (C3), and (S1). Their legitimacy will therefore turn on whether a plausible rationale can be provided that satisfies the neutrality requirement expressed by the conjunction of (C2) and (S2).

III: Liberal Arguments for Marriage Subsidies

I will now examine the various arguments offered by political liberals that are plausibly relevant to the justice of marriage subsidies, and assess which of these arguments satisfy the neutrality requirement. Where necessary, I will revise these arguments to make them maximally plausible, but without engaging in an all-things-considered evaluation of the arguments. I will also respond to Clare Chambers's argument that Rawlsian liberalism forbids the state recognition of marriage (and thence, *a fortiori*, that it forbids marriage subsidies). I will argue that the most plausible argument that satisfies the neutrality requirement is what I will call the *child-welfare argument*, so I will develop and formalise this argument (Part III.i) and defend it against possible objections (Part III.ii).

I noted earlier that there has been little explicit discussion by political liberals of the legitimacy, or desirability, of marriage subsidies,⁷²² but that there has been much discussion of the legitimacy of state *recognition* of marriage. Liberal political theorists have taken a wide range of positions on this question. Clare Chambers argues that liberalism forbids the recognition of marriage and requires a "marriage-free state".⁷²³ Alison Toop, Stephen Macedo, and Ralph Wedgwood defend, on different grounds, the continued recognition of marriage in roughly its current form.⁷²⁴ Lorrie Watson and Christie Hartley suggest that recognition is permissible only in some social conditions,⁷²⁵ while Elizabeth Brake and Tamara Metz, separately, defend

⁷²¹ I assume either that marriage subsidies involve a constitutional essential or matter of basic justice, or that the anti-perfectionist requirements of public reason apply to all political decisions (for a defence of the latter view, see (Quong 2011, 256–89)

⁷²² A partial exception is (Galston 1996), but he does not deploy a specifically Rawlsian version of liberalism.

⁷²³ (Chambers 2017, 47–76)

⁷²⁴ (Toop 2019; Wedgwood 2015; Macedo 2015, 79–142)

⁷²⁵ (Watson and Hartley 2018, 212–47)

revisionary proposals in which an institution quite different from marriage in its current form is recognised by the state.⁷²⁶

I will engage with most of this literature indirectly. If it is legitimate for the Rawlsian liberal state to subsidise marriage, then, *a fortiori*, it may also recognise marriage, for the state could not subsidise marriage without recognising it. However, if it is not legitimate for the Rawlsian state to do so, my argument will, by a parallel *a fortiori* logic, be defeated.

Most of the existing Rawlsian (or ‘political’) liberal rationales for recognising marriage are versions of one of two main arguments. First, Wedgwood⁷²⁷ and Macedo⁷²⁸ appeal to the *communicative function* of state-recognised marriage: legal recognition of relationships as marriage facilitates individuals in easily communicating information about their relationships to society. Second, Toop’s defence of state-recognised marriage, as well as Metz and Brake’s defences of recognising alternative marriage-like institutions, appeal to a state *interest in regulating caregiving relationships* deriving from both the vulnerability and the goods that these relationships create.⁷²⁹

I will not evaluate these two arguments here, because neither the *communicative* argument nor the *caregiving argument* can justify subsidising marriage. A rationale for recognising marriage that also justifies subsidising it must claim that marriage is a *social good*, i.e., that it is valuable and desirable that more citizens choose to marry. Neither the communicative argument nor most versions of the caregiving argument claim or imply that marriage is a social good. The communicative argument merely asserts that some citizens desire to communicate information about their relationships to society, and that state-recognition of marriage can help satisfy this desire. It is agnostic about whether it is good that citizens satisfy this desire (except insofar as satisfying any non-repugnant desire is, plausibly, good). Most versions of the caregiving argument merely claim that the quality of citizens’ caregiving relationships is a social good, but do not claim that caregiving is best provided in married families, only that recognising the caregiving relationships that exist (under the label “marriage” for Toop⁷³⁰ and Brake,⁷³¹ under a different label for Metz⁷³²) is an appropriate means of regulating the social good of caregiving.

Toop makes two versions of the *caregiving argument*. The first implies that marriage *is* a social good, but this first version is a perfectionist argument. Toop suggests that dyadic, romantic caregiving relationships might be valuable in certain distinctive ways, which involve “intimacy” and “fidelity”.⁷³³ This is a perfectionist argument because some citizens’ conceptions of the good do not accept that intimacy and fidelity are intrinsically valuable. To appeal to the purported

⁷²⁶ (Brake 2011; Metz 2010). Brake would retain the name “marriage” for this institution but Metz would not.

⁷²⁷ (Wedgwood 2015, 36–8)

⁷²⁸ (Macedo 2015, 88–97)

⁷²⁹ (Toop 2019, 322–5; Brake 2011, 173–8; Metz 2010, 119–26)

⁷³⁰ (Toop 2019)

⁷³¹ (Brake 2011, 185–8)

⁷³² (Metz 2010, 113–4)

⁷³³ (Toop 2019, 324)

intrinsic value of these characteristics of a relationship is necessarily to make a perfectionist argument, and this version of the caregiving argument is therefore outside the scope of this chapter.

The second version of the argument from this interest that Toop makes is anti-perfectionist, but does *not* hold that marriage is a social good. Toop claims that dyadic, romantic caregiving relationships are uniquely “risky” compared to other forms of caregiving relationship. She then claims that the need to regulate the risks of these relationships provides a *pro tanto* anti-perfectionist reason to recognise only dyadic, romantic relationships as ‘marriage’.⁷³⁴ However, this anti-perfectionist argument does not imply that it is valuable for more people to marry or enter this “risky” kind of relationship, only that, *if* people enter this kind of relationship, the state has an interest in protecting them by recognising the relationship as ‘marriage’.

In addition to his support for the communicative argument, however, Macedo provides two additional arguments based on *human welfare* that *do* imply that marriage is a social good. The argument from *adult welfare* appeals to the claim that marriage contributes to adults’ subjective well-being, mental and physical health, and financial security.⁷³⁵ Macedo also makes a *child welfare* argument, which appeals to the claim that children raised by married couples benefit from greater financial and non-financial parental investment, producing better health, educational, and economic outcomes later in life.⁷³⁶ Macedo’s arguments, unlike the communicative argument or most versions of the caregiving argument, clearly claim that marriage is a social good. However, the adult welfare argument is perfectionist because it appeals to marriage’s purported effect on subjective well-being. Appeals to the subjective well-being of adults are necessarily perfectionist, because they make sense only as relying on judgments about the overall goodness or flourishing of citizens’ lives; it is impossible to define ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’ in a way that does not depend on some particular conception of the good.

The adult welfare argument could be repaired to appeal only to the effect of marriage on health, education, and financial security, which are primary goods, since all citizens have reason to value them, whatever their overall conception of the good.⁷³⁷ Yet the plausibility of this version of the argument would face another problem arising from its paternalistic character. Although Macedo claims that marriage is a social good, he readily concedes that marriage is not in the interests of every adult.⁷³⁸ Therefore, even if Macedo is correct that marriage causes most adults to enjoy better access to primary goods, this does *not* necessarily imply that marriage is a social good, because it does not necessarily imply that increasing the proportion of adults who marry would increase overall access to these primary goods in society. Instead, it may be that those adults whose health, financial security, etc., is improved by marriage recognise this and choose to marry, and those adults for whom this is not the case choose not to marry. Liberals

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ (Macedo 2015, 109)

⁷³⁶ Ibid., 110-112

⁷³⁷ On “primary goods”, see (Rawls 2001, 169)

⁷³⁸ Ibid., 109

rightly make at least the defeasible presumption that adults of sound mind are the best judges of their own interests. Since this presumption is defeasible, perhaps the adult welfare argument could be further repaired. However, I think the child welfare argument can most easily be shown to be plausible because it does not face the additional challenge of overcoming a presumption against paternalism.

Before developing and formalising the child welfare argument, I will first explain why Chambers's view, that the Rawlsian state cannot legitimately recognise marriage, is mistaken (if Chambers were correct, the case for marriage subsidies would be unable to get off the ground: the state must recognise marriage in order to subsidise it).

Chambers makes two arguments against the legitimacy of state-recognised marriage. First, she claims that state recognition of marriage reinforces gender inequality by strengthening social norms and patterns of material dependency that make women vulnerable to abuse and reduce their socio-economic status.⁷³⁹

Second, she claims that any benefits to child welfare arising from the positive effect marriage on family stability (these are the benefits to which the child welfare argument will appeal below) can only be known to exist in societies where state recognised marriage exists, because "no evidence is available"⁷⁴⁰ to compare the outcomes of children raised in 'married' households vis-a-vis those of children in unmarried households, "*in a society where marriage does not exist as a state-recognised institution.*"⁷⁴¹

For the sake of argument, I will accept Chambers's claim about gender inequality. Her argument still fails. Granting Chambers's claim about gender inequality, she has established that there is one weighty *pro tanto* reason to abolish state-recognised marriage. However, she has not provided a convincing reason to think there may not be similarly weighty reasons on the other wise. Chambers's claim that we cannot know how informal 'marriage' will affect family stability in a society without state-recognised marriage is plausible only on the basis of some kind of epistemic claim according to which it is very difficult to make accurate predictions about people's behaviour in societies very different to our own.

This epistemic claim, on which Chambers implicitly relies, also implies that it is very difficult to make accurate predictions about how people would respond to the abolition of state-recognised marriage. Chambers claims that "there is no reason to think" that parents would "lose their commitment to values such as stability and enduring relationships" if state-recognised marriage were abolished, because the state could signal its support for such values through other means.⁷⁴²

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 19-20

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 104

⁷⁴¹ Ibid. Emphasis original. Private ceremonies or contracts called 'marriage' could still exist in a society without state-recognised marriage.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 109

But there are in fact two reasons to think these values would be threatened. First, as Chambers acknowledges, marriage has a distinct and distinctly thick set of social meanings, and one of these meanings is a commitment to care for children produced by the marital relationship.⁷⁴³ Abolishing state-recognised marriage will have a *meaning-disrupting effect* on these meanings. A state policy of signalling concern for family stability and enduring parental relationships in other ways would very plausibly be significantly less effective at encouraging such values than the status quo of state-recognised marriage, precisely because it would not engage the *thick nexus of long-established social meanings* that state-recognised marriage engages.

Second, the abolition of state-recognised marriage itself is very likely to have a harmful *signalling effect*. Suppose the state ceases to recognise marriage, and announces it is doing so on the grounds that Chambers thinks justify this abolition—that marriage is an oppressive, patriarchal institution that undermines gender equality and autonomy.⁷⁴⁴ This will very plausibly be interpreted by parents or potential parents as a symbolic endorsement of the values of expressive liberty, sexual autonomy, and a thick conception of gender equality above what are (in this case) the competing values of family stability, commitment, and child welfare. It is probable that the state will thereby induce more people to prioritise these values over pursuing stable marriages that are conducive to child welfare.

I do not claim to be able to predict the magnitude of the *meaning-disrupting* and *signalling effects*. The same epistemic principle that justifies Chambers's claim that we cannot know the effect of informal 'marriage' on family stability in a society without state-recognised marriage also implies that we cannot know the magnitude of these two effects. We therefore cannot know if their magnitude exceeds the harmful effect of state-recognised marriage on gender equality that I conceded for the sake of argument.

It is therefore possible that countervailing reasons for retaining state-recognised marriage exist, of equal or greater magnitude to the reason Chambers adduces in favour of abolition. The magnitude of the effects I have discussed is difficult to foresee in part because of the same reasons (the applicability of the burdens of judgement to such complex appraisals of the effects of policies in different social worlds) that justify the deep version of Rawlsian liberalism, with multiple legitimate reasonable conceptions of justice, in the first place. Therefore, Chambers has failed to refute the legitimacy of state-recognised marriage and provided no reason to think subsidising marriage is illegitimate. I will now move on to discuss the substantive argument for subsidising marriage.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁴⁴ (Chambers 2017, 11-46).

III.i: Thinking of the Children: The Child Welfare Argument

The most promising argument for subsidising marriage will therefore rely on an appeal to the interests of children, where the concerns about paternalism will largely not apply.⁷⁴⁵ Macedo mentions evidence that being raised in married families benefits children, but does not develop a fully worked-out argument based on this evidence.⁷⁴⁶ In the remainder of this chapter, I will defend an argument that appeals to this evidence. I will not defend the overall soundness of this argument, but I will defend its compatibility with the conditions of legitimacy in Rawlsian liberalism and its plausibility. Plausibility, here, is a rough epistemic notion: the argument should not rely on arbitrary conjecture or inferential errors; should seem, to good-willed readers, to have, *prima facie*, at least some force; and should stand up against obvious objections.

Rawls lists among the legitimate state interests in the family the “orderly production and reproduction of society from one generation to the next”.⁷⁴⁷ This gives us at least *prima facie* reason to think that a liberal state has a non-perfectionist interest in the means by which a society reproduces itself across generations. As we will see, the child welfare argument relies on claims that capture part of this interest.

The child welfare argument proceeds as follows.

P1: Subsidies, implemented appropriately, can have a non-trivial impact on the number of adults who marry or stay married;

P2: If more adults are induced to marry or stay married, more children will be raised in stable, reasonably happy married families vis-à-vis the likely alternatives, provided this inducement is done in the way least likely to cause the additional marriages to be dysfunctional;

P3: If more children are raised in stable, reasonably happy married families vis-à-vis the likely alternatives, children’s average levels of physical and mental health, educational attainment, and future income and wealth will be significantly higher;

P4: The state may justly act (provided it does not violate any basic rights in doing so) to increase its citizens’ levels of physical and mental health, educational attainment, and income and wealth, since all of these are primary goods;

C: Therefore, the state may justly introduce marriage subsidies *iff* such subsidies induce more adults to marry or stay married, provided this inducement is done in the way least likely to cause the additional marriages to be dysfunctional.

⁷⁴⁵ There is, of course, a literature debating the nature and significance of children’s interest in autonomy and the legitimacy of moulding children’s values and preferences (e.g. (Fowler 2014; Clayton 2012)). However, the argument I will defend does not rely on this moulding.

⁷⁴⁶ (Macedo 2015, 110–12)

⁷⁴⁷ (Rawls 1997, 793)

The child welfare argument is valid: if (P1-P4) are true, (C) is true. (P4) is true according to political liberalism, which is the version of liberal theory this chapter uses. The issue therefore turns on (P1-3). I will now show that (P1-3) are, on the balance of probabilities, more likely than not to be true.

III.ii: The Plausibility of the Child Welfare Argument

(P1) claims that marriage subsidies can have a significant impact on a society's marriage rate. The evidence from Hungary, which I have already referred to, supports this claim. After the introduction of a large, subsidised loan for newlyweds in 2019, which is partly or wholly forgiven depending on the number of children the couple goes on to have, the number of marriages in Hungary jumped by over 20%.⁷⁴⁸ Scholars generally agree that the subsidies played an important role in inducing this change, despite disagreeing over the likely long-term magnitude and durability of the trend towards a higher marriage rate.⁷⁴⁹

Broader empirical analyses of the impact of financial subsidies and penalties on marriage rates corroborate the claim that subsidies can have a significant impact. Studies in the United States, deploying both statistical analyses and randomised trials, have found that the net fiscal impact of tax and welfare policy on married vs. single status has a significant impact on people's likelihood of marrying.⁷⁵⁰ The evidence strongly suggests, therefore, that policies that affect people's financial circumstances, like marriage subsidies, can have a significant impact on a society's marriage rate. (P1) is therefore probably true.

The obvious objection to (P2) is what I will call the 'perversity claim'.⁷⁵¹ This is the claim that, if more people are induced to marry or stay married by subsidies, the people marrying or staying married who would not otherwise have done so will be the 'wrong' people. According to the perversity claim, people marrying or staying married for financial reasons will generally be those who do not have a relationship that is otherwise happy or stable enough to justify marriage or staying married. These people will therefore generally not have stable, reasonably happy marriages, and the net effect of marriage subsidies will therefore not be, as their advocates intend, to increase the proportion of children raised in stable, reasonably happy marriages vis-a-vis the likely alternatives, but to increase the proportion of children raised in *unstable* and *unhappy* marriages vis-a-vis the likely alternatives, thus having a presumably negative impact on overall child welfare, or at least undermining confidence in any positive impact.⁷⁵² If the

⁷⁴⁸ (DeRose 2023)

⁷⁴⁹ See (Woods 2021; Szakacs and Fenyo 2023; Fűrész and Molnár 2021)

⁷⁵⁰ (Eriksen 2010; Fisher 2013)

⁷⁵¹ Following (Hirschman 1991), a perversity argument holds that a policy will in fact undermine the very value it purports to promote.

⁷⁵² Whether the net effect on child welfare will be negative in this scenario depends on the relative impact on children of being raised in unstable, unhappy married families vis-a-vis being raised in one-parent households. To my knowledge, no empirical evidence exists permitting us to assess this. Nevertheless, the perversity claim, if true, would undermine confidence in the positive impact of marriage subsidies on child welfare.

perversity claim is true, (P2) is false, and the child welfare argument fails. If, however, the perversity claim is false, and people who are induced to marry by subsidies are as likely, or nearly as likely, as other people who choose to marry to have reasonably happy and stable marriages, then (P2) is true, and the net effect of subsidies will be to increase the proportion of children raised in reasonably happy and stable marriages vis-a-vis the likely alternatives.

The perversity claim is probably false because it has implausible implications for the causes of recent trends in marriage patterns. Most Western liberal democracies have seen substantial, and in some cases dramatic, falls in marriage rates since 1990. For instance, the United States saw its marriage rate fall by 37% between 1990 and 2022,⁷⁵³ and this decline in marriage rates has been steepest among non-college-educated people.⁷⁵⁴ The decline has not been accompanied by a comparable decline in the divorce rate, which has declined modestly since 1990 but not at a comparable pace to the marriage rate.⁷⁵⁵ This means that, compared to the situation in 1990, a substantially smaller section of the population is choosing to marry and stay married at any given time, and this trend is particularly concentrated among less educated people.

If the perversity claim were true, how would we explain this trend? The perversity claim holds that subsidies cannot induce more people to both marry or stay married *and* form or sustain reasonably happy and stable marriages; it holds, in other words, that people induced by subsidies to marry or stay married will have unhappy and/or unstable marriages. Thus, the perversity claim implies that, at any time, there are *not* a significant number of *unmarried* people who, were they induced to marry and stay married, would enjoy reasonably happy and stable marriages. Yet the proportion of unmarried people has risen substantially since 1990. How can we explain this, consistently with the perversity thesis?

There are two possible ways of explaining the decline in marriage since 1990 consistently with the perversity thesis: either (a) the decline in marriage since 1990 has involved a decline in the proportion of people who, if they married, would be *able* to enjoy reasonably happy and stable marriages; or (b) the decline does not involve a decline in this proportion, but it is nevertheless true that, at the margins, financial incentives will mainly induce people to marry or stay married who would, if they did so, *not* enjoy reasonably happy and stable marriages.

Both (a) and (b) are extremely implausible and inconsistent with the best available evidence. For (a) to be true, it must be the case that, since 1990, large swathes of the population, especially poorer and less educated segments of the population, have become less capable of sustaining reasonably happy and stable (not perfect) marriages. This is *prima facie* highly implausible. For (b) to be true, it must be the case that only, or overwhelmingly, people who are not capable of sustaining reasonably happy and stable marriages respond to financial considerations when deciding whether to marry, which is also *prima facie* extremely implausible; or that there is something unique about the mechanism by which *subsidies* specifically affect the

⁷⁵³ Compare (Clarke 1995, 1) and (Tsai 2024)

⁷⁵⁴ (Taylor et al. 2010, 1)

⁷⁵⁵ (Loo 2024)

relevant financial considerations influencing choices about marriage that somehow causes subsidies to influence the decisions only of people who would be unable to sustain reasonably happy and stable marriages, which is also *prima facie* implausible.

Not only is (a) *prima facie* implausible, it is contradicted by widespread evidence that, since 1990, more people have begun to delay or avoid marriage because of changes in cultural values. While survey evidence typically shows near-stability in the share of unmarried people claiming that they would *like to get married at some point*, there is good reason to believe that people are increasingly ascribing *lower priority* to marriage when it appears to conflict with other desires or values. For instance, between 2006 and 2020, the percentage of Americans claiming to believe it is “very important” for a couple to marry if they “plan to spend the rest of their lives together” fell by sixteen points. During the same time period, the percentage of Americans claiming to believe it is “morally acceptable” to have children outside marriage rose by the same margin, while belief in the acceptability of divorce rose by eight points and belief in the acceptability of non-marital sex rose by nine points.⁷⁵⁶

Taken together, this declining belief in the importance of marriage, combined with increasing belief in the acceptability of non-marital relationships and divorce, clearly indicates a trend towards cultural values that ascribe less importance to marriage when there appear to be trade-offs between marriage and other values or goals. It would be surprising if this trend did not play a significant part in causing the decline in the prevalence of marriage during this time period. Much more plausible is Brad Wilcox’s supposition that Americans (and presumably people in other Western liberal democracies) increasingly ascribe less importance to marriage when it appears to conflict with the self-expression or satisfaction purportedly afforded by other lifestyle choices, such as sexual and romantic experimentation;⁷⁵⁷ or with the ideal of entering a presumptively permanent relationship, or remaining in such a relationship, only with one’s “soul mate”.⁷⁵⁸ This supposition is, of course, consistent with the observation noted earlier that the proportion of unmarried people saying they would, in principle, like to get married has remained relatively stable.

If, in face of this clear evidence for declining belief in the importance of marriage, we were to hold on to explanation (a) for the perversity claim—namely that the decline in the prevalence of marriage is caused by a decline in the proportion of people who, if they married, would experience reasonably happy and stable marriages—we would have to make a further highly implausible supposition. We would have to suppose that, for the people increasingly choosing to prioritise other goals and values above marriage, this change in priorities is either cause or consequence of an increasing *inability* to sustain relatively happy and stable marriages, an inability that would persist even if such people were to *choose* to marry. It is plausible enough that *some* people who ascribe relatively little priority to marriage might be unable to sustain such a relatively happy and stable marriage if they were to choose to marry, but it is not plausible to think that all, or nearly all, of these people would be unable to sustain such a relationship. Very

⁷⁵⁶ (Gallup, Inc 2025)

⁷⁵⁷ (Wilcox 2024, 23–4; 68–70)

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 121–4

plausibly, many of the people prioritising other values and goals above marriage have only relatively shallow, fleeting, and (perhaps) adaptive preferences for these other values and goals vis-a-vis marriage,⁷⁵⁹ so that they would not necessarily be deeply unhappy or conflicted if they were to choose to marry. Even in the case of people for whom anti-marriage preferences are deeply rooted and intense, if these people were to choose to marry, it would presumably be because they had *already* changed or moderated these preferences. It is therefore overwhelmingly plausible to suppose that a significant proportion of the people currently prioritising other goals over marriage would have reasonably happy and stable marriages if they changed their priorities and chose to marry or stay married, so explanation (a) must be rejected as false. Quite simply, more people who *could* have reasonably happy and stable marriages are choosing to do other things. They could choose otherwise.

What about explanation (b)? Could it be the case that many people who *could* have reasonably happy and stable marriages are choosing other things, but that financial subsidies will only affect the choices of the group of people who are currently choosing other things and *could not* have such marriages? If this were true, we would expect that, empirically, in cases where subsidies induce more people to marry, these marriages tend to be less stable, so the increase in the marriage rate would be accompanied by an increase in the divorce rate.⁷⁶⁰ (Of course, this may not hold true if the subsidies were lost, or required to be repaid, in the event of divorce. Typically, however, this is not the case. In Hungary, for instance, subsidies continue as family allowances in the event of divorce).⁷⁶¹ This increase in the divorce rate is not what we observe. The doubling of Hungary's marriage rate between 2010 and 2021 was, in fact, accompanied by a significant *fall* in the divorce rate.⁷⁶² American studies corroborate the claim that marriage subsidies usually increase the marriage rate without increasing the divorce rate.⁷⁶³ We should therefore reject explanation (b) as false.

Neither explanation for the perversity claim is consistent with the available evidence, so we must conclude that the perversity claim is probably false and (P2) is probably true. There is no reason to think that people induced to marry or stay married through subsidies are likely to have less happy or stable marriages than anyone else who marries or stays married. Inducing people to marry or stay married through subsidies, therefore, probably *does*, at least if done in the most appropriate ways, lead to more children being raised in reasonably happy and stable married families vis-à-vis the likely alternatives, rather than to more children being raised in unhappy and/or unstable married families.

The case for (P3) is very strong, indeed overwhelmingly strong. Note that, per the probable truth of (P2), the “likely alternative” to children being raised in reasonably happy, stable married families is not children being raised in unhappy and/or unstable married families. Nor is it children being raised in polygamous families, polyamorous polycules, multigenerational families,

⁷⁵⁹ Just as is plausibly the case with respect to any lifestyle choice.

⁷⁶⁰ This does not measure the happiness of marriages, but data on this is hard to come by, for obvious reasons.

⁷⁶¹ (DeRose 2023)

⁷⁶² (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2024)

⁷⁶³ (Dickert-Conlin 1999, 230–2)

kibbutzim, feminist collectives, or state-run orphanages, for the statistical frequency of such childcare arrangements is vanishingly small in all the Western liberal democracies. The likely alternative is, overwhelmingly, children being raised by *one-parent families* or *unmarried two-parent families*. As I will shortly explain, the empirical evidence for the superiority of reasonably happy and stable married families over one-parent families for children's future access to primary goods is overwhelming, while unmarried two-parent families are considerably less stable than married ones, and therefore more likely to end up collapsing into one-parent families.

The economist Melissa Kearney has recently summarised much of this evidence. Drawing on several studies conducted over the last decade, Kearney shows that, on average, children raised in two-parent households enjoy substantially better outcomes, in terms of all the primary goods under discussion (health, wealth, educational outcomes, likelihood of criminality or drug addiction, etc.) than children raised in one-parent households, even when controlling for other socio-economic variables presumably relevant to child development.⁷⁶⁴ She notes that the two-parent effect is mediated but *not* fully explained by the level of economic resources to which households have access, which strongly implies that the two-parent effect is an independent causal influence, not a result of the fact that two-parent households are likely to be of higher socio-economic status than one-parent households.⁷⁶⁵

This suggests that two-parent households tend to produce better outcomes for children in terms of primary goods because the presence of two parents contributes not only to children's material resources (due to having two incomes in the household), but also, crucially, to cultural and social resources of other kinds, such as *parental attention*. In other words, children raised in two-parent (as opposed to one-parent) households tend to benefit emotionally and psychologically from greater parental attention, leading to better outcomes later in life as measured in terms of a range of primary goods.

Importantly, Kearney also cites evidence showing that the stability of two-parent households is strongly correlated whether the parents are married.⁷⁶⁶ In other words, children living with two *married* parents are more likely to still live with two parents X years in the future than children living with two *unmarried* parents, even when other factors plausibly influencing the likelihood of parental separation are controlled for.⁷⁶⁷ Now, it is plausible that, even when all other factors known to affect the likelihood of this separation are controlled for, some *other*, unidentified factor nevertheless contributes to *both* the likelihood that a couple will stay together and the likelihood that they will marry. Nevertheless, it is *extremely* probable that the act of marrying itself *causes* part of the correlation between marital status and household stability, because an extremely plausible mechanism exists to explain this causal process. Marrying, i.e. publicly pledging to at least attempt to live together permanently, extremely plausibly influences couple's future decisions in the direction of valuing relationship stability to a higher degree, thereby partially

⁷⁶⁴ (Kearney 2023, 48–57)

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57–64. This is partly because two-parent households usually have two incomes.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 66

⁷⁶⁷ See also (Marriage Foundation 2022)

causing the higher relationship stability seen among married couples, and thereby also partially causing the lower risk that children raised by two married parents will end up experiencing their parents' separation than children raised by two unmarried parents.⁷⁶⁸

It appears, then, that *marriage* plays an important part in producing the child-welfare benefits of two-parent households. Kearney's evidence therefore validates the overwhelming likelihood that (P3) is true: if more children are raised in stable, reasonably happy married families vis-à-vis the likely alternatives, their average levels of physical and mental health, educational attainment, future income and wealth, and access to other primary goods will be significantly higher. It appears, therefore, that all of the premises (P1-P3) of the child welfare argument are true. (P1) and (P3) are almost certainly true, and (P2) is probably true. Since (P4) is (per the assumptions of this chapter) true, the argument appears to be sound. Despite the uncertainty introduced by the merely probabilistic judgement that (P2) is true, the argument is certainly plausible even if it is not certainly sound.

I will now briefly respond to some hypothetical objections, before discussing the theoretical challenge to (P4) posed by Chambers. First, a critic might argue that the child welfare argument is in some sense *covertly* perfectionist. While it does not appeal explicitly to any perfectionist values, but only to children's future access to primary goods, part of the mechanism for the beneficial effects of child subsidies appears to involve changes in citizens' overall conceptions of human flourishing. This is because, to induce people currently prioritising other lifestyle choices above marriage to marry, it is extremely plausible to think that marriage subsidies do not work (when they work) simply by adding an additional financial consideration to the 'scales' on which a person weighs the choice to marry or not marry, but also by moulding citizens' beliefs about the intrinsic importance of marriage vis-a-vis other lifestyle choices. It is not as if Bettina thinks to herself, "Well, I'd prefer to be a single, childless cat lady, but pursuing this lifestyle is only worth €20,000 to me, and I can get a €30,000 subsidy for marrying Alfréd. So on balance, my expected utility is higher if I become a tradwife instead." Rather, any plausible mechanism for the effect of marriage subsidies on choices will rely in part on the way in which the state, by offering these subsidies, moulds citizens' values and priorities. By offering subsidies, the state appears to 'honour' marriage above other lifestyle choices.⁷⁶⁹ The state, in inducing citizens to choose marriage in part because of the honour it gives to marriage, or because of the indirect effects this honour has on social norms, moulds citizens to give more value to marriage and commitment vis-à-vis experimentation or finding a 'soul mate', and thereby changes their comprehensive conceptions of flourishing. Marriage subsidies are therefore a covertly perfectionist policy.

My response to this objection is that this kind of covert perfectionism simply does not matter to Rawlsian liberalism. Political liberals widely recognise that the state cannot coherently aim that

⁷⁶⁸ A possible objection here is that this mechanism may only operate in societies with state-recognised marriage. I will respond to this objection in Part 4 of this chapter.

⁷⁶⁹ Compare (Hazony 2022, 145–2) on "honor".

its policies are neutral in *effect*, as opposed to merely anti-perfectionist in *intention*.⁷⁷⁰ Many kinds of policy that political liberals widely accept will turn out, on close inspection, to be covertly perfectionist in an analogous way. For instance, suppose the state decides to subsidise fresh fruit and vegetables and tax ultra-processed ‘junk’ food on the impeccably anti-perfectionist grounds that health is a primary good that the state has a strong interest in promoting.⁷⁷¹ If this policy is effective in changing citizens’ food choices, it will not only be because it changes the financial incentives citizens face when making such choices. It will, extremely plausibly, also be because citizens come to ascribe more intrinsic weight, in their value systems, to long-term health vis-à-vis fleeting gastronomic pleasure. Perhaps some citizens even come to regard junk food as morally ‘impure’.⁷⁷² It would be absurd, and have absurd consequences, to think that this covert perfectionism is a reason, let alone a compelling reason, for the state not to try to encourage healthy eating among its citizens.

Another objection would be that alternative policies could achieve the same end—promoting child welfare—more effectively. One obvious alternative policy suggested by Kearney’s evidence of the superiority of married families, compared to one-parent families, for child welfare is to try to compensate children raised in one-parent families for this disadvantage. However, this policy, while certainly justified, is a *complement* to the policy of subsidising marriage, not a substitute for this policy. As Kearney’s evidence shows, a large part of the reason that two-parent families are better for child welfare than one-parent families is that they provide children with more non-material resources such as parental attention. It is likely to be difficult, if not almost impossible, for the state to fully compensate children for the disadvantages attendant on being raised in one-parent households, because it is plausibly difficult (if not impossible) to provide children adequate substitute goods for parental attention, assuming (as is extremely plausible) that the attention of paid professionals is at best an imperfect substitute for parental attention.⁷⁷³ Even if it *were* possible for the state to fully compensate children raised in one-parent households, this might, in some plausible circumstances, be substantially less cost-effective than *combining* this policy with a policy to reduce the number of children raised in one-parent families.⁷⁷⁴ An appropriate policy mix would therefore be for the state to *both* assist children raised in one-parent households *and* to encourage more parents or prospective parents to marry so that fewer children are raised in one-parent households in the first place.

Another alternative policy is that of subsidising childbirth specifically for couples who are *already* married, instead of subsidising marriage directly. This is likely to be of very limited effectiveness in increasing the proportion of children raised in married families for two reasons. The first

⁷⁷⁰ (Kramer 2017, 13–14). A stronger version of this objection could be recovered from Kramer’s (ibid., 17–24) discussion of “neutrality of means and ends”. I will respond to this objection, which applies to my discussion of both marriage subsidies and public religion, in the next chapter.

⁷⁷¹ Some liberals might object to such a policy on the grounds of its *paternalism*, but nothing in Rawlsian liberalism commits us to rejecting all paternalistic policies.

⁷⁷² Cf. (Haidt 2012, 150) on the “impurity-avoidance function in New Age grocery stores”.

⁷⁷³ See the literature on the negative effects of professional daycare vs parental care for young children. E.g. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2003)

⁷⁷⁴ It might be that a great quantity of material resources is needed to make up for the effect of having only one income and one parent in the household, and a relatively small quantity needed to reduce the number of one-parent households.

reason is that the fairly comprehensive existing empirical literature on pronatalism suggests childbirth subsidies have only a very modest impact on the birth rate at very high financial cost,⁷⁷⁵ whereas marriage subsidies can be much more cost-effective (as we saw in the case of the doubling of Hungary's marriage rate from 2010 to 2021). The second reason is that, even if subsidies for childbirth to already-married couples could raise the birthrate to such couples by as much as 0.5—which is probably the outer limit of feasibility, per the evidence cited above—this would have only a modest impact on the proportion of children being raised within married households (and thence on the proportion being raised in stable two-parent households, which conduce to child welfare) in societies like the contemporary Western liberal democracies where upwards of 40% of children are currently born out of wedlock.⁷⁷⁶ This 40% or more of children would be largely untouched by a policy of childbirth subsidies for the already-married. Although it is possible that childbirth subsidies for the already-married might induce more couples to marry before having children, this effect is likely to be considerably more modest than the effect of directly subsidising marriage on such couples. On the balance of probabilities, given the evidence we have, subsidising marriage directly, either alongside or instead of subsidising childbirth to already-married couples, is likely to be a considerably more effective means of improving child welfare than merely subsidising childbirth for the already-married.

Finally, a possible objection might be that the appeal to parental attention as the mechanism for the benefits of married families implies a rationale for encouraging polygamy and/or polyamory, since in polygamous/amous households, there is more potential 'parental' attention for children. If we find this conclusion unappealing (I take no position on whether we should), it might constitute a *modus tollens* argument against the child welfare argument, with at least some *pro tanto* force.

However, when we consider the mechanism for the child welfare benefits of married families more carefully, it becomes clear that there is no reason to think that polygamous/amous families would realise this mechanism more than two-parent families. The conduciveness of a household structure to child-welfare does not increase monotonically with the number of 'parents', or rather—since children conceived naturally in polygamous/amous households still have only two biological parents—with the number of *adults* in the household. The evolutionary-psychological literature on polygamy strongly suggests that, in general, polygamous/amous households with three or more adults—but of course only two biological parents of each individual child—exhibit a distinctive set of dysfunctions which negate any benefits in adult attention supplied by the additional adults in the household.⁷⁷⁷ Moreover, evolutionary-psychological literature also suggests that the amount of 'parental' investment, both financial and in terms of attention, from adults in a polygamous/amous household who

⁷⁷⁵ (Stone 2020)

⁷⁷⁶ (OEC Family Database 2022)

⁷⁷⁷ E.g. (Henrich 2023). These dysfunctions include a substantially higher risk of child abuse and neglect, and of conflict between adults in the household. This research pertains directly to the traditional polygynous families found in some traditional, purportedly patriarchal, societies. But evolutionary psychology would also strongly suggest that any mass uptake of polygamy/amoury would primarily take the form of polygny.

are not biologically related to a child is likely to be considerably less than the investment from the child's biological parents.⁷⁷⁸ Thus, the benefits to any given child of having additional, biologically unrelated adults present in the household are likely to be small, and the expected costs, in the form of the characteristic dysfunctions of polygamous/amorous households, are likely to be large. None of this is intended as an argument against encouraging or recognising polygamy/amory: that would take us far beyond this chapter's focus. It is merely intended as a rebuttal to the possible objection that the mechanism by which married families produce superior child welfare outcomes implies that the state should encourage polygamy/amory. When it comes to child welfare, *two parents good, three (or more) 'parents' better* is a misleading slogan that rests on a fallacious inference.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there is no tension, let alone contradiction, between being a Rawlsian liberal and being an enthusiast for Orbán-style marriage subsidies. Plausibly, reasonable conceptions of justice actually *demand* support for such policies. I have demonstrated that some such conceptions certainly *permit* support for such policies.

Rawlsian liberals should take this as a warning not to read off substantively left-of-centre or anti-conservative conclusions too directly and automatically from the framework of Rawls's mature view of political liberalism. Some reasonable conceptions of justice have substantively left-of-centre and anti-conservative implications across a range of contested issues; others have the opposite implications. Just as Rawls warned against making political liberalism "political in the wrong way" by aiming for a mere "balance of forces"⁷⁷⁹ that do not reflect moral conviction, we must also guard against making political liberalism 'liberal in the wrong way' by turning it into a device for rationalising the exclusive legitimacy of substantively left-liberal conclusions.

We should not inadvertently vindicate Yenor's judgement that "neutrality is a fiction", applied always against traditionalist beliefs but never against progressive ones.⁷⁸⁰ Thomas Nagel worried that conservatives and traditionalists might see political liberalism as a bad-faith device for justifying the preferred policies of progressive-perfectionists, while bypassing substantive argument about human flourishing.⁷⁸¹ Nearly forty years later, Robert P. George concluded that Nagel's worry was right: many left-liberal theorists, he argued, had themselves viewed political liberalism as a "parlor game" in which the substantive policy conclusions were never really open to question.⁷⁸² By showing that political liberalism does not invariably lead to the policy conclusions favoured by progressive-perfectionists for independent reasons—that, looked at carefully, the content of some, but only some, reasonable conceptions of justice converges with progressive-perfectionism—I hope to have shown that Rawlsian liberalism is not a mere parlour

⁷⁷⁸ E.g (Jex and Burgess 2021)

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 39

⁷⁸⁰ (Yenor 2021, 186)

⁷⁸¹ (Nagel 1987, 216)

⁷⁸² (American Enterprise Institute 2023, 01:14:49)

game but a viable way of ordering a society containing deep disagreements between progressives and traditionalists and between diverse conceptions of justice.

The wider implication of my conclusion is that some versions of liberalism can accept the legitimacy of many of the postliberals' preferred and indeed flagship policies. I have demonstrated that there exists a plausible anti-perfectionist argument for marriage subsidies. This argument has a significant *prima facie* chance of persuading neutralist liberals and even some progressive-perfectionists of the justice of marriage subsidies. *Postliberals*, and other *traditionalist anti-liberals*, should therefore recognise that they have a realistic prospect of achieving this important policy goal within the liberal regime. It is also highly plausible that making progress towards this goal will also have a mitigating impact on some aspects of the liberal regime's structural tendency to decay into progressive-authoritarianism, since, although the goal makes no explicit reference to traditionalist beliefs about marriage, working towards it will inevitably bring liberals into sympathetic contact with persons holding such beliefs. This should have a mitigating effect on the mechanism for liberal decay into progressive-authoritarianism discussed in chapter 5 by reducing the experienced *overwhelming obviousness* of progressive beliefs about marriage and family, specifically of *sexual expressivism*. Postliberals, therefore, should be encouraged by both of these observations—that they have a greater ability to achieve their policy goals within the liberal regime than they assume, and doing so will plausibly also reduce the risk of its decay into progressive-authoritarianism than they assume—to see the liberal regime in a less negative light than they currently tend to.

For the same reasons, *liberal traditionalist-perfectionists*, who are committed to minimal liberalism in conjunction with non-coercive perfectionist policies based on traditionalist conceptions of flourishing, should also mitigate the belief, often expressed by mainstream conservatives, that either or both real-world liberal regimes and liberal theory are inherently hostile to pro-family policies.

Progressive-perfectionists like Chambers,⁷⁸³ who think that the state should promote the overall human good as conceptualised by a progressive view of flourishing, should be persuaded by my argument in this chapter to admit that there are at least some important *pro tanto* considerations on the other side of the argument. Sometimes, not all values can be fully realised at once; recognising this is, I believe, one of the marks of a mature theory of political morality.⁷⁸⁴ The value (for progressive-perfectionists) of a thick conception of gender equality or sexual autonomy will sometimes exist in a trade-off relationship with the value of child welfare, which is often best promoted by constraints on the implementation of such thick conceptions of equality and autonomy. Depending on the relative weight progressive-perfectionists give these sometimes-competing values, it is possible that the correct balancing will sometimes come out on the side of marriage subsidies even if this policy is bad for equality and autonomy.

⁷⁸³ Chambers argues that state-recognised marriage is incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism because of Rawlsian liberalism's prominence among liberal theorists, but her actual theoretical views are progressive-perfectionist. See (Chambers 2017, 47).

⁷⁸⁴ Cf. (Berlin 2017 [1958])

Progressive-perfectionists, then, should learn not to make the unachievable best the enemy of the achievable good.

Chapter 7: Establishment Without Perfection: The Liberal Case for Promoting Religion

The previous chapter demonstrated that the core postliberal policy goal in the area of family policy—namely, the goal of subsidizing marriage—can be supported by plausible Rawlsian, anti-perfectionist liberal arguments, and therefore can be plausibly achieved within the liberal regime. This chapter will do the same for the core postliberal policy goal in religious policy, namely the promotion of religious belief, practice, and/or affiliation through ‘public religion’, i.e., a more than symbolic political establishment of, and thereby promotion of, one or more religions.⁷⁸⁵

This chapter will outline the main types of argument that have been advanced for promoting religion that do *not* appeal to theological claims about the purported truth or intrinsic value of one or more religions. From among these arguments, I will identify a specific argument in the work of Nigel Biggar, which claims that promoting religion can be an effective and prudent means of ‘containing’ certain forms of anti-liberalism popularly known as “woke”, as the most likely to be both compatible with Rawlsian liberalism and appealing to postliberals.⁷⁸⁶ Biggar’s *Anti-Woke Containment Argument* for promoting religion holds that state promotion of religion can limit the prevalence and influence of a particular type of ‘unreasonable’, authoritarian secularism, which popular authors refer to as “woke” or “progressive extremism”, and which in fact contains a rationale for the very progressive-authoritarianism that postliberals fear.⁷⁸⁷

If this containment argument is plausible, this will reassure postliberals about the liberal regime on two counts. First, it will make it easier for them to achieve their preferred policy goals within the liberal regime than they typically assume, for reasons precisely analogous to how the previous chapter on family policy showed that it is easier for postliberals to achieve their goals in this area than they typically assume.⁷⁸⁸ Second (and similarly to the case of the argument for marriage subsidies discussed in the previous chapter), if the argument for promoting religion that I will defend were acted on, and if the argument’s premises are correct, acting on this argument would have the direct effect of mitigating the liberal regime’s tendency towards progressive-authoritarianism, since the existence of this mitigating effect is the central mechanism that, according to the argument, grounds the positive effects of promoting religion.

⁷⁸⁵ Throughout this chapter, the phrase “promoting religion” refers to efforts intended to increase belief in, practice of, and/or affiliation with one or more religions in a society. I will refer throughout to establishment of “religion(s)” because it is possible for a state to establish more than one religion.

⁷⁸⁶ Specifically (Biggar 2011, 2020; Biggar and Laborde 2018)

⁷⁸⁷ See (Williams 2024c; Kaufmann 2024a) on this ideology.

⁷⁸⁸ As the previous chapter argued, if a postliberal policy can be supported by plausible arguments that are compatible with Rawlsian liberalism, postliberals might plausibly be able to implement it within the liberal regime. This is because such a policy will be supported by plausible *anti-perfectionist* arguments, which can appeal to, and have significant *pro tanto* force for, groups beyond postliberals and other traditionalist-perfectionist

To show that Biggar’s containment argument is plausible and acting on the argument would be consistent with Rawlsian liberalism, this chapter will defend three claims: (1) that the containment argument for promoting religion is compatible with Rawlsian *public reason*; (2) that the argument’s conclusion—that states should promote religion through non-coercive, but more-than-symbolic, “moderate” religious establishment—is compatible with Rawlsian *liberalism*; and (3) that the containment argument is *plausible*.

I will begin (part I) by showing that most of the anti-liberal postliberals on which this thesis focuses support a form of religious establishment that avoids first-order coercion, but which is more than symbolic, as a means of promoting religion, and that they primarily defend this view on the basis of non-theological arguments. This justifies and motivates my engagement with anti-perfectionist (and thus non-theological) arguments for “moderate” forms of religious establishment. In part II, I will outline the conditions that an argument for promoting religion must meet to be compatible with Rawlsian public reason. In this part, I will also contrast these conditions with those required by other versions of liberalism and rebut arguments from theorists who think the conditions are more demanding than I do. In doing so, I will demonstrate claims (1) and (2), by showing that anti-perfectionist arguments for promoting religion as a *means* to a neutral *end* are compatible with public reason, and that moderate establishment is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. Part III will then briefly survey the various arguments that have been offered *for* promoting religion, and then identify the Anti-Woke Containment Argument in Biggar’s work. I will then formalise this argument and defend it against criticisms from Cécile Laborde.⁷⁸⁹ Part IV will, finally, demonstrate claim (3) by showing that, based on the best available empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of state promotion of religion and its likely impact on the prevalence of anti-liberal, progressive-authoritarianism in society, the Anti-Woke Containment Argument is plausible.

I: Postliberalism and Promoting Religion

By “promoting religion”, I mean to refer to the implementation by the state of policies aimed at increasing the prevalence of belief in, practice of, and/or identification with one or more religion(s) among the population.⁷⁹⁰ These policies could include symbolic endorsement, provision of religious instruction in state educational institutions, funding of religious organisations, measures aimed at regulating society’s “moral ecology” to make the cultural and social environment more conducive to religion, or measures coercively enforcing religious practice or professions of religious belief.⁷⁹¹

Policies aiming to promote religion overlap with policies that constitute religious ‘establishment’, but are not co-extensive with such policies. Religious ‘establishment’ usually refers to state

⁷⁸⁹ See (Laborde 2020; Biggar and Laborde 2018)

⁷⁹⁰ Echoing the standard measurement of religion along the three axes of affiliation, belief, and practice. See e.g. (Schwadel 2011)

⁷⁹¹ On “moral ecology”, see (Hertzke 1998)

endorsement of, institutional linkage with, and/or material (e.g., financial) support for one or more religions.⁷⁹²

Not all policies constitutive of establishment are necessarily policies that aim to promote religion. A state could establish one or more religions for reasons that have nothing to do with promoting religion. Such reasons might include a desire to honour a religion's contribution to society's cultural heritage, or a desire to promote the representation and recognition of the interests of one or more religious communities.⁷⁹³ A state could even establish one or more religions in order to *undermine* the influence of religion in society. Indeed, David Miller defends religious establishment on the grounds that it can have a "moderating effect... on religious discourse and practice".⁷⁹⁴ It is plausible that this moderating effect, if it exists, will often spill over into reducing rates of religious belief, practice, and/or affiliation. So-called 'supply-side' scholars of religious change argue that religious establishment tends to produce secularisation because state-supported religions have little incentive to meet people's spiritual needs and desires.⁷⁹⁵ If this is true, a state could establish one or more religions in order to promote secularisation, i.e., to achieve the opposite goal of the goal on which this chapter focuses.

Similarly, not all policies aimed at promoting religion are constitutive of establishment. A state that believed that the supply-side thesis about establishment promoting secularisation to be true could seek to *promote* religion by *disestablishing* it. A state could also aim to promote religion through influencing society's "moral ecology" in ways that involve no endorsement of, institutional linkage with, or material support for any religion. For instance, if a state believed (as Deneen appears to believe)⁷⁹⁶ that social media tends to distract people from spiritual reflection, it might impose restrictions on social media algorithms to reduce the distracting or addictive effects of social media, making spiritual reflection easier. Such a policy would not appear to involve any endorsement of, institutional linkage with, or material support for any *specific* religion or religions, as opposed to endorsement of spiritual reflection in general.

Nevertheless, the fairly extensive literature debating the compatibility of establishment with liberal political theory is relevant to my aims in this chapter. Some theorists, in the course of discussing the compatibility of establishment with liberalism, claim that there are no plausible arguments appealing to the purported tendency of a policy to promote religion that are compatible with Rawlsian public reason;⁷⁹⁷ and some theorists claim that some or all of the practices that comprise establishment and that postliberals defend are incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism.⁷⁹⁸ If either of these claims were true, claims (1) and (2) of the three claims

⁷⁹² (Seglow 2017, 190–191) provides the most systematic list of establishment practices. See also (Biggar 2011, 1–2), who refers to all of the practices I have mentioned except state funding.

⁷⁹³ (Modood 2010, 9–11) defends state promotion of religion as a means of promoting recognition and representation.

⁷⁹⁴ (Miller 2021, 75)

⁷⁹⁵ For a defence of the supply-side view, see (Stark and Finke 2002)

⁷⁹⁶ (Deneen 2023b, 258)

⁷⁹⁷ See (Seglow 2017, 202) on how most establishment practices "can be given a public reason defence".

⁷⁹⁸ (Laborde 2013, 72) claims that only "multi-faith" establishment is compatible with political liberalism. (Laborde and Lægaard 2019, 184) argue that *introducing* establishment, as opposed to *retaining*

this chapter aims to prove would be false, so I will rebut these claims, which are made by various liberal theorists in the course of debating the compatibility of establishment with liberalism, in the course of parts II-IV of this chapter.

Most liberal theorists who have addressed the issue of establishment distinguish between “symbolic religious establishment”, which is not coercive, and establishment practices that involve coercion. Symbolic establishment practices include official state endorsement of religion and the public display of religious symbols.⁷⁹⁹ Many theorists use terms like “moderate”,⁸⁰⁰ “weak”,⁸⁰¹ or “modest”⁸⁰² to refer to these non-coercive forms of establishment. Coercive establishment practices, by contrast, involve coercing people into professing a belief or affiliation or practicing a religion.

Some theorists also explicitly draw attention to a type of establishment practice that is more than symbolic but not directly coercive. Aurélia Bardon distinguishes between a form of moderate establishment that is not coercive but “gives special rights or privileges to the adherents of the established religion”, and purely symbolic religious establishment practices.⁸⁰³ I think we should refine this distinction further. Non-coercive establishment practices that give “special rights or privileges” to *adherents* of the established religion, i.e., to individual persons who identify with the established religion, will not be compatible with minimal liberalism, let alone Rawlsian liberalism, because these practices will violate the formal legal equality of citizens. However, it is possible for establishment practices to give special privileges to established religious *institutions* without giving special privileges to adherents. Miller explains that what he calls “liberal establishment” is not only non-coercive but also entails that “every citizen must have an equal political status” and that citizens who dissent from the established religion must be “protected by anti-discrimination laws”.⁸⁰⁴ This egalitarianism—which appears to go beyond minimal egalitarianism by also requiring protection from private discrimination—is compatible, Miller argues, with going “beyond merely symbolic recognition” and extending to “material support”, funded through taxation, for established religious institutions.⁸⁰⁵

Miller is correct that we should distinguish between forms of non-coercive establishment that respect the formal equality of citizens and those that do not. Thus, I will distinguish between three kinds of establishment practice as follows:

1) Anti-liberal establishment: practices—such as compelled worship or special legal privileges for individuals affiliated with the established religion(s)—that violate minimal agency rights and/or minimal formal equality.

historical practices of establishment, is incompatible with liberalism. (Vallier 2017, 108) argues that any establishment practices involving the use of public funds are incompatible with liberalism.

⁷⁹⁹ (Bardon 2022, 256–7)

⁸⁰⁰ (Modood 2010, 5; Seglow 2017, 189; Bonotti 2012, 333)

⁸⁰¹ (Laborde and Lægaard 2019, 176)

⁸⁰² (Laborde and Lægaard 2019, 176; Laborde 2013, 69)

⁸⁰³ (Bardon 2022, 256)

⁸⁰⁴ (Miller 2021, 77)

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 77–8

2) Moderate establishment: practices—such as state funding of religious organisations or religious instruction in state schools—that involve material support for the established religion(s) but respect minimal agency rights and minimal formal equality.

3) Symbolic establishment: practices—such as official state endorsement of a religion or placing religious symbols in public places—that involve no significant material support for the established religion(s).

The issue of religious establishment, of any kind, should be carefully distinguished from the issue of religiously-justified laws. It is possible to argue for any kind of establishment practice, even anti-liberal establishment, from premises that make no reference to purported religious truth. A law banning public apostasy, for example, could conceivably be supported on the grounds that it preserved civic peace and social stability. This would not be a religiously-justified law. Conversely, as Christopher Eberle points out, a law enacting the redistribution of wealth could be supported on the basis of Liberation Theology's injunction to enact a 'preferential option for the poor'.⁸⁰⁶ This *would* be a religiously-justified law. Even a law *forbidding* religious establishment practices and/or the state promotion of religion could be religiously-justified, for instance if it is supported on the basis of an interpretation of the Biblical injunction to separate the things of God from those of Caesar.⁸⁰⁷ For reasons I will explain shortly, I will not discuss religiously-justified laws in this chapter.

In the previous chapter, I used Audi's distinction between first- and second-order coercion to analyse the coercion involved in subsidising marriage.⁸⁰⁸ The distinction applies to material state support for religion in an analogous way. Just as forcing a person to marry involves first-order coercion, forcing a person to pray or attend religious services also involves first-order coercion. If, on the other hand, the state subsidises a religious organisation and funds this subsidy through general taxation, it does not use first-order coercion with respect to religious practice or profession of belief. It does, however, use second-order coercion, because it must use first-order coercion with respect to tax-collection in order to fund the subsidisation of religion. Thus, anti-liberal establishment potentially involves first-order coercion with respect to religious practice or profession, but moderate establishment involves only second-order coercion with respect to religious practice or profession, relying on first-order coercion with respect to tax collection. Symbolic establishment involves no coercion of either kind.

What kind of establishment practices, and other policies, do postliberals support as means of promoting religion?

Among postliberals who are genuinely anti-liberal, only Catholic integralists and Christian Nationalists explicitly advocate anti-liberal establishment. Integralism would, in principle, permit the state to ban heresy or apostasy, and would limit the non-Catholic communities' right to

⁸⁰⁶ (Eberle 2002, 112–3)

⁸⁰⁷ Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17. (Chaplin 2022) argues against establishment on theological grounds.

⁸⁰⁸ (Audi 2014, 11)

engage in public worship.⁸⁰⁹ Wolfe's Christian Nationalism permits compulsory church attendance to be enforced among baptised Christians.⁸¹⁰ These integralist and Christian Nationalist goals are obviously incompatible with any version of liberalism; there is no interesting theoretical question about whether liberalism is compatible with compulsory church attendance or apostasy laws, for instance, for these obviously violate minimal agency rights.

National Conservatives and non-integralist 'common good conservatives' like Deneen typically do not explicitly defend anti-liberal establishment. Instead, they tend to defend moderate establishment, in conjunction with moral-ecological measures that do not constitute establishment, as a means of promoting religion.

These measures to promote religion are a central aspect of the substantive National Conservative and common good conservative postliberal accounts of political morality. Hazony lists "public religion" as the second principle (out of nine) of "conservative democracy", asserting that "Christianity should be the basis for public life and strongly reflected in government and other institutions." This involves, for Hazony, abandoning "the liberal doctrine" of "a 'wall of separation between church and state'".⁸¹¹ Making Christianity "the basis for public life" seems to indicate religiously-justified laws; "reflected in government" suggests symbolic establishment, while rejection of the 'wall of separation' indicates support for financial or other forms of material support for religion. "Reflected... in other institutions" seems to indicate support for 'moral ecology' measures aimed at encouraging a Christian ethos in non-state institutions. Corroborating all this, recently, Hazony has prominently called for the overturning of the US Supreme Court's application of the First Amendment's religion clauses to the states in the 1947 case *Everson v. Board of Education*, so as to permit the reintroduction of prayer in public (state) schools.⁸¹² This legal reform would also permit the state-level introduction of formal religious establishments.⁸¹³

At the same time, Hazony emphasises that the "public religion" he supports would not violate minimal agency rights or formal equality, arguing, in his co-authored paper on *Everson*, that although the First Amendment's 'establishment clause' should not constrain state governments, the 'free exercise clause' should still protect "rights that are reserved to private individuals and groups".⁸¹⁴ Similarly, the National Conservative 'Statement of Principles' emphasises that "Jews and other religious minorities" should have secure rights to conduct their own worship, education, and "governance... of their communal institutions". The 'Statement' also rejects "religious or ideological coercion" of "adult individuals... in their private lives and... homes".⁸¹⁵ Taken together, these qualifications of the government's role in promoting public religion appear to permit moral-ecological regulations and religiously-justified laws while carving out a space for the protection of the rights of dissenters from the favoured religion(s). This would apparently

⁸⁰⁹ (Crean and Fimister 2020, 168, 170–1; Pink 2024a)

⁸¹⁰ (Wolfe 2022, 474)

⁸¹¹ (Hazony 2022, 368)

⁸¹² (Hazony et al. 2025)

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*, 9

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁵ (National Conservatism 2022)

include not only minimal agency rights with respect to religious practice or non-practice and personal lifestyle choices (at least “in... private lives”, i.e., when they do not directly impinge on moral ecology),⁸¹⁶ but also substantial parental control over education and group rights for minority communities over the management of “their communal institutions”.

Deneen’s common good conservatism takes a similar view. His *Regime Change* defends a “*postliberal integration*”, a phrase that at first glance, and probably intentionally, can bring to mind “integralism”.⁸¹⁷ Yet, as other scholars have noted, the substance of Deneen’s explicit recommendations is much less radical than his rhetoric.⁸¹⁸ Deneen’s discussion of “integrating religion” does not endorse anything like integralism.⁸¹⁹ Rather, his position involves a non-coercive (or not explicitly coercive) traditionalist-perfectionism grounded in a conception of the “common good” that includes spiritual goods such as “the life of *prayer*”.⁸²⁰ Deneen endorses moral-ecological measures, targeting the “ambient conditions fostered by the public and social order”, to ensure that society not only protects a formal right to pray but also that its culture is not “inimical to the habit of prayer”.⁸²¹ Deneen states that these moral-ecological measures will avert “a social order that is publicly *indifferent* to religious belief and practice”.⁸²² The only specific policy Deneen hints at is support for “*blue laws and a day of rest on the Sabbath*”.⁸²³ Regulating Sunday commerce does not contradict any aspect of minimal liberalism. Deneen, then, like Hazony, supports moderate establishment, along with moral-ecological measures, to promote religion. He differs from Hazony, however, in not explicitly or evidently supporting religiously-justified laws.

As I argued in Chapter 2, despite Deneen’s reluctance to explicitly endorse first-order coercion, and National Conservatism’s explicit rejection of it, neither Deneen’s view of political morality nor the National Conservative view contains a clear rationale for a principled avoidance of coercion, and both these views imply potential rationales for *embracing* coercion. This is why I consider both these views instances of genuinely anti-liberal postliberalism. Both Deneen and Hazony, as I also showed in Chapter 2, place great emphasis on the No Alternatives Argument for traditionalist-authoritarianism and make it central to their overall view of political morality.

This chapter, however, will argue that notwithstanding whatever wider anti-liberal wider agenda of which they may, for Deneen and Hazony, be a part, the moderate religious establishment and moral-ecological measures that both National Conservatives and non-integralist Catholic anti-liberals support as means of promoting religion can be justified by a plausible argument that is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism and therefore potentially appealing to political actors who are not postliberals or even traditionalist-perfectionists. In doing so, it will, I hope, like the

⁸¹⁶ Note the convergence with the liberal, anti-paternalist, but traditionalist-perfectionist interpretation of new natural law defended in (Finnis 2001)

⁸¹⁷ (Deneen 2023b, 207)

⁸¹⁸ (Sleat 2025, 47–60)

⁸¹⁹ (Deneen 2023b, 250–62)

⁸²⁰ Ibid., 253–6. Emphasis original.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 257–8 it will.

⁸²² Ibid., 260. Emphasis original.

⁸²³ Ibid. Emphasis original.

previous chapter, give these postliberals reasons to value the liberal regime more than they currently appear to.

Although some anti-liberal postliberals, like Hazony, defend not only moderate establishment, but also religiously-justified laws, I will not discuss or defend such laws. A significant academic literature exists debating the legitimacy of such laws; political liberals typically frame the issues as dividing ‘exclusivists’, who hold that religiously-justified laws can never be legitimate, from ‘inclusivists’, who think they can sometimes be legitimate.⁸²⁴ However, I think that showing the ‘inclusivist’ position were correct would be considerably less valuable for postliberals than showing that moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures can be compatible with Rawlsian liberalism (claim 2) and supported by plausible *non-religious* (because anti-perfectionist) arguments (claim 3) that are also compatible with Rawlsian public reason (claim 1).

This is because the aim of this chapter, like the previous one, is to demonstrate that postliberals may be able to form ideological coalitions outside the group of traditionalist-perfectionists, within liberal regimes. Showing the legitimacy of religiously-justified laws would only show that postliberals could appeal to citizens who *share the religious convictions that justify the laws in question*, on the basis of those convictions, without violating liberal conditions of legitimacy. I aim to demonstrate that postliberals could plausibly persuade citizens who do *not* share the relevant religious convictions, or indeed any religious convictions, to support the public promotion of religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures. This is a larger constituency, so demonstrating that postliberals can plausibly persuade this constituency will do more to show that they can plausibly achieve their most important policy goals within the liberal regime. In what follows, therefore, I take no position on the debate between ‘inclusivists’ and ‘exclusivists’ about the legitimacy of religiously-justified laws; everything I say is compatible with either position being correct.

This approach, of focusing on anti-perfectionist arguments for moderate establishment rather than the legitimacy of religiously-justified laws, also seems to me to be congruent with how postliberals themselves justify their preferred religious policies. It is true that Deneen, Hazony, and other postliberals appeal to perfectionist arguments when defending these policies; but they usually make arguments that, while perhaps not completely anti-perfectionist, at least do not depend on specific, controversial theological claims. For instance, Deneen defends Sabbath ‘blue laws’ by citing a study claiming that “the public manifestation of religious indifference” is “strongly correlated” with “the dramatic rise of ‘deaths of despair’”.⁸²⁵ Whatever we think of the merit of this argument, it is clearly an attempt to justify moderate establishment on the basis of reasons that religious non-believers could in principle accept. This chapter will not only vindicate the claim that this kind of argument can at least sometimes be plausible, but also show that such arguments could plausibly gain widespread acceptance within the liberal regime.

⁸²⁴ E.g. (Eberle 2002; Vallier 2014)

⁸²⁵ (Deneen 2023b, 260))

II: Public Reason and Promoting Religion

This chapter assumes an “orthodox” interpretation of Rawlsian liberalism.⁸²⁶ This is the same interpretation that I unpacked in the previous chapter. In that chapter, I outlined six conditions that Rawlsian liberalism imposes on reasonable conceptions of justice. Such conceptions of justice may not (C1) endorse the violation of basic rights and must (C2) prioritise such rights above perfectionist considerations and the general welfare. They should also (S2) not be inextricably linked to *specific* comprehensive doctrines, such as religious doctrines, though (for some theorists of political liberalism) citizens may support specific conceptions on the basis of their distinctive comprehensive doctrines.⁸²⁷ These conceptions should also apply (S1) only to society’s basic structure, and not directly to other institutions, such as religious organisations, and should ensure (C3) that citizens have sufficient resources to make adequate use of their basic rights. Finally, these conceptions should also express ideas derived from the public political culture of a liberal and democratic society (S3).

Conditions (S1-3) apply to the *arguments* for promoting religion that are compatible with Rawlsian liberalism’s idea of public reason: these conditions require that these arguments address society’s basic structure (S1), are separable from any specific comprehensive doctrine that might support them (S2), and are consistent with the content of a liberal society’s public political culture (S3). If these conditions are satisfied by an argument for promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures, my claim (1) is true. Conditions (C1-3) apply to the *substantive policies* that are compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. Such policies must respect basic rights (C1), prioritise such rights above perfectionism and the general welfare (C2), and be compatible with citizens having adequate resources (C3). If these conditions are satisfied by moderate establishment and (at least some) moral-ecological measures, my claim (2) is true.

As I showed in the previous chapter, (C2) and (S2) together generate a *neutrality requirement*: an argument for a particular policy must be justified on the basis of anti-perfectionist reasons that are not inextricably linked to a specific conception, or family of conceptions, of human flourishing. The neutrality requirement implies, and partially expresses, ‘exclusivism’ about religious justifications for laws. If, however, ‘inclusivism’ about such justifications is correct, my conclusions will not change. If promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures is compatible with exclusivist Rawlsian liberalism, it will also be compatible with an inclusivist version, *a fortiori*. As I mentioned earlier, assuming exclusivism permits me to make a stronger case on behalf of postliberals’ potential ability to persuade a broad constituency of citizens to support their preferred policies within the liberal regime.

⁸²⁶ (Laborde 2013, 67) refers to “orthodox” Rawlsianism.

⁸²⁷ See (Billingham 2017)

It is evident that policies of moderate establishment can satisfy (C1) by protecting basic rights and liberties.⁸²⁸ Part of my definition of moderate establishment is that it does not involve violations of basic agency rights or first-order coercion with respect to religion. Some moral-ecological measures may violate basic rights, but many do not. For instance, regulating social media algorithms or traffic to promote an environment conducive to spiritual reflection does not violate anyone's basic agency rights.⁸²⁹ It should also be evident that arguments for promoting religion via moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures are consistent with (S1): such arguments make claims about the appropriate state policy towards religion but not about the appropriate actions of specific religious organisations themselves. There is also no reason that either moderate establishment or moral-ecological measures should fail to satisfy (C3) by preventing citizens from accessing sufficient resources to make use of their basic rights, unless inordinate amounts of money are spent on these policies. I assume, as I did in the previous chapter, that (S3) is satisfied if the other conditions of compatibility are satisfied.

Therefore, the challenge (as was the case in chapter 6) arises from the conjunction of (S2) and (C2), namely the neutrality requirement. Arguments for promoting religion via moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures of the kinds that postliberals support will be compatible with Rawlsian liberalism if and only if such arguments are anti-perfectionist. My claim (1) will be true if and only if this is the case. Policies of moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures to promote religion will be compatible with Rawlsian liberalism if and only if such policies do not involve prioritising perfectionist considerations above citizens' rights. These rights include not just basic rights (i.e., basic agency and free speech rights) but also rights against *second-order* coercion. Because moderate establishment involves second-order coercion, I will need to show that it can be supported for anti-perfectionist reasons. If this condition is satisfied, my claim (2) will be true.

Laborde's "minimal secularism" is a highly influential alternative framework to Rawlsian liberalism for laying out the conditions for the compatibility of state-religion relationships with liberalism.⁸³⁰ Minimal secularism requires liberalism-compatible state-religion relationships to meet three conditions. Rawlsian liberalism, as I have interpreted it, affirms one of these three conditions, understood roughly in the same way as Laborde understands it, interprets one of them in a similar but more demanding fashion, but rejects the idea that the final condition is a requirement of compatibility with liberalism at all rather than a mere *desideratum* that can be traded off against other values.

The three conditions of Laborde's minimal secularism hold that establishment practices must be (i) "justifiable", (ii) "limited", and (iii) "inclusive".⁸³¹ "Justifiable" means that laws should be based on reasons that are "accessible" to all citizens regardless of the conceptions of flourishing and

⁸²⁸ To my knowledge, no liberal theorists have denied this. Even those who think moderate establishment is usually impermissible for other reasons accept that it is compatible with basic rights and *formal* equality. See e.g. (Bardon 2022; Laborde 2013)

⁸²⁹ Though it might violate basic free speech rights, depending on what the regulation involves (see Chapter 1, Part II on 'minimal liberalism').

⁸³⁰ (Laborde 2017, 113–159)

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, 118

wider comprehensive doctrines they affirm.⁸³² This accessibility requirement seems to me to largely converge with the Rawlsian neutrality requirement. Laborde thinks arguments are accessible if they can be “understood and assessed” (even if not endorsed) by all citizens regardless of their comprehensive doctrines, i.e., on the basis of “common standards”.⁸³³ Some arguments that would not satisfy the Rawlsian neutrality requirement may count as accessible, if they avoid specific appeal to metaphysical claims; Laborde gives the examples of “New Natural Law” and “rational criticism... within the Islamic tradition of legal reasoning”.⁸³⁴ So the accessibility condition captures a similar thought to the Rawlsian neutrality requirement, but imposes slightly different specific requirements. In some cases, Rawlsian liberalism is additionally demanding with respect to neutrality/accessibility, as it rules out ‘accessible’ arguments (like those of New Natural Law) that do not rely on specific metaphysical claims. In these cases, this additional demandingness is a benefit for this chapter’s project; for if postliberals can make plausible arguments for their preferred religious policies that pass a highly *stringent* neutrality requirement, it is more plausible that they will persuade a wider constituency to support these policies than if they could only pass a less stringent neutrality-related requirement like Laborde’s accessibility requirement.

The concept of the (ii) “limited” state embodies the Rawlsian principle of protecting basic rights and liberties. “Comprehensive ethics”, according to the ideal of the limited state, “should not be coercively enforced on individuals”.⁸³⁵ In other words, individuals should not be coerced into following any particular conception of human flourishing; instead, they should be free to decide for themselves what ethical norms to follow. This generates a requirement to respect religious liberties and other agency rights, ultimately aligning with condition (C1) of Rawlsian liberalism, which is the requirement to protect basic rights. Since coercion *other* than particular conception of flourishing is compatible with the limited state, this shows that Laborde’s requirement is less stringent than the Rawlsian (C1); thus again, by showing that moderate establishment moral-ecological measures can pass Rawls’s requirement, I necessarily also show they can pass Laborde’s.

Laborde’s idea of (iii) the “inclusive” state, however, diverges considerably from Rawlsian liberalism. One aspect of inclusivity is that the state upholds the formally equal legal rights of all citizens; this requirement is obviously shared with Rawlsian liberalism.⁸³⁶ Laborde’s inclusivity, however, requires more than formally equal rights for all citizens regardless of religion; it also requires states to avoid expressing the message “that religious identity is a component of civic identity”.⁸³⁷ Laborde thinks that establishment practices will convey such a message. She also thinks that they will thereby express the message that dissenters from the established religion belong less fully to the political community than adherents, if, as a matter of empirical sociological fact, the religious identity in question “is a marker of vulnerability or domination”.⁸³⁸

⁸³² Ibid., 119-124

⁸³³ Ibid., 120

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 127

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 144

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 132

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 135

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 137

We may call this argument the *civic standing objection*. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar argument, putting the objection in particularly forceful terms by stating that establishment practices resemble a “slap in the face” to dissenters, “of the kind a noble might give a vassal”.⁸³⁹

I deny the claim that expressing a message that religious identity is a component of civic identity necessarily entails expressing the message that dissenters from the established religion(s) belong less fully to the political community than adherents, even if the religious identity in question is a marker of vulnerability.

Sune Lægaard’s analysis of what establishment practices may be interpreted as expressing can help us see why this claim is false.⁸⁴⁰ Lægaard argues that the *civic standing objection*, as usually formulated by liberal theorists, is ambivalent between two possible interpretations. The “alienation account” identifies the wrong-making feature of the message purportedly sent by establishment as a subjective “relation within the psychological life of individual citizens”, which (in some versions) is reducible to “psychic harm”.⁸⁴¹ By contrast, the “symbolic equality account” identifies the wrong-making feature with the objective fact that a message of inequality was (purportedly) sent by one or more establishment practices, regardless of how, or how many, citizens were subjectively psychologically affected.⁸⁴²

Lægaard holds that the alienation account is implausible because it implies that the morality of establishment practices can depend on “people’s idiosyncratic sensibilities”.⁸⁴³ This is a compelling objection, because people can sometimes experience alienation as a result of an unreasonable tendency to take offence at minor perceived slights. The symbolic equality account, however, faces a theoretical challenge in specifying the “interpretative perspective” by which a reasonable and objective observer should determine the content of the message that a particular establishment practice sends.⁸⁴⁴ Lægaard goes on to observe that theorists who promote the civic standing objection to establishment have yet to specify precisely what this perspective should be.⁸⁴⁵

Lægaard’s argument shows that whether a particular establishment practice sends a message of civic inequality to dissenters depends on the specific interpretative perspective adopted, and I would add that the choice of such a perspective may, plausibly, turn out to be deeply contestable and value-laden. Thus, it is not self-evident by any means that establishment practices necessarily express the message that dissenters from the established religion(s) are less fully members of the political community.

Although this is not self-evident, is it nevertheless *true* that establishment practices necessarily express this message? Surely not. Many plausible interpretive perspectives will yield the result

⁸³⁹ (Nussbaum 2008, 227)

⁸⁴⁰ (Lægaard 2017)

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., 121

⁸⁴² Ibid., 124-5

⁸⁴³ Ibid., 122

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid., 127-9

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid., 129-30

that many establishment practices do *not* send this kind of message. For instance, if the Prime Minister of a state declares “this is a Christian country that welcomes people of all religions or none”, does this send the message that dissenters from the established religion(s) are less fully members of the political community? It certainly sends the message that religious identity is a component of civic identity at the level of religious *communities*: it expresses the claim that the identity of the state is related in some important way to ways in which it, purportedly, corporately upholds Christianity. But it does not follow, by any kind of strict conceptual necessity, that individual citizens who are not Christians cannot be formally equal to Christian members of a community that corporately upholds Christianity. This will depend on what our interpretive perspective holds that a state’s corporately upholding Christianity implies and entails. Many plausible interpretive perspectives will hold that such corporate upholding involves only, for example, an acknowledgement of a purportedly special role played by Christianity in the state’s history, and not an affirmation of the superior civic status of Christians over non-Christians.

Therefore, I conclude that not all establishment practices express the message that dissenters from the established religion(s) are less fully members of the political community, even if they express the message that religious identity is a component of civic identity. Laborde and Nussbaum’s iterations of the *civic standing objection* therefore fail.

Does the *civic standing objection* nevertheless draw attention to real harms to dissenters, even if establishment practices do not always express the message that dissenters from the established religion(s) are less fully members of the political community? Plausibly, some establishment practices that do not express such a message nevertheless make some dissenters *feel* less welcome or included in the state’s civic community (Lægaard’s alienation account would affirm that this happens). But *feeling* is only a *pro tanto* harm.

Rawlsian liberalism rejects the idea that avoiding this kind of affective harm is a *sine qua non* of being liberal, and holds instead that it is a *desideratum* of liberalism, often an important one, but one that can be traded off against other *desiderata*. To see this, consider the structure of a reasonable conception of justice in Rawls’s mature theory. Every such conception must specify “certain basic rights, liberties, and opportunities” and ascribe these “special priority”. Every such conception must also endorse “measures” to ensure “adequate all-purpose means” for “all citizens” to “make effective use” of the liberties that the conception specifies.⁸⁴⁶ I interpret this to mean that these conceptions must prioritise basic rights and liberties above securing the all-purpose *means* for citizens to make *use* of these rights and liberties. In other words, principles protecting *formal* rights and liberties must have some kind of priority above principles governing the distribution of the “primary goods” that citizens need to make use of these formal rights and liberties.⁸⁴⁷ This interpretation is also congruent with the structure of Rawls’s own *preferred* conception of justice, in which the first principle of justice, protecting basic rights, is lexically prior to the second, which concerns the distribution of primary goods.⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁶ (Rawls 2005, 450)

⁸⁴⁷ On “primary goods”, see (Rawls 2001, 169)

⁸⁴⁸ (Rawls 2005, 5)

Now, the kind of affective harm that can be brought about by the state's expression of the message that "that religious identity is a component of civic identity",⁸⁴⁹ even if the *formal* equality of dissenters is fully protected and the state does not also express that dissenters are less fully members of the political community, is clearly *not* a matter of formal rights and liberties. What is it, then? Rawls clarifies that the "primary goods" governed by principles of distributive justice are not merely material; they also include the "social bases of self-respect".⁸⁵⁰ A *message*—a speech act—that suggests religious identity is a component of civic identity cannot, in itself, undermine dissenters' formal equality under the law, assuming that effective anti-discrimination laws exist. It could, however, undermine their self-respect. The disvalue of such messages, then, in Rawlsian liberalism, consists in the fact that they can—at least if, per Laborde, the relevant religious identity is a "marker of vulnerability"—constitute a denial to dissenters of some of the "social bases of self-respect".

But in Rawlsian liberalism, citizens have no absolute right to the *maximum possible* access to the "social bases of self-respect", any more than they have an absolute right to the maximum possible income or wealth. As we have just seen, a reasonable conception of justice must only ensure all citizens have *adequate* "all-purpose means" to make use of their formal rights and liberties; one of these "all-purpose means" is access to the social bases of self-respect. Adequacy is clearly a sufficientarian notion. The mere fact that a state expresses the message that religious identity is a component of civic identity and thereby causes affective harm to dissenters does *not* in itself mean that the dissenters' access to the social bases of self-respect falls below the threshold of adequacy. Sometimes, as long as their access remains above this threshold, a reasonable conception of justice will permit trade-offs: some reduction in their access will be an acceptable means of advancing other important goals, such as improving access to the social bases of self-respect, or to other primary goods, for other citizens, or achieving other neutral ends. Even the difference principle, which is a relatively demanding distributive principle, will permit such trade-offs in some circumstances.

To illustrate, suppose a state with a majority Muslim population and a significant Christian minority—a more liberal Kazanistan?⁸⁵¹—decides to symbolically establish Islam as the state religion, while fully protecting the formal legal equality of Christians. Assuming that the Kazanistani population's confessional division is a salient marker of vulnerability, this symbolic establishment will send a message that reduces Christian citizens' access to the social bases of self-respect. Suppose, however, that despite this messaging, Christian Kazanistanis remain, on average, wealthier and better-educated than Muslims, and over-represented in senior government and private sector positions. In this situation, there would be absolutely no plausible reason to think that Christians' access to the social bases of self-respect had fallen below the level of 'adequacy', however conceptualised. The harm done to Christians by the symbolic establishment of Islam would be a *pro tanto* harm, but not the kind of wrong that automatically undermines Kazanistan's liberal credentials. If Kazanistan had a sufficiently weighty neutral reason for symbolically establishing Islam, the harm to Christians' access to the social bases of

⁸⁴⁹ (Laborde 2017, 135)

⁸⁵⁰ (Rawls 2005, 76)

⁸⁵¹ See (Rawls 1993, 75–8)

self-respect would, far from undermining Kazanistan's claim to be liberal, simply be an acceptable cost of achieving liberal justice.

Therefore, Rawlsian liberalism rejects Laborde's conception of liberalism's 'inclusivity' requirement as implying that all establishment practices, and/or state-endorsed messages that suggest a link between religious identity and the state's civic identity, are incompatible with liberalism. The correct Rawlsian view is that avoiding such messages is a *desideratum* that can be traded off against other goals. Laborde herself accepts, elsewhere, that "orthodox" Rawlsian liberalism does not forbid all state-endorsed messaging that weakens a group's civic standing, arguing that this orthodox Rawlsianism "is *indeterminate* about the symbolic... place of religion".⁸⁵² Thus, she instead introduces a heterodox "*republican* interpretation of political liberalism", according to which such messaging is incompatible with liberalism.⁸⁵³ My aim in this chapter is only to show that postliberal policies on public religion are compatible with *orthodox* Rawlsianism. Although it is helpful for my argument where orthodox Rawlsianism turns out to be more demanding than alternative theories, this demandingness is not a central or important reasons or using orthodox Rawlsianism as the standard, so where orthodox Rawlsianism is *less* demanding this is no reason to abandon it.

Moreover, I can make a further concession to Laborde and still maintain the conclusion that state-endorsed messages that undermine civic standing are only a *pro tanto* harm. Laborde states that the "distinctive" feature of republican political liberalism that generates the absolute requirement to avoid messages that undermine civic standing is the way that republican political liberalism applies the "constraints of public reasoning... to cover civic status, recognition, and citizenship", in addition to the orthodox Rawlsian application of these constraints to "constitutional essentials and principles of justice". Suppose Laborde's interpretation of political liberalism is correct, and the constraints of public reasoning apply to civic status. It would not follow that weakening civic standing is an absolute wrong that political liberalism can never permit. I have demonstrated above that civic standing is best understood, for Rawlsians, as one of the social foundations of self-respect. It is therefore among the primary goods that are subject to distributive justice, but as long as an 'adequacy' threshold is met, some reasonable conceptions of justice will permit the state to lower some citizens' civic status to achieve weighty neutral ends. Laborde, therefore, would need to introduce an additional modification to orthodox Rawlsianism, according to which citizens have a right to the maximum civic standing compossible with the same civic standing for other citizens, at least insofar as civic standing can be affected by symbolic messaging. I find this principle unappealing and unmotivated. In any case, its status as a deeply heterodox aspect of Rawlsianism is sufficient to justify my rejecting it for the theoretical purposes of this chapter.

Having outlined the conditions that must be satisfied for the policies of promoting religion via moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures to be compatible with Rawlsian liberalism, I will now examine and rebut two claims by liberal theorists that the conditions should be more stringent.

⁸⁵² (Laborde 2013, 67). Emphasis original.

⁸⁵³ Ibid., 83. Emphasis original.

First, Matthew Kramer argues that the Rawlsian neutrality requirement should be strengthened in a way that would render it impossible for any argument in favour of a policy that *aims* at promoting religion to qualify as anti-perfectionist. The standard Rawlsian interpretation of the neutrality requirement holds that the *ends* a policy seeks to achieve must be neutral between reasonable conceptions of human flourishing, i.e., a policy must not aim to promote a particular such conception (including a religious one) as an end. This standard interpretation, however, permits a policy to deploy the promotion of a particular such conception (including a religious one) as a *means* to achieving an end that does not consist of the promotion of any such conception, but rather of the advancement of interests all citizens share regardless of the particular conception of human flourishing they affirm. For instance, Rawls explicitly states that Patrick Henry's argument for promoting religion in order to encourage civic virtues desirable for citizens of a liberal republic qualifies as neutral and is compatible with Rawlsian public reason.⁸⁵⁴ Henry's argument is a particularly clear example of an argument for promoting religion as a *means* to achieving a neutral end, namely "preserv[ing] the peace of society" by inculcating "Christian knowledge".⁸⁵⁵ Rawls states that Henry's argument could "be expressed in terms of the political values of public reason". Although Rawls does not find the argument to be very plausible, he clearly thinks that it is compatible with the requirements of public reason.⁸⁵⁶

Kramer argues that Rawls's view of neutrality is insufficiently demanding, and instead holds that Rawlsian liberalism's neutrality requirement should apply not just to the *ends* a policy is designed to achieve but also to the *means* deployed to achieve it.⁸⁵⁷ To motivate this view, Kramer presents a thought experiment in which a state, Convivia, decides to promote Buddhism on the grounds that the "spread of the Buddhist creed" will "enhance the public-spiritedness and harmoniousness of their society".⁸⁵⁸ Kramer then asserts that "any adequate conception of neutrality should generate the verdict" that Convivia's actions are "illegitimately non-neutral".⁸⁵⁹ If Kramer is correct that the neutrality requirement should apply to means as well as ends—that Rawlsian liberalism should require state policy not just to aim at goals whose value is independent of any specific conception of human flourishing, but also to avoid intentionally *promoting* any specific such conception as a *means* to such neutral goals—then Henry's argument would turn out, *contra* Rawls, to be incompatible with Rawlsian public reason. Miller's argument, that states may promote religion in order to moderate its potentially destabilizing effects, would also turn out to be incompatible. Significantly, so would Biggar's containment argument that I will discuss in the following section; it also relies on promoting religion as a *means* to a neutral end.

Fortunately, there is no good reason to think that Kramer's modification to Rawlsian liberalism is correct. Kramer's claim that Convivia's actions are illegitimate is an assertion for which he provides no explicit argumentation. As far as I can tell, we are supposed to accept the claim on

⁸⁵⁴ (Rawls 1997, 794–5)

⁸⁵⁵ Henry, quoted in Rawls, *ibid.*

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 795

⁸⁵⁷ (Kramer 2017, 18–24)

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 23

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24

the basis of the force of Kramer's *intuition*. I do not share this intuition. How can we resolve the impasse?

The only way to make progress here would be to try to work out the implications of the underlying *rationale* for accepting Rawlsian liberalism in the first place. What, we might ask, does the correct account of this rationale imply that the theory should say about neutrality of means? Unfortunately, there is no agreement among Rawlsian liberal theorists as to what the correct rationale for Rawlsian liberalism actually is.⁸⁶⁰ Moreover, I am not committed to the view that Rawlsian liberalism is a good theory of political morality, nor, therefore, to the view that there exists *any* good rationale for Rawlsian liberalism. Rather, I deploy the theory in this chapter only to show that postliberals can make plausible anti-perfectionist arguments for their preferred religious policies with a plausible chance of persuading neutralist liberals and other non-traditionalist-perfectionists, within the liberal regime.

Therefore, I think it is appropriate to ignore Kramer's modification to the Rawlsian neutrality requirement on the grounds that it yields at best a heterodox version of Rawlsian liberalism. My aim is to assess the compatibility of arguments for promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures with Rawlsian public reason, not with a particular heterodox version thereof. I therefore set aside Kramer's views on the neutrality requirement.

Second, Kevin Vallier argues that establishment practices are incompatible with liberalism if they aim to advance purposes that some "reasonable persons" reject. This principle generates something close to the neutrality requirement, because the purposes that no reasonable persons reject—such as "promoting economic prosperity" and "controlling violent crime"—are all anti-perfectionist purposes.⁸⁶¹ Vallier thinks this will rule out most religious establishment practices, including most forms of purely symbolic establishment.⁸⁶²

I do not think, however, that Vallier's argument rules out promoting religion as a means to a neutral end, since his discussion assumes that establishment practices aim to promote religion as an end in itself rather than as a means to a further, neutral end. The end for which the version of the containment argument that I will discuss in the next section holds that religion should be promoted as a means is one that I think Vallier would agree that no reasonable person will reject: namely, the aim of protecting the stable existence of a liberal society itself.

The foregoing discussion has shown that claim (1) of the claims that I defend in this chapter is true: promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. The next section will show claims (2) and (3) to be true: that (2) there exist arguments for doing so that are compatible with Rawlsian public reason, and that (3) at least one such argument is also plausible

⁸⁶⁰ (Billingham and Taylor 2022, 676)

⁸⁶¹ (Vallier 2017, 109)

⁸⁶² *Ibid.*, 113–4

III: Arguments for Promoting religion

I will now survey some of the arguments for promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures that liberal theorists have endorsed. I will focus only on those arguments that have been endorsed as legitimate by at least some liberal theorists—as opposed to those that have *only* been endorsed by postliberals, other traditionalist-perfectionists, or conservatives—because, *prima facie*, such arguments are more likely to turn out to be compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. I will first lay out the major categories of argument for promoting religion through moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures that liberal theorists have endorsed, and I will then identify Biggar’s Anti-Woke Containment Argument as the argument that, if both compatible with Rawlsian liberalism and plausible, would be most useful for postliberals seeking to persuade other citizens to support their preferred policies on public religion within the liberal regime. I will then formalise Biggar’s argument and show that it *is* compatible with Rawlsian liberalism and plausible.

I have already mentioned Miller’s argument for moderate establishment. Miller’s argument, however, is not an argument for promoting religion, but an argument for using moderate establishment to produce a “moderating effect” on religion, an effect which could (depending on precisely what this “moderating effect” involves) plausibly end up *weakening* religion as such, rather than promoting it.⁸⁶³ In any case, Miller is not aiming to *promote* religion, despite his endorsement of moderate establishment. I will therefore set this argument aside.

We can group the arguments for promoting religion advanced by liberal theorists into three main types of argument.

1) Civic virtue arguments

Civic virtue arguments appeal to the purported tendency of religious belief or practice to promote virtues that, if widespread among citizens of a liberal polity, will tend to make that polity more able to achieve its legitimate, liberal aims. Such arguments should be carefully distinguished from *perfectionist* virtue-based arguments. Civic virtue arguments appeal only to religion’s purported effect on virtues that citizens of a liberal polity should have *qua* citizens, not virtues that it is intrinsically desirable for persons to have on the basis of some conception of human flourishing or other. Civic virtues might include tolerance of different views (both comprehensive and purely political), forbearance and goodwill in political debate, and a willingness to sacrifice personal interests when liberal justice requires it.⁸⁶⁴ Civic virtue arguments therefore claim that religion should be promoted as a means to spread certain virtues among the citizenry and thereby, ultimately, to aid the liberal state in achieving many, or perhaps nearly all, of its legitimate aims.

⁸⁶³ (Miller 2021, 75)

⁸⁶⁴ (Biggar 2020, 210)

Patrick Henry's argument for promoting Christianity as a means to "'preserv[ing] the peace of society" is an early example of the civic virtue argument.⁸⁶⁵ Coleridge's vision of an established church as a 'clerisy', spreading culture and education among the populace in a manner that "trains them up to be citizens of the country",⁸⁶⁶ is also a civic virtue argument. So is Roger Scruton's argument that an established church contributes to a robust sense of national identity that encourages citizens to identify with, and thus accept, decisions they disagree with.⁸⁶⁷

Among liberals, the journalist Jonathan Rauch (who is an atheist) has recently claimed that some religious doctrines—specifically some versions of Christianity—have a superior capacity to secular comprehensive doctrines for producing deep commitment to some of the civic values that liberal states rely on.⁸⁶⁸ Rauch does not endorse state promotion of religion, but he endorses a key premise of civic virtue arguments, namely that religion can promote virtues beneficial for the functioning of liberal polities.

2) Social utility arguments

Whereas civic virtue arguments appeal to religion's purported tendency to promote virtues beneficial for the functioning of a liberal polity, *social utility* arguments appeal to religion's purported tendency to produce social outcomes that may, consistently with liberalism, be considered desirable ends for a state to seek to produce. For example, a social utility argument might claim that religion tends to make citizens wealthier, and that the state should therefore promote religion as a *means* to achieving the neutral end of increasing citizens' access to the primary good of wealth. Social utility arguments thus appeal directly to religion's purported effects on citizens and argue that some of these effects help achieve ends at which the liberal state can legitimately aim. Conservatives have long appealed to the purported social utility of religion to argue for its promotion. For instance, Burke and Bonald argued that religion should be promoted because it strengthens families and organic communities (Burke's "little platoon[s]"⁸⁶⁹ or Bonald's "natural" social groups).⁸⁷⁰ Of course, these conservative social utility arguments are explicitly perfectionist, which makes them incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism.

The clearest discussion of a social utility argument from a recent liberal theorist is found in Tariq Modood's work. Modood's social utility argument is straightforward and clear, and it is exemplary of how a liberal might make such arguments. Modood even describes the argument as "based on religion as utility". According to Modood's argument, a liberal state may judge many "social outcomes" to be "desirable" for anti-perfectionist reasons. Religious organisations or individuals might, he suggests, plausibly improve the socio-economic conditions of "the needy" in a "more economical" way than state provision could. Since improving those conditions is clearly a legitimate goal for a liberal state, the state could legitimately promote religion so as to improve the socio-economic conditions of needy people. Modood also gives an example

⁸⁶⁵ Henry, quoted in (Rawls 1997, 794-5)

⁸⁶⁶ (Coleridge 2015, 48)

⁸⁶⁷ (Scruton 2017, 60–63, 2000, 87–112)

⁸⁶⁸ (Rauch 2025, 27–8)

⁸⁶⁹ (Burke 2003 [1790], 40)

⁸⁷⁰ (Bonald 1997 [1801])

likely to be congenial to postliberals, stating that “if it were true that religious people are less likely... to have a marriage breakdown”, this would generate “reasons to encourage the relevant religion” that a liberal state could legitimately act on by “fund[ing]” the relevant “religious organisations”. These would be anti-perfectionist reasons that consist of reducing the purported “social problems” and economic costs of family breakdown.⁸⁷¹ Modood does not explicitly endorse these social utility arguments as *correct*, but he clearly thinks it is legitimate for the state to act on them.

3) “Containment” arguments

The final category of argument for promoting religion that at least some liberal theorists have endorsed as legitimate consists of arguments from the purported capacity of religion to “contain” anti-liberal doctrines, limiting their spread and influence. According to these arguments, the state should promote religion because doing so is a prudent means of reducing the prevalence and influence of anti-liberal doctrines in society, and thereby promoting the stability of liberalism itself. For this to be true, it must be the case that the religion(s) being promoted tend to influence their adherents to support political liberalism. It must also be the case that the religion(s) in question are functional competitors with at least some of the threatening anti-liberal doctrines in the society in question. I will expand on what this means in more detail shortly, but for now, a rough first pass at the notion is that a religion being a functional competitor with one or more anti-liberal doctrines means that increasing belief in, and/or depth of commitment to, the religion will tend to *undermine* belief in, and/or depth of commitment to, particular doctrines (religious or otherwise) that tend to influence their adherents to *oppose* political liberalism. The mere fact that a religion, or version of a religion, influences its adherents to *support* political liberalism does not automatically entail that it functions as a competitor with the salient anti-liberal doctrines in the society in question. For instance, if it were true that Lutheranism tends to influence its adherents to support political liberalism, and that Wahhabi Islam tends to influence its adherents to oppose political liberalism, it would not follow that promoting Lutheranism is a prudent means of containing Wahhabi Islam, if promoting Lutheranism tended to cause Lutheran churches to grow at the expense of atheism and not at the expense of Wahhabi Islam. Lutheranism would not be a functional competitor with Wahhabi Islam.

“Containment” is a well-established concept in Rawlsian liberalism, with an extensive theoretical literature. In a footnote to his discussion of “reasonable pluralism” in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls comments that the presence of anti-liberal doctrines is “a permanent fact of life”, and this “gives us the practical task of containing them—like war or disease—so that they do not overturn political justice.”⁸⁷² Rawlsian liberal theorists have extensively debated the means by which this containment may legitimately and justly be pursued and the circumstances in which it is prudent, but all agree that preventing the spread of anti-liberal doctrines is a legitimate aim of a liberal state.⁸⁷³

⁸⁷¹ (Modood 2010, 9).

⁸⁷² (Rawls 2005, 63), footnote 125.

⁸⁷³ See e.g. (Pennanen 2015; Badano and Nuti 2018, 2024)

The theoretical question faced by containment arguments for promoting religion, therefore, does not concern the compatibility of pursuing this aim with Rawlsian liberalism; this is not in dispute. The interesting theoretical questions concern whether pursuing this aim through the *means* of promoting religion involves any policies incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism and whether *specific* containment arguments themselves are compatible with Rawlsian public reason. I will now reconstruct Biggar's containment argument and show that the argument is compatible with Rawlsian public reason, and that the policies it advocates are compatible with Rawlsian liberalism.

III.I Biggar's Anti-Woke Containment Argument

Biggar makes his containment argument for promoting religion, through moderate establishment, as a means of containing anti-liberal doctrines in the course of a wider defence of the compatibility with Rawlsian liberalism of the establishment of the Church of England.⁸⁷⁴ Some of Biggar's claims are therefore contextually specific to the situation in England, but I think that we can recover from his writing on the topic a containment argument that transcends this local context and, if successful, shows that moderate establishment and moral-ecological measures to promote religion can be a prudent means of containing anti-liberal doctrines.

Most of Biggar's 2011 book chapter and 2020 paper defending the Anglican establishment—some of the content of which is repeated in both texts—consists of defences of the compatibility of moderate establishment with Rawlsian liberalism.⁸⁷⁵ I will not discuss this material here, as I have already, I think, demonstrated its compatibility and shown that the objections to it are unfounded. Instead, I will focus on the *positive* arguments for promoting religion through moderate establishment that Biggar makes, and among these, specifically on the containment argument.

The containment argument is present in Biggar's 2011 book chapter, but becomes clearer and more explicit in 2020. In 2011, Biggar defended the view that neutrality between reasonable comprehensive doctrines (doctrines that endorse political liberalism) is *conceptually impossible*, and that the state must therefore choose one to promote through moderate establishment.⁸⁷⁶ This appears to be an analogous argument to the conceptual No Alternatives Argument I discussed in Chapter 4. Biggar does not think that liberalism is conceptually incoherent, just that a fully neutralist version of liberalism is conceptually incoherent; he therefore infers not that liberalism should be replaced by traditionalist-authoritarianism but that the liberal state should promote one of the particular reasonable comprehensive doctrines found within society.

Biggar's claim that neutrality between reasonable comprehensive doctrines is conceptually impossible is, in my view, false and should be rejected, but demonstrating this here would not be important for this chapter's goal. Biggar makes a further argument for promoting religion

⁸⁷⁴ (Biggar 2011, 2020)

⁸⁷⁵ (Biggar 2011, 15–20, 2020, 211–214)

⁸⁷⁶ (Biggar 2011, 5–6, 8–9).

through moderate establishment that is not dependent on his claim about the conceptual impossibility of neutrality. In his 2011 book chapter, Biggar argues that “if a liberal ethos is to survive, supportive views have to be fostered by public institutions, and corrosive ones (somehow) suppressed”.⁸⁷⁷ This is because “illiberal” worldviews have “been known to grow to democratically dominant proportions... within living memory”.⁸⁷⁸

Biggar also attributes this view to Rawls and to Rawlsian liberalism.⁸⁷⁹ Rawlsian liberals take a range of views on the degree to which “supportive views *have to be fostered*”, the role of “public institutions” in doing so, and the legitimate methods for suppressing or otherwise limiting the spread of “corrosive” views.⁸⁸⁰ The methods Biggar advocates, however (namely moderate establishment practices), are not, as the previous part of this chapter has shown, incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism.

Because “supportive views”, i.e., comprehensive doctrines that support political liberalism, need to be “fostered” by “public institutions”, Biggar argues that the state should *promote*, i.e., aim to spread belief in and commitment to, those supportive doctrines among the population.⁸⁸¹ Biggar then further argues that, if the state should promote comprehensive doctrines that support political liberalism, Anglican Christianity has specific characteristics that make promoting it particularly apt as a means to encourage support for political liberalism. “Anglicanism”, he writes, “is structurally humanist” and affirms “the special dignity of human being”.⁸⁸² Moreover, this version of Christianity holds that “the world possesses a given rationality that is there for rational beings to grasp”.⁸⁸³ Because humans are “rational” but “fallible”, it follows that, in order to grasp the rationality of the world, “they need to reason *together*”.⁸⁸⁴ This need to engage in collective reasoning grounds a conviction in the importance of “generous, ‘liberal’ virtues” like “openness to being... corrected”, “respect for others as potential speakers of the truth”, and “tolerance of strange... views”.⁸⁸⁵ All of these features of Anglican Christianity, for Biggar, together make it an effective means of promoting support for political liberalism. Anglicanism endorses, Biggar argues, and provides a deep rationale for, belief in the importance of mutual respect, democratic deliberation, and tolerance of diverse views; and these values are likely to lead people who affirm the truth of Anglicanism to support something like political liberalism.

So far, this might look like a civic virtue argument. Biggar appears to suggest that promoting Anglicanism is a good means of promoting virtues and values that are useful in maintaining the stability and functioning of a Rawlsian liberal state. However, in his 2020 paper, Biggar shifts the emphasis of his argument to explicitly address not only the positive virtues and values that Anglicanism purportedly promotes, but also its purported role as a functional competitor to

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid., 6

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid., 4-6

⁸⁸⁰ See the literature on containment cited *supra*, note 94.

⁸⁸¹ (Biggar 2011, 4, 14, 24)

⁸⁸² Sic. Ibid., 6.

⁸⁸³ Ibid., 7

⁸⁸⁴ Ibid. Emphasis original.

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid., 8.

salient anti-liberal comprehensive doctrines. In the course of doing so, he subsumes his civic virtue argument into a containment argument.

In this paper, Biggar discusses what he takes to be a specific anti-liberal comprehensive doctrine and argues that promoting Anglicanism is an effective and prudent means of countering this anti-liberal doctrine's influence. Biggar refers in this paper to an incident in which he was "threatened with castration" and subject to an academic boycott on account of his views on imperialism.⁸⁸⁶ He argues that this conduct, on the part of several of his "academic colleagues",⁸⁸⁷ illustrates the presence and power of a particular anti-liberal doctrine "in Oxbridge Senior Common Rooms".⁸⁸⁸ In a separate article for the *Oxford Magazine* about the specific controversy to which his 2020 paper alludes, Biggar describes this purportedly anti-liberal doctrine as exhibiting "repressive and dictatorial impulses" and refusing to tolerate disagreement about social justice insofar as it bears upon the evaluation of imperialism and other phenomena.⁸⁸⁹

I take no position here on the specific controversy that Biggar is alluding to, nor on whether the conduct of any of his "academic colleagues" evinced an anti-liberal attitude. The critical point is that his discussion of this controversy allows us to gain a rough idea of what Biggar thinks is the content of the anti-liberal doctrine that motivates these purportedly intolerant academics. Biggar does not name this doctrine or give any explicit account of its purported content. However, it is clear that this doctrine, if it exists, has something to do with intolerance of politically right-of-centre views, particularly on questions relating to what the introduction to this thesis called 'nationalism', i.e. relating to views on race, nationality, ethnicity, migration, historical memorialisation, or imperialism.

A substantial empirical literature argues that a loose anti-liberal doctrine that exhibits this kind of intolerance exists; is gaining influence in contemporary liberal democracies, especially in academic institutions; and also exhibits intolerance of traditionalist views on gender, marriage, sexuality, and family.⁸⁹⁰ Scholars of this loose doctrine disagree as to how to name it, but popular discourse seems to have settled on the terms "woke" or "wokeism".⁸⁹¹ The political scientist Eric Kaufmann defines woke as the "sacralization of historically-marginalized identity groups", specifically groups defined in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.⁸⁹² 'Sacralization' denotes the belief, purportedly evinced by adherents of woke, that even minor perceived offenses to these historically marginalised groups are almost incommensurably bad.⁸⁹³

⁸⁸⁶ (Biggar 2020, 208)

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid., 210

⁸⁸⁹ (Biggar 2018, 5–6)

⁸⁹⁰ E.g. (Rozado et al. 2023; Rozado 2023; Kaufmann 2024a; Williams 2024c; Kaufmann 2021; al-Gharbi 2024)

⁸⁹¹ "Woke" is often used as a noun in this discourse.

⁸⁹² (Kaufmann 2024, xii)

⁸⁹³ Ibid.

If woke exists (I will argue later that it does, and is influential and threatening in many liberal societies), it is clearly the anti-liberal doctrine that Biggar has in mind. Woke is not identical or coextensive with progressive-authoritarianism. Woke also encompasses views on nationalism-related topics that are not part of progressive-authoritarianism, so in this respect, it is broader in scope than progressive-authoritarianism. Moreover, we could certainly imagine versions of progressive-authoritarianism that do not sacralise historically marginalized groups. Woke is a particular partially comprehensive doctrine that, due to its political intolerance, is anti-liberal and opposes certain core elements of both political liberalism and minimal liberalism, and which provides a particular rationale, or set of rationales, for progressive authoritarianism via legal restriction, deriving from the ‘sacred’ status it accords to certain historically-marginalised groups.

Biggar claims in his 2020 paper that Anglicanism is a functional competitor with (what we have now identified as) woke. According to Biggar, this is because Anglicanism tends to promote in its adherents the specific virtues that woke purportedly rejects. Biggar claims that Anglicanism affirms “informal, moral duties that discipline the exercise of rights”, whereas woke rejects “informal norms of civility” and “duties of virtue”.⁸⁹⁴ Anglicanism, argues Biggar, affirms these duties because of its belief that humans stand “in a world whose... moral order precedes and frames and judges her choices”,⁸⁹⁵ while at the same time affirming “the special dignity of human beings... who flourish in freely understanding, and investing themselves in, the good of the world”.⁸⁹⁶ Because of this affirmation of both human dignity and moral duty to seek to understand an objective moral order, Anglicanism will induce in its adherents a “certain generosity or *liberalitas*” that makes “it possible to *sustain* dialogue” in the face of “fierce passions”.⁸⁹⁷ Therefore, Biggar argues, promoting Anglicanism will undermine the distinctive values and character traits associated with woke, because persons sufficiently committed to Anglicanism are unlikely to form such traits or affirm such values.⁸⁹⁸ Promoting Anglicanism will thereby help contain an anti-liberal doctrine and increase the stability of a liberal polity.

A final point of clarification about Biggar’s containment argument concerns the mechanism by which he thinks moderate establishment can promote religion. Biggar identifies a mix of symbolic and substantive (but not first-order coercive) establishment practices as important to promoting religion in the way on which his argument relies. These include the monarch’s symbolic “affirmation... of the established church”, as well as the established church’s “privileged position in state education”.⁸⁹⁹ Biggar never explicitly states that these practices are intended to increase belief in and depth of commitment to Anglicanism among the population. Some of his other arguments (aside from the containment argument) rely on mechanisms other than such an increase in belief and commitment. However, the containment argument can only work by positing that at least some of the establishment practices Biggar defends will tend to increase belief in or commitment to the religion in question among citizens, since it relies on the

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid., 208

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid., 209-10

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid., 209

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid., 210. Emphasis original

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., 214

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid., 205

idea that these practices will influence citizens in a way that leads them to affirm Anglican doctrines and values and therefore reject woke beliefs. Biggar does explicitly say that “the state can promote a dominant culture that is supportive of liberal norms and laws” by privileging Anglicanism.⁹⁰⁰ It is perhaps possible that the Anglican establishment could somehow inculcate values supportive of liberal norms and laws without inculcating Anglicanism itself, but I think the most plausible interpretation of Biggar’s argument is that it relies on the claim that establishment practices will promote belief in and commitment to the established religion(s) among citizens.

Biggar does not discuss moral-ecological measures that do not constitute moderate establishment. However, if his containment argument is plausible, a parallel argument for using non-first-order coercive moral-ecological measures to promote religion as a means of containing anti-liberalism is also plausible. This gets us to the result that postliberals want.

Before assessing Biggar’s containment argument, I will set it out in formal terms. I will also abstract from the specific discussion of Anglicanism (or of Christianity more broadly) in particular and interpret Biggar’s claims about these as conditional claims about religion in general. I take no position on whether Biggar’s interpretation of Anglicanism or Christianity is correct, nor do I take a position on whether Anglicanism is a functional competitor with woke in the English context.

The formalised and abstracted version of Biggar’s containment argument is as follows.

(P1) Moderate establishment is, sometimes, an effective and prudent means of inculcating belief in and commitment to the established religion(s) in liberal societies;

(P2) Woke is an influential and threatening anti-liberal doctrine;

(P3) One or more religion(s) in at least some liberal societies induce adherents to support political liberalism, and such religions are functional competitors with woke, so promoting them will weaken the influence of woke;

(P4) The state should pursue effective and prudent means of weakening the influence of influential and threatening anti-liberal doctrines;

(C) Therefore, when moderate establishment is an effective and prudent means of inculcating belief in and commitment to the established religion(s), and these religions induce adherents to support political liberalism and are functional competitors with woke, the state should promote these religions as a means of weakening the influence of woke.

I refer to this argument (as I noted previously) as the Anti-Woke Containment Argument. The Anti-Woke Containment Argument is valid: if (P1-P4) are all true, (C) will be true. (P4) is true according to the Rawlsian liberal doctrine of containment. Premises (P1-P3) are all

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid., 208

controversial. In the final section of this chapter, I will defend (P1-P3) and show they are all plausible.

The Anti-Woke Containment Argument is compatible with Rawlsian public reason, and its conclusion is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. I have already defended the claims that moderate establishment is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism and that anti-perfectionist arguments for moderate establishment are compatible with Rawlsian liberalism. The Anti-Woke Containment Argument is clearly anti-perfectionist because it does not appeal to the purported truth or goodness of any particular comprehensive doctrine, religious or otherwise, but only to the neutral value of stabilising a liberal society.

Laborde raises a specific objection to Biggar's arguments for establishment, which I believe, if applied to the formalised Anti-Woke Containment Argument, fails. Laborde argues that Biggar's argument is ambiguous as to whether it purports to show that the state should "establish"... comprehensive, specifically Anglican" theology or just "the humanist anthropology" that Biggar claims Anglicanism endorses and provides a deep rationale for, and which tends to produce support for political liberalism among citizens. If Biggar means that the state should establish Anglican theology, Laborde argues, this is incompatible with Rawlsian liberalism, because "Rawls explicitly *denies* that liberal states can appeal to *even reasonable* comprehensive faiths to justify laws and policies".⁹⁰¹

Laborde's objection, however, rests on a misunderstanding of Biggar's claims. Biggar never claims that the state should *appeal* to Anglican theology as a *justification* for laws or policies. He only claims that the state should *promote* this theology through various establishment practices. Some of Biggar's other arguments for establishment, which I have not discussed here, *are* perhaps more ambivalent in this respect and thus vulnerable to Laborde's critique. But the Anti-Woke Containment Argument is not ambivalent: it is very clearly an anti-perfectionist argument for promoting religion as a *means* to a neutral end. The argument in absolutely no way asserts or implies that the state should act on the basis of *reasons* supplied by the theology of the established religion(s). Laborde's objection, therefore, is ineffective against the Anti-Woke Containment Argument.

IV: The Plausibility of the Anti-Woke Containment Argument

The final section of this chapter will defend the plausibility of premises (P1-3) of the Anti-Woke Containment Argument. All three of these premises are controversial; but all three, I believe, are also very plausible.

Let us begin with (P1), which claims that moderate establishment is sometimes an effective and prudent means of inculcating belief in and commitment to the established religion(s) in liberal societies. Moderate establishment is, I assume, *prudent* means to this end when it is *effective* and comes with no costs that *substantially outweigh* its benefits.

⁹⁰¹ (Laborde 2020, 219). Emphasis original.

Can moderate establishment be an effective means of promoting belief in and commitment to the established religion(s) in liberal societies? This is an empirical question; the answer will depend on research in the social science of religious change. Sociologists of religion have taken various views on the effects of religious establishment. I have already mentioned the ‘supply-side’ view that establishment tends to *weaken* the established religion(s) by reducing the incentive of religious organisations to meet people’s spiritual needs.⁹⁰²

The most recent and most thorough empirical work on the dynamics of religious change supports a qualified and chastened version of the ‘secularisation thesis’, according to which processes inextricably linked to socio-economic modernisation tend to produce long-term religious decline. This empirical work suggests that moderate establishment *usually* makes little difference to this process of decline. This research is consistent, however, with maintaining that moderate establishment can *sometimes* be an at least somewhat effective means of promoting religion.⁹⁰³

Specifically, Jörg Stolz and three other sociologists have recently published the first major study to test models of religious decline that account for longitudinal data on religious belief and affiliation in Western, traditionally Christian countries, against data from traditionally Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist countries. Their results are best explained, mathematically, by a model positing a three-stage “secular transition” over “roughly 200 years”.⁹⁰⁴ Participation in religious services declines first, followed by a decline in the subjective importance people attribute to religion, and then a decline in religious affiliation.⁹⁰⁵ The decline takes place mainly through cohort replacement, not changes in individual religiosity across lifetimes.⁹⁰⁶ Countries enter this decline process at different times, and most of the cross-country variation in degrees of age-cohort difference along the three dimensions of religiosity measured is explained by positing different dates of entry into the decline process.⁹⁰⁷ Traditionally Hindu and Buddhist countries show the same pattern of cohort differences in religiosity as traditionally Christian ones.⁹⁰⁸ Traditionally Muslim countries show significant cohort differences in religious participation and subjective importance, but not in affiliation; the authors attribute this to these countries being at early stages in the secular transition.⁹⁰⁹ The United States is not an outlier to the pattern.⁹¹⁰

The fact that this model explains so much of the observed patterns of religiosity worldwide and across age cohorts strongly suggests that a qualified form of the ‘secularisation thesis’ is

⁹⁰² See (Stark and Finke 2002)

⁹⁰³ (Stolz et al. 2025)

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid., 1

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 2

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., 1

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3-4

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., 4-5

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., 5. *Contra* earlier research, which not only took place when the US was at an earlier stage of the secular transition, but tended to focus on parochial comparisons to more evidently secularising European countries.

roughly correct. Stolz et. al. do not offer any causal explanation for the explanatory validity of their model. Sociologists have suggested many reasons why one or more aspects of modernisation might tend to cause secularisation.⁹¹¹ I take no position on what the correct causal explanation for the pattern observed by Stolz et. al. might be. The validity and robustness of their model, however, make it highly likely that there is *some* causal explanation that has something to do with modernisation.

If there is a long-term ‘secular trend’, so to speak, across modernising societies, this might weaken the plausibility of (P1), by suggesting it is difficult for moderate establishment to promote religion in the face of deep structural causes tending to undermine it. For instance, the presence of a moderate establishment in countries like England and Denmark does not appear to have slowed the pace of secularisation at all, compared to countries that lack such an establishment. Among Western countries, there is no discernible correlation between the presence or absence of moderate establishment and the size of cohort differences in religiosity.⁹¹² Moreover, Hungary and Poland, which have recently seen vigorous efforts to promote religion through moderate establishment of the kind that postliberals support, are not outliers: Poland actually has among the world’s highest cohort differences in religiosity, while Hungary’s are close to the European average.⁹¹³

Nevertheless, it is still *plausible* that moderate establishment is *sometimes* an effective and prudent means of promoting belief in and commitment to the established religion(s). Stolz et. al. note two significant exceptions to the pattern they observe: “eastern post-communist countries” with “traditionally Orthodox or Muslim majorities”, and Israel. Younger cohorts in these countries are not less religious than older cohorts; in some cases, they are more religious.⁹¹⁴ It is plausible that moderate establishment practices play a significant role in promoting religiosity in at least some of these countries.⁹¹⁵

However, perhaps a more helpful example of moderate establishment being effective in promoting religiosity is supplied by the Cold War era United States. Between 1945 and 1990, rates of reported religious affiliation, belief, and practice in the United States were largely stable (despite significant movements between dominations, yielding notably the net decline of ‘mainline’ Protestant churches and the net growth of Evangelical churches).⁹¹⁶ Many scholars have argued that a kind of informal and moderate multi-establishment of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious institutions existed in the United States during this period. For instance, Robert Bellah identified aspects of this informal establishment with a state-led ‘civil religion’,⁹¹⁷

⁹¹¹ (Bruce and Voas 2023, 1)

⁹¹² (Stolz et al. 2025, 3) *Contra* ‘supply-side’ theorists, however, there is no positive *or negative* correlation between moderate establishment and cohort differences in religiosity.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6. See (Weinreb and Blass 2020; Sokol 2025)

⁹¹⁶ (Nadeem 2022)

⁹¹⁷ (Bellah 2021 [1967])

and Will Herberg identified an informal official endorsement of a religiously-inflected “American way of life” supposed to be shared by Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.⁹¹⁸

Many scholars of the period’s religious history have, in light of the above, argued that this informal moderate multi-establishment contributed to the robustness and stability of religious affiliation, belief, and practice in America during the Cold War.⁹¹⁹ While I am not committed to the claim that this informal establishment certainly contributed to religiosity, the example of the Cold War United States is nevertheless a *plausible* example of a fairly recent instance where moderate establishment was an effective and prudent means of inculcating belief in and commitment to the established religions. Moreover, it is an example of where this plausible worked in a society that did not exhibit the high levels of political or geopolitical instability seen in post-Communist states and Israel.

I conclude that although, across the world as a whole, there is no significant correlation between moderate establishment practices and the growth or decline of religion, it remains *plausible* that there exist mechanisms, operative in some countries, by which moderate establishment practices can effectively promote religion. These mechanisms appear, often, to rely on (as in the Cold War United States) moderate establishment practices like state endorsement of a ‘civil religion’, or on (as in Israel) subsidising religious communities. There is not sufficient empirical evidence to predict with confidence *when* these mechanisms will be operative. Nevertheless, they appear to operate in a significant number of countries. In the absence of such evidence permitting us to judge when they will operate and when they will not, it is *plausible* to think that they have a reasonable chance of operating in any given society. It is therefore *plausible*, in any particular society, to think that moderate establishment practices will have a non-negligible probability-adjusted expected impact on religious belief and commitment to the established religion(s).

If such practices are an *effective* means of promoting religion, they are, at least sometimes, also a *prudent* means of doing so. Such measures could only be effective but not prudent if there is good reason to think that implementing them will have significant normative costs. There is no good reason to think that establishment measures that operate through either of the mechanisms I have discussed—subsidising religious communities with high birth rates and encouraging citizens to link religion to a national identity that they value—necessarily come with such costs. Encouraging citizens to link one or more religion(s) to a national identity that they value could plausibly send a message that undermines the civic standing of dissenters from the religion(s) in question, but I have already shown that this is only a *pro tanto* wrong; there is no reason to think it will be more weighty than the benefit achieved by promoting religion. Analogous reasoning applies to the financial and other costs of subsidising religious communities with high birth rates.

⁹¹⁸ (Herberg 2012 [1955])

⁹¹⁹ E.g. (Bullivant 2022, 94–127)

I conclude that (P1) is plausible: it is plausible to think that moderate establishment is, sometimes, an effective and prudent means of inculcating belief in and commitment to the established religion(s) in liberal societies.

(P2) holds that woke is an influential and threatening anti-liberal doctrine. First, is woke an anti-liberal doctrine? Woke is not a doctrine with prominent, formal organisational structures or institutions of the kind that might issue statements of principles. Nor is it a doctrine in which highly articulate ideological texts play a major role. Rather, it functions primarily as an “emotional regime”, transmitted through bottom-up mechanisms whereby individuals spread a distinct set of often-implicit values and commitments.⁹²⁰ What is the content of these often-implicit values and commitments?

Recall that woke is the “sacralization of historically-marginalized [race, gender, and sexuality-based] identity groups”. Woke therefore involves treating minor putative harms (such as ‘micro-aggressions’) to members of these groups (*qua* their membership) as *almost incommensurably bad*.⁹²¹ Treating minor putative harms in this way would be anti-liberal because it entails treating harms that do *not* involve the violation of basic rights as more weighty than the protection of basic rights. For example, a woke attitude to racial ‘micro-aggressions’ would hold that expressing a belief in ‘colour-blindness’ reinforces structural anti-black racism and is therefore almost incommensurably bad. If this attitude to racial ‘micro-aggressions’ is held consistently, it is anti-liberal, because the almost incommensurable badness of verbally reinforcing structural anti-black racism implies that basic rights should be violated in order to eliminate this almost incommensurable harm. But verbally reinforcing structural anti-black racism—assuming that the speech-acts in question really have this effect—does *not* violate the basic rights protected by minimal liberalism because these rights are formal legal protections against state coercion, not rights against speech-acts that contribute to structural social dynamics. I take no position here on whether structural anti-black racism is real or whether verbally expressing a belief in ‘colour-blindness’ contributes to it: if this structural racism *is* real, if verbally expressing this belief *does* contribute to it, and if there is no effective means of countering this contribution other than legal restriction, then coercively preventing such verbal expression still constitutes the violation of a basic free speech right.⁹²² (If structural racism is sufficiently powerful, verbal expressions of belief in colour-blindness contribute significantly enough to this racism, *and* there is no effective means of countering such verbal expressions without legal restriction, these facts might imply a good argument *against liberalism*, but this would be far outside the scope of this chapter.)

However, we can only be *certain* that woke is anti-liberal if we have direct empirical confirmation that adherents of woke actually support the violation of the basic rights protected by minimal liberalism in order to prevent harms, like purported contributions to structural anti-black racism,

⁹²⁰ (Kaufmann 2024b)

⁹²¹ (Kaufmann 2024a, xii)

⁹²² I assume that the expression of support for colour-blindness in question is defined in content-relative terms, e.g. expressing a support for equal treatment for persons of all races and opposition to pursuing equal outcomes, and therefore that restricting this expression is a *content-based* restriction of free speech.

that these adherents view as almost incommensurably bad. Merely endorsing *social sanctioning* of verbal expressions like the ones discussed above would not unambiguously imply that adherents of woke endorse violating minimal agency and free speech rights; but endorsing *legal restriction* of such expressions would do so.

As I have argued elsewhere, no such direct empirical confirmation exists, but neither does any direct empirical *disconfirmation* exist.⁹²³ We cannot, therefore, be certain that woke is anti-liberal. However, in light of the clear evidence that woke involves an implicit commitment to treating putative harms to sacralised historically-marginalised groups as almost incommensurably bad, and the fact that (as I showed above) treating putative harms this way implies anti-liberalism because it implies that basic rights should be violated to prevent putative harms that (whatever their weight) involve no such violations of basic rights, it is at least highly *plausible* to think that woke is anti-liberal.

If woke is an anti-liberal doctrine, is it influential and threatening to liberalism? The answer is a clear yes. The sociologist David Rozado and two colleagues have documented powerful empirical evidence of the rising influence of woke. Between 2010 and 2019, the incidence of prejudice-denoting terms (like “racism”, “sexism”, “homophobia”, and “patriarchy”) in mainstream US newspapers increased by between 100 and 3,000 percent. The sharper increases occurred for terms like “white supremacy” (2,862 percent) and “patriarchy” (520 percent) which plausibly indicate a woke attitude, while terms that do not have woke connotations, like “gender discrimination” (171 percent), increased less sharply.⁹²⁴ Believing that structural racism exists and is important (indicated by use of the term “white supremacy”, as opposed to “racism”), or that structural misogyny exists and is important (indicated by use of the term “patriarchy”, as opposed to “gender discrimination”), does not necessarily make a person an adherent of woke, because it is possible to believe that these structures exist and are important without believing that even small contributions to them are almost incommensurably bad.

Nevertheless, we know that a large proportion of people who believe that structural racism and misogyny exist and are important also believe that even small contributions to them are almost incommensurably bad, and thus are adherents of woke. It is extremely likely, therefore, that a significant portion of the dramatic increase in interest in structural discrimination that Rozado et. al. document indicates the rising prevalence and influence of woke beliefs. Rozado et. al. certainly believe this is the correct interpretation of their findings, and even believe they have identified a “great awakening”.⁹²⁵ Not only do woke beliefs appear to be exhibiting a medium-term increase in prevalence and salience, but they are also increasing in prevalence generationally, at least in the major English-speaking democracies. Kaufmann has found that younger generations in these countries are several times more likely to hold beliefs indicative of woke attitudes. Since, in general, Kaufmann argues, moral and political attitudes are ‘sticky’ once formed in early adulthood, the younger generations are unlikely to abandon woke attitudes

⁹²³ (Williams 2024c)

⁹²⁴ (Rozado et al. 2023, 107)

⁹²⁵ (Rozado 2023; al-Gharbi 2023)

later in life.⁹²⁶ Thus, woke attitudes are likely to gain in influence as the younger generations become the median voters in these countries, demonstrating that (if woke is anti-liberal), it is indeed a threat to liberalism.

Woke, then, is clearly an influential doctrine and one that is, in the long run and despite evident setbacks linked to Trump's election in 2024, gaining influence in the major English-speaking democracies. Therefore, if woke is anti-liberal, it is an influential and threatening anti-liberal doctrine. As we have seen, it is plausible that woke is indeed anti-liberal, so it is plausible that woke is an influential and threatening anti-liberal doctrine. I conclude that (P2) of the Anti-Woke Containment Argument, like (P1), is plausible.

Finally, I will assess (P3), which holds that woke and one or more religion(s) are functional competitors. This is a claim about the causal interaction of woke attitudes with religious belief or commitment. If belief in and/or commitment to one or more religion(s) is caused by factors that undermine woke attitudes, or the belief in and/or commitment to the religion(s) in question themselves undermine woke attitudes, then the religion(s) in question are functional competitors with woke, and effectively promoting such religion(s) is likely to reduce the prevalence and influence of woke attitudes.

Scholars of woke have taken a range of views on the degree to which woke is a functional competitor with religion. The linguist John McWhorter argues that embracing woke satisfies many of the same psychological needs that religion attempts to satisfy, such as providing a sense of purpose, meaning, and wholeness.⁹²⁷ He also argues that woke *is* a religion, on the grounds that it is (purportedly) based on "creation myths" and "beliefs... beyond the reach of empirical experience".⁹²⁸ McWhorter goes on to claim that woke exhibits certain structural features shared by religion in general or Christianity in particular: both woke and religion he claims, require "suspensions of disbelief",⁹²⁹ involve sacralised authority figures ("clergy"),⁹³⁰ affirm a doctrine of "original sin" (for woke, this is inherited "white privilege"),⁹³¹ anticipate an "apocalyptic" transformation of the world,⁹³² and seek the "punishment and elimination" of "heretics".⁹³³ The political theorist Joshua Mitchell makes similar claims about the structural affinity between woke and Christianity in a more theologically sophisticated register. Mitchell, who uses the term "identity politics" to refer to woke, claims that "identity politics is a deformation of the Christian insight that a scapegoat does indeed take away the sins of the world", and that this "deformation" mis-identifies the scapegoat as "mortal... the white heterosexual male... rather than Divine".⁹³⁴

⁹²⁶ (Kaufmann 2024a, 231, 234–5, 237–8)

⁹²⁷ (McWhorter 2021, 68–86)

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31

⁹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32

⁹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35–7

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, 37–40

⁹³² *Ibid.*, 42

⁹³³ *Ibid.*, 48–55

⁹³⁴ (Mitchell 2022, 14)

Even if McWhorter and Mitchell are correct that woke exhibits a structural affinity with Christianity and meets the same psychological needs for its adherents that religion meets, this would not prove that woke is a functional competitor with religion in general or with Christianity in particular.⁹³⁵ It is possible that woke, various religions, and any number of other doctrines *all* meet these psychological needs, and that some people are content to let these needs go *unmet*. Successfully promoting one or more religion(s) might therefore lead to these religion(s) growing at the expense of other religions, or of indifference to comprehensive doctrines that meet people's psychological needs, or of other secular comprehensive doctrines, rather than at the expense of woke.

However, Mitchell also argues that the woke commitment to a kind of “deformation” of “original sin” illustrates that adherents are “captivated by the idea of irredeemable stain”. This captivation, Mitchell claims, means that adherents of woke will only find their psychological need for “a deep account of sin” and “irredeemable stain” met by “Reformed theology”.⁹³⁶ Mitchell is making a speculative claim here about the psychological *motivation* for adhering to woke. He might be correct in this theological-political claim about the *structure* of woke—that one of its central concepts is a transformed and secularised analogue to the Christian doctrine of original sin—while still being incorrect about adherents' psychological motivation. Adherents of woke could be motivated by something else, even if an analogue to original sin is structurally central to woke. Mitchell, therefore, has not established that “Reformed theology”, or any theology, is a functional competitor to woke, let alone the *only* such competitor. To determine which doctrines are actually functional competitors to woke, we need to examine the empirical data on other beliefs that correlate with woke, not just (as McWhorter and Mitchell do) compare the morphological structure of woke with that of other doctrines.

Kaufmann has shown that adherence to, and belief in, Christianity is *not* directly linked to rejection of woke: Christian religiosity does not directly lead to a rejection of woke, unless it is mediated by another factor, such as a strong sense of national identity or conservative ideology.⁹³⁷ In Europe, where Christian identification has a strong ethno-cultural element, there is a correlation between Christian affiliation and rejecting woke attitudes, but this correlation does not hold in America. Rejection of woke attitudes is directly correlated with the ethno-cultural identity of Europeans who identify with Christianity, but not directly correlated with their Christian identification as such.⁹³⁸ The available empirical evidence, then, does not suggest that woke is a functional competitor with Christianity.⁹³⁹

Nevertheless, there is a very good reason to think that *some versions* of Christianity, and of other religions, are functional competitors with woke. This is the *conceptual incompatibility* between the *progressive* beliefs about gender, sexuality, and family baked into woke and the *traditionalist* beliefs about these topics affirmed by socially conservative versions of Christianity

⁹³⁵ I take no position on whether McWhorter and Mitchell are correct about structural affinity and psychological needs. For a different view on structural affinity, see (Vallier 2023b)

⁹³⁶ (Mitchell 2022, 14)

⁹³⁷ (Kaufmann 2024a, 228)

⁹³⁸ Ibid., 226. This paragraph adapts material from (Williams 2024c).

⁹³⁹ Evidence is not available for other religions.

and of other religions. Vallier provides a plausible list of woke beliefs, among which are “*strong egalitarianism*”—the belief that “all hierarchies... require deconstruction”—and “*radical social construction*”—the belief that “nearly all identities”, including “in many cases, the distinction between biological males and females... are the product of human beliefs and practices”.⁹⁴⁰

Socially conservative versions of Christianity, and of other religions, are conceptually incompatible with strong egalitarianism and radical social construction. Socially conservative versions of religions affirm that at least some hierarchies (or partially-hierarchical relationships) are sometimes benign. They do *not*, however, necessarily affirm that these hierarchies should be enforced or upheld by the state. Some such versions of religions affirm this, but some do not, believing instead that these hierarchies should be maintained only through the voluntary efforts of individuals and communities. For the latter category of such versions of religions, there is no tension between social conservatism and political liberalism; for many such versions of religions, there exist deep, and mutually congruent or at least consistent, rationales for both political liberalism and social conservatism.⁹⁴¹ These socially conservative but politically liberal versions of religions will tend to induce adherents to support political liberalism. Rauch has recently argued that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the contemporary United States is an example of such a socially conservative religion that tends to induce adherents to support political liberalism.⁹⁴² I take no position on whether Rauch is right about the Latter-day Saints, but his argument at least shows that the idea of such a socially conservative but politically liberal version of a religion is far from outlandish. Biggar would, I assume, hold that conservative versions of Anglicanism are also examples of this kind of version of religion.

These socially conservative but politically liberal versions of religions will also, I think, act as functional competitors with woke, precisely because their social conservatism directly contradicts woke. For instance, the nuclear family is a partially hierarchical set of relationships between spouses and between parents and children. Socially conservative versions of religions usually affirm that the nuclear family, despite (or because of) its hierarchical features, is good because it is mandated and/or established by transcendent powers as the best, if not the only permissible, setting for sexual relationships and for the rearing of children. Holding this socially conservative belief is, of course, perfectly compatible with thinking that the state should not enforce it. But as Vallier points out, highly plausibly, woke is opposed not just to state-enforced hierarchies but also to “voluntarily agreed upon hierarchy, and hierarchy in private spaces”.⁹⁴³ Thus, the belief, affirmed by many socially conservative versions of various religions, that the nuclear family is good is conceptually incompatible with a consistent commitment to woke. One could easily make a similar argument about the incompatibility of the beliefs about gender roles affirmed by socially conservative versions of religions with the woke belief in radical social construction.

⁹⁴⁰ (Vallier 2023b)

⁹⁴¹ For instance, some versions of religions teach both that extra-martial sex is *morally* impermissible intemperance and that *legally* enforcing the moral requirements of temperance destroys the moral value of temperate conduct for people coerced into such conduct.

⁹⁴² (Rauch 2025)

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

It follows from this observation about conceptual incompatibility that, insofar as adherents of woke (on the one hand) and socially conservative versions of religions (on the other hand) are *saliently aware* of their respective commitments regarding gender, sexuality, and family, woke and socially conservative versions of religions are likely to be *functional competitors*. Increasing belief in and commitment to socially conservative versions of religions will reduce belief in and commitment to woke, because people cannot consistently affirm the beliefs about gender, sexuality, and family affirmed both by woke and by socially conservative versions of religions at the same time. Thus, it appears that any state promotion of socially conservative versions of one or more religion(s) will serve to undermine belief in and commitment to woke.⁹⁴⁴

However, we cannot be certain that even socially conservative versions of religion(s) and woke are functional competitors, because it is possible that successfully promoting these versions of religion(s) will cause them to grow *at the expense of doctrines that affirm progressive views of gender, sexuality, and family, but that reject woke*. For this reason, I conclude that (P3), the claim that woke and (at least some) religion(s) are functional competitors, is *plausible* but cannot be known to be true with certainty.

To sum up, then, I have shown that all of the premises (P1-P3) of the Anti-Woke Containment Argument are *plausible*. (P4) is true by stipulation, and the argument is valid. Therefore, (C5) is also *plausible*, and the argument is plausibly sound.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there exists at least one plausible argument for state promotion of religion of the kind postliberals support, namely, through moderate establishment and/or moral-ecological measures. The Anti-Woke Containment Argument that I have retrieved from Biggar's work is plausibly sound. Although the argument does not directly assert the need for moral-ecological measures, only moderate establishment, an analogous version could easily be formulated to include such measures. I have also demonstrated that the argument is compatible with Rawlsian public reason and that its conclusion, in favour of state promotion of religion through moderate establishment, as well as its potential analogous extension to the promotion of religion through moral-ecological measures, is compatible with Rawlsian liberalism.

In addition to showing that postliberals can therefore have a plausible chance of persuading other constituencies, beyond traditionalist-perfectionists, of their favoured policies on public religion within the confines of the limited regime, this conclusion has two additional virtues for the postliberals. First, it shows that there is a plausible liberal case for promoting religion as a *means of containing woke*, which contains rationales for progressive-authoritarianism. Postliberals, concerned about the plausible decay of the liberal regime into progressive-authoritarianism, must welcome this. Second, it shows that there is a plausible

⁹⁴⁴ Obviously, some socially conservative version(s) of religions oppose political liberalism because they support legal imposition of their social conservatism, but many such versions of religions reject this imposition and support political liberalism.

liberal case for promoting *socially conservative religions or versions of religions*, which are the kind of religious doctrines postliberals tend to support.

In conjunction with my previous chapter, which showed that postliberals can find a plausible liberal argument for promoting marriage through marriage subsidies, this chapter has vindicated the claim that postliberals can not only legitimately argue for most of the distinctive domestic policies they want within the confines of liberalism, but that they have a plausible chance of achieving these goals within the liberal regime. While not eliminating the significant risk of the liberal regime decaying into progressive-authoritarianism that Chapter 5 identified, Part 3 of this thesis has shown that postliberals should be considerably more optimistic about the liberal regime than they typically appear to be. While I have not tried to convince postliberals that the liberal regime is the best regime despite its potential for decaying into progressive-authoritarianism, I hope I have shown that the liberal regime affords postliberals considerable latitude for achieving many of their distinctive, preferred policy goals, and that in building coalitions with other ideological constituencies to achieve these goals they will also be able to reduce the regime's risk of decaying into progressive-authoritarianism into the bargain.

Final Conclusion

Liberalism has not *entirely* failed. Nor is it about to end its influence over political thought and human affairs—either with a whimper or with a bang. The postliberal critique of liberalism, while not entirely successful, draws our attention to features of liberalism that are often convenient to overlook. As I see it, this thesis has made several important contributions to the emerging debate on postliberalism and its discontents.

Preliminary to the main body of my thesis, my introduction makes the contribution of sharpening our understanding of the distinction between traditionalism and progressivism. While sociological work like James Davison Hunter’s drew on something like this distinction, it was not philosophically precise.⁹⁴⁵ The divide between traditionalism and progressivism, which concerns the role of epistemic deference and strong evaluation in conceptions of human flourishing, is central and architectonic in understanding socio-moral divisions in contemporary liberal societies. Recognising the divide is essential to understanding the background conditions in which postliberalism has arisen: namely, the rising fear among traditionalists of a progressive form of authoritarianism that coercively imposes a vision of flourishing based on expressive individualism. We can thus get beyond the loose talk of ‘coercive liberalism’, the ‘illiberal left’, or even ‘illiberal liberalism’ (whatever that might be) that circulates in popular discourse.

Chapter 1 has performed the laborious but usually-avoided task⁹⁴⁶ of answering the question: *What do we talk about when we talk about ‘liberalism’?* Liberals often seem unsure, or to offer answers that have little relevance outside the vistas of the academy. Vermeule’s complaint about liberal theory “worked out to the *n*th decimal”,⁹⁴⁷ but ultimately “science fictional”—bearing the same relation to the dilemmas real states as “the novels of J.K. Rowling bear to the current United Kingdom”⁹⁴⁸—has more than a little merit. Of course liberal theory is more grounded in reality than *Harry Potter*. But how much more? What purchase do debates about the legitimacy of introducing religious arguments in legislative deliberation have on a world in which politicians seek to ban “casual conversations” and “private prayer” for evincing the wrong opinion on the morality of homosexual sodomy?⁹⁴⁹ Strauss wrote that the positivist political science of his time was “excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns”.⁹⁵⁰ No one could imagine that liberal theorists do not know that Rome (or Washington, or Brussels) burns. But to the extent—limited, but real—that they fiddle, their ignorance of this fact does not excuse them at all.

Of course, some liberals have ventured out of the academy’s groves and presented their -ism as a fighting creed. But their efforts still seem to yield a disappointing vagueness about its limits.

⁹⁴⁵ (Hunter 1991)

⁹⁴⁶ Avoided by (Sleat 2025; Kelly 2025b; Borg 2025)

⁹⁴⁷ (Vermeule 2019)

⁹⁴⁸ (Vermeule 2024)

⁹⁴⁹ (Williams 2024a)

⁹⁵⁰ (Jaffa 1984)

Fukuyama identifies liberalism with a “right to autonomy”, which entails “choices with regard to speech, association, belief, and ultimately political life”.⁹⁵¹ Does Fukuyama mean to prioritize first- or second-order autonomy? Can I autonomously choose to follow the commands of the Pope, or the Ayatollah, because I believe his infallibility to be a metaphysical truth? Is autonomy fundamentally about the duty to search for and live in accordance with objective truth, or a right to arbitrarily invent and posit my own values?⁹⁵² Liberalism cannot ignore these questions.

Sunstein comes closest of recent authors to providing a genuinely *minimal* baseline for liberalism, one that brings many political conservatives into the fold and permits widely divergent interpretations of core values—allowing liberals to disagree on the questions raised above while still acknowledging one another as liberals.⁹⁵³ His account of liberalism’s core still, however, lacks specificity: it is not sufficiently determinate to serve as an acid test to distinguish real-world ideologies that are liberal from those that are anti-liberal.

Chapter 1 has provided this acid test. My conception of minimal liberalism permits us to filter ideologies that are consistent with some version or other liberalism from those that are not. Deploying this filter, I show in Chapter 2 that only some of what passes for postliberalism is really anti-liberal. Vermeule wrote in 2018 of the “gravity well of liberalism”:⁹⁵⁴ the sheer pervasiveness of liberal ideals in the background culture of liberal societies makes it hard for would-be anti-liberals to achieve ideological escape velocity before falling back into liberal assumptions so entrenched we hardly recognise them as liberal—a point also well-made in Alexandre Lefebvre’s *Liberalism As A Way of Life*, in a rare instance of a liberal acknowledging that postliberalism’s descriptive claims about liberal regimes are often true. All too often, liberalism is to us what water is to fish.⁹⁵⁵

Milbank, Pabst, Blond, and other left-wing or centrist postliberals are manifestly trapped in the gravity well. For all their heartfelt protestations to the contrary, they offer only a more communitarian version of liberalism. They envisage less regime change than a subtle ethos change, while viewing any backsliding on liberal rights protections as incorrigibly “illiberal”. Genuinely anti-liberal postliberalism is found almost entirely on the political right. Within this right-wing postliberalism, only National Conservatism, Deneen’s common good conservatism, integralism, and Christian Nationalism evidently lack rationales for a commitment to the rights protections of minimal liberalism.

Chapter 2 has also identified the genuinely novel postliberal critique of liberalism. Other scholars—Sleat, Kelly, Borg—have treated postliberalism more-or-less as a package deal and purported to evaluate the entire project, both constructive and critical, in its totality. Yet as I have shown in Chapter 2, much of what postliberals say about liberalism is far from original. A great deal of it was said by thinkers like MacIntyre; some of it goes back to Maistre. What *is* new, as I

⁹⁵¹ (Fukuyama 2023)

⁹⁵² See (Finnis 2008), esp. p. 3-9.

⁹⁵³ (Sunstein 2025, 1–18)

⁹⁵⁴ (Vermeule 2018b)

⁹⁵⁵ (Lefebvre 2024, 160–73)

demonstrate, is what Vallier identifies as the “no alternatives” argument: the argument that traditionalist authoritarianism must be imposed because protecting the rights of *both* progressives and traditionalists is *impossible even if it is desirable*.⁹⁵⁶ No other scholarship has systematically focussed upon this argument, but it is the sole original critique of liberalism offered by postliberals. It is also a profoundly important argument. Attending to the argument forces us to distinguish between liberal theory (whether we judge it irredeemably Potteresque or not) and what Strauss called the *regime*. My thesis is the first academic study to highlight this distinction and make it central to our interpretation of postliberal claims. It is also the first to formalise and systematically evaluate the No Alternatives Argument.

Although scholars have not systematically focused on the No Alternatives Argument, some liberal academics (notably Sunstein and Koppelman) have attempted to rebut postliberal claims about both liberal theory and the liberal regime in a manner that evinces robust, good-faith engagement and at least some awareness of the theory-regime distinction. Chapter 3 is the first systematic academic response to these efforts. It demonstrates that they fail because, despite their awareness of the distinction, Koppelman and Sunstein misinterpret important claims of Deneen and Hazony as being claims about liberal theory when they are really claims about liberal regimes. Close attention to Deneen’s often-overlooked reliance upon Strauss helps us interpret these postliberal claims correctly. Thus, Chapter 3 has shown that the novel postliberal critique of liberalism remains unrefuted.

Part 2 of my thesis engages directly in the first-order merits of the No Alternatives Argument. The Argument is formally valid. Is it sound? Is it *plausibly* sound? This depends, in part, on whether we interpret the argument as making a conceptual claim about liberalism or an empirical claim about liberal regimes. Chapter 4 examines the conceptual version of the argument, which claims that liberalism (inasmuch as it means, as it absolutely must mean, the protection of basic rights for both traditionalists and progressives) is “a conceptual and logical impossibility”.⁹⁵⁷

The conceptual No Alternatives Argument is not, in its current form, a successful argument. Its key premise, the claim that anti-authoritarianism is conceptually impossible, is not fully supported by the evidence Vermeule adduces for it. This key premise is also, I believe, false. I demonstrate the falsehood of this key premise by providing a single counter-example, i.e., an anti-authoritarian theory that is conceptually coherent. I show that the new natural law theory of political morality, at least in Finnis’s interpretation, is conceptually coherent, anti-authoritarian, and relies centrally upon a coherent and determinate conception of the “common good”. It thus functions as a counter-example to the claim that, in light of the unavoidable pervasiveness of appeals to the common good, the only coherent theories of political morality are anti-liberal.

Chapter 5 examines a very different version of the No Alternatives Argument. This is the empirical version. Abjuring implausible claims about liberalism’s incoherence, this version claims that real-world liberal regimes necessarily decay into progressive-authoritarianism because of

⁹⁵⁶ (Vallier 2024b)

⁹⁵⁷ (Vermeule 2022c).

causal mechanisms that these regimes activate. I show that the argument is worth taking seriously. Real-world liberal regimes really are undergoing a slow slide towards progressive-authoritarianism for what appear to be fairly deeply-rooted structural reasons. It does not follow, however, that we can confidently infer that all possible liberal regimes will exhibit this structural tendency toward decay.

The reality is that postliberals have presented us with plausible but far from indisputable reasons to think that the mechanism of decay generalises to all possible liberal regimes. In light of this fact, we have to navigate an epistemic condition of uncertainty. There is a chance—we don't know precisely how great, but it is greater than negligible while less than certain—that liberalism's decay into progressive-authoritarianism is inexorable. How should we respond?

Part 3 addresses Lenin's question—*what is to be done?*—from the point of view of traditionalists: traditionalists who do not know if they should favour, as postliberals recommend, a coercive and authoritarian traditionalist regime as an insurance against the progressive kind, or whether they should accept some kind of rationale (perhaps a 'fusionist' rationale—synthesising or 'fusing' traditionalism with some kind of political liberalism)⁹⁵⁸ for regarding the liberal regime as the best one, despite all its dangers. Everyone else can regard this part as arguing from Rawlsian "conjecture".⁹⁵⁹ Liberalism will be less stable if traditionalists reject it.

My aim in Part 3 is modest, for there are many dimensions relevant to traditionalists' evaluation of the best regime in light of the risks highlighted in Part 2. One of these dimensions concerns the likely effect of trying to achieve postliberal policy goals *within* the liberal regime. Is this even conceivable? Yes, at least for National Conservatives and non-integralist common good conservatives: while Deneen and Hazony do not affirm deep rationales for avoiding authoritarian coercion, they do *not* explicitly endorse anti-liberal measures in their statements on the two most important and distinctive postliberal domestic policy goals, namely the state promotion of religion and of marriage.

It is one thing to show that these measures are compatible with my "minimal" liberalism; real-world liberals may regard this as too minimal to make the measures remotely palatable. I therefore show, in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively, that postliberal policies on *marriage subsidies* and *public religion* are compatible with *Rawlsian* liberalism. Rawlsian liberalism navigates between the Scylla of a liberalism that permits almost anything and the Charybdis of a liberalism that forbids much of what real-world liberal states uncontroversially do. It is close to the theoretical 'centre' of liberalism; showing postliberal policies are compatible with one of the most academically influential versions of liberalism is a much bigger victory than showing their compatibility with some marginal or heterodox strand. Moreover, and more speculatively, I suspect Rawlsian liberalism roughly captures some widely—but inchoately—felt intuitions about political legitimacy held by a great many mainstream political actors, on the centre-left and centre-right, in the real world. It is plausible to think that moderate social democrats and

⁹⁵⁸ See e.g. (Vallier 2025a, 2025b)

⁹⁵⁹ (Rawls 1997, 783)

progressives, centrist liberals, and moderate conservatives all share some loose set of commitments to treating all citizens with respect, to avoiding first-order coercing citizens into following particular conceptions of flourishing, and to offering reasons for second-order coercion that all citizens who accept the legitimacy of the political order could in principle also accept; I think Rawlsian liberalism captures this thought.⁹⁶⁰ Thus, if my conclusion is correct, it will make it much easier for postliberals to achieve their goals *within the liberal regime that they presently appear to reject*, because they will be able to appeal to citizens who do not support their religious views or their traditionalism.

I interpret Rawlsian liberalism to require anti-perfectionism. While some liberals, including some who are committed to some kind of doctrine of public reason, defend ‘inclusivism’ about religious reasons in policy-making,⁹⁶¹ my result will be more useful for reconciling postliberals with the liberal regime if it holds even if ‘exclusivism’ is true.

Thus, Chapter 6 shows that there exist plausible anti-perfectionist arguments for marriage subsidies; Chapter 7 shows that there exist such arguments for promoting religion—actually aiming to increase rates of religious belief, practice, or affiliation—through moderate forms of religious establishment that deploy public funds to support religion but do not (unlike integralism or Christian Nationalism) coercively impose religious practice or professions of faith.

In Chapter 6, I develop and defend as plausible what I call the “child-welfare argument” for subsidizing marriage, which holds that marriage subsidies can sometimes induce more couples to marry or stay married, and this will often be good for children’s access to Rawlsian “primary goods” like income and health, valued independently of the conception of flourishing the children grow up to affirm.⁹⁶² In Chapter 7, I do the same for a version of Nigel Biggar’s argument for promoting religion, which I describe as a “containment argument”. This argument holds that promoting religion is sometimes a prudent way of protecting liberalism itself from progressive-authoritarianism (a result that should be especially welcome to postliberals).

These chapters make an entirely unique contribution to debates on liberalism, family policy, and public religion. They show, in contrast to ubiquitous and often reflexive assumptions on the part of many liberals, that some of the most important and indeed totemic postliberal goals are not really anti-liberal at all. Far from requiring the privatisation of marriage⁹⁶³ or forbidding its promotion, some impeccably ‘reasonable’ conceptions of liberal justice will endorse actively and fulsomely promoting the institution. These conceptions will in fact endorse marriage subsidies of the kind introduced in Orbán’s Hungary and celebrated by right-wing postliberals. Liberals, ironically, too often take Orbán at his “illiberal” word;⁹⁶⁴ but whatever we think of other Fidez or postliberal measures, there is nothing genuinely anti-liberal about this modest attempt to tilt the scales in favour of sexual-romantic practices that are good for children.

⁹⁶⁰ Postliberals agree that mainstream social democrats and conservatives are really liberals. See (Timothy 2021; Milbank and Pabst 2016; Deneen 2019)

⁹⁶¹ (Eberle 2002; Vallier 2014)

⁹⁶² On “primary goods”, see (Rawls 2001, 169)

⁹⁶³ (Chambers 2017)

⁹⁶⁴ E.g. (Fodor 2021)

The same holds for public religion. While some liberals recognise the danger of “woke” progressive-authoritarianism,⁹⁶⁵ there has been no explicit endorsement of the use of religion as a means to counter this ideology. The only full and explicit liberal theoretical endorsement of moderate establishment is that of David Miller; but he defends establishment on the grounds that it can have a “moderating effect... on religious discourse and practice”, thereby reducing the influence of anti-liberal or otherwise destabilising interpretations of religions.⁹⁶⁶ This argument is not useful for the postliberals because it is not an argument for *promoting* religion. Indeed, it is plausible that this “moderating effect”, if it exists, will often spill over into reducing rates of religious belief, practice, and/or affiliation. While Tariq Modood suggests that religion’s “social utility” can be a legitimate grounds for promoting religion, he does not actually *endorse* the idea that liberal states *should* promote religion.⁹⁶⁷ By contrast, my argument, which builds on Nigel Biggar’s discussion of religious establishment but clarifies and repairs the argument substantially, shows there is a plausible liberal case for using moderate establishment to promote religion as a means to increasing the influence of ‘reasonable’ comprehensive doctrines in society vis-a-vis anti-liberal ones.

For the reasons explained in both these final chapters of the thesis, then, I conclude part 3 having shown that postliberals can plausibly achieve a great many of their most prized goals by building ideological coalitions *within* the liberal regime; and moreover that this will have the effect of *mitigating* any tendency that may exist for this regime to decay into progressive-authoritarianism. This does not settle definitively the question of *what is to be done* by traditionalists, but it should re-arrange their calculus. Promoting faith and family are not goals that require anti-liberal “regime change” at all.

I conclude, therefore, with a call for mutual understanding. Liberalism is a broader and more capacious doctrine than postliberals assume; and conversely, postliberalism’s specific policy goals are less incorrigibly anti-liberal than many liberals claim. Postliberals can push for a more conservative, more faith-friendly, and more traditionalist ethos within the broad confines of the liberal regime. If and insofar as postliberals still believe traditionalist-authoritarianism is the best regime, it may be that all I have done is make a compelling case for *modus vivendi*. But the best regime need not be the enemy of the good: an acceptable regime for all is better than a confused struggle between factions mutually uncomprehending of each other’s ideological commitments. Less separates liberalism at its best and postliberalism at its most practical than we are prone to assume.

⁹⁶⁵ E.g. (McWhorter 2021; Kaufmann 2024d)

⁹⁶⁶ (Miller 2021, 75)

⁹⁶⁷ (Modood 2010, 9)

Bibliography

- 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis, Nos. 21-476 (United States Supreme Court 2023).
https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/21-476_c185.pdf.
- ABC News. 2015. "Timeline: 22 Years between First and Last Australian States Decriminalising Male Homosexuality." *ABC News*, August 24.
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-24/timeline:-australian-states-decriminalise-male-homosexuality/6719702>.
- Alliance of Sodomy Supporters. 1998. "Sodomy Laws in the US." Sodomy.com.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20131216194515/http://www.sodomy.org/laws/>.
- Al-Mawardi. 2000. *The Ordinances of Government*. Wafaa Wahba. The Great Books of Islamic Civilization. Garnet Publishing.
- American Compass. 2025. "What Comes After Post-Liberalism with Patrick Deneen." Youtube, July 11. 3128 sec. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vAO_pkkizk.
- American Enterprise Institute. 2023. "Making Men Moral: 30th Anniversary Conference | Day 1." Youtube, November 30. 17135 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1qU42NiHzA>.
- Anderson, Elizabeth S., and Richard H. Pildes. 2000. "Expressive Theories of Law: A General Restatement." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 148 (5): 1503.
- Anton, Michael. 2023. "Modernity and Its Discontents." Claremont Review of Books.
<https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/modernity-and-its-discontents/>.
- Asad, Talal. 1983. "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz." *Man; a Monthly Record of Anthropological Science* 18 (2): 237.
- Audi, Robert. 2014. "Church-State Separation, Healthcare Policy, and Religious Liberty." *Journal of Practical Ethics* 2 (1): 1–23.
- Badano, Gabriele, and Alasia Nuti. 2018. "Under Pressure: Political Liberalism, the Rise of Unreasonableness, and the Complexity of Containment." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (2): 145–168.
- Badano, Gabriele, and Alasia Nuti. 2024. *Politicizing Political Liberalism: On the Containment of Illiberal and Antidemocratic Views*. Oxford University Press.
- Baker, Hunter. 2024. "Two Christians Take On Postliberalism." *Modern Age*, March 8.
<https://modernagejournal.com/two-christians-take-on-postliberalism/235818/>.
- Bardon, Aurélia. 2022. *Christmas, Crescents, and Crosses: When Is Symbolic Religious Establishment Permissible?* KOPS Universität Konstanz.
- Barron, Bishop Robert. 2024. "Bishop Barron Presents | Patrick J. Deneen - Freedom, Truth, and the Political Order." Youtube, May 31. 4166 sec.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n17-soclRkE>.

- Bednarz, William P. 2023. "Escaping the Cave of Liberalism." *The Imaginative Conservative*, February 5.
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2023/02/escaping-cave-liberalism-politics-real-dc-sc-hindler-william-p-bednarz.html>.
- Bellah, Robert N. 2021 [1967]. "Civil Religion in America." In *Christianity and Modern Politics*. De Gruyter.
- Bellah, Robert Neelly. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press.
- Bell, Daniel. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions Of Capitalism: 20th Anniversary Edition*. Basic Books.
- Bell, Duncan. 2014. "What Is Liberalism?" *Political Theory* 42 (6): 682–715.
- Benson, Harry. 2022. "Marriage: We Need To Talk About Hungary." Marriage Foundation.
<https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/MF-note-Marriage-We-need-to-talk-about-Hungary.pdf>.
- Berger, Peter L. 2011. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Open Road Media.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 2017 [1958]. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Liberty Reader*. Routledge.
- Berry, Wendell. 2018 [1993]. *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*. Counterpoint.
- Biggar, Nigel. 2011. "Why the 'Establishment' of the Church of England Is Good for a Liberal Society." In *The Established Church: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Mark Chapman, Judith Maltby, and William Whyte.
- Biggar, Nigel. 2018. "'Ethics and Empire' and Freedom of Speech." Nigel Biggar, January 11.
<https://nigelbiggar.uk/2018/01/11/ethics-and-empire-and-freedom-of-speech/>.
- Biggar, Nigel. 2020. "Anglican Establishment: How Is It Liberal?" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33 (2): 205–214.
- Biggar, Nigel, and Cécile Laborde. 2018. "Nigel Biggar and Cécile Laborde: Religious Establishment: Can It Be Liberal Enough?" YouTube, {Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory}, June 21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LffG0itLhHs>.
- Billingham, Paul. 2016. "Convergence Justifications within Political Liberalism: A Defence." *Res Publica (Liverpool, England)* 22 (2): 135–153.
- Billingham, Paul. 2017. "Can My Religion Influence My Conception of Justice? Political Liberalism and the Role of Comprehensive Doctrines." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (4): 403–424.
- Billingham, Paul, and Anthony Taylor. 2022. "A Framework for Analyzing Public Reason Theories." *European Journal of Political Theory : EJPT* 21 (4): 671–691.

- Billot, Louis. 2020 [1922]. *Liberalism: A Critique of Its Basic Principles and Various Forms*. John M. Vella. Vol. 46. Arouca Press.
- Bitler, Marianne P., Jonah B. Gelbach, Hilary W. Hoynes, and Madeline Zavodny. 2004. "The Impact of Welfare Reform on Marriage and Divorce." *Demography* 41 (2): 213–236.
- Blond, Phillip. 2010. *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*. Faber & Faber.
- Bloom, Allan. 2008 [1987]. *The Closing of the American Mind*. Simon and Schuster.
- Bonald, Louis de. 1997 [1801]. "On Divorce." In *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present*, edited by Jerry Z. Muller. Princeton University Press.
- Bonotti, Matteo. 2012. "Beyond Establishment and Separation: Political Liberalism, Religion and Democracy." *Res Publica* 18 (4): 333–349.
- Borg, Stefan. 2024. "In Search of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right." *European Journal of Social Theory* 27 (1): 3–21.
- Borg, Stefan. 2025. *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right*. Routledge.
- Bráder, Ádám. 2025. "Hungary's Family Policies Recognized in Washington as a Global Model." *The Hungarian Conservative*, March 18.
https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/hungary-family-policy-washington-recognition-musk-vance/.
- Brake, Elizabeth. 2011. *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Brettschneider, Corey. 2012. *When The State Speaks, What Should It Say? How Democracies Can Protect Expression and Promote Equality*. Princeton University Press.
- Brown, Callum G. 2009. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*. Routledge.
- Brown, Callum G. 2019. *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation, 1945–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 2017. "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (8): 1191–1226.
- Bruce, Steve, and David Voas. 2023. "Secularization Vindicated." *Religions* 14 (3): 301.
- Bruni, Luigino, and Stefano Zamagni. 2016. *Civil Economy*. Agenda Publishing.
- Bullivant, Stephen. 2022. *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America*. Oxford University Press.
- Burke, Edmund. 2003 [1790]. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Yale University Press.

- Chambers, Clare. 2004. "Are Breast Implants Better than Female Genital Mutilation? Autonomy, Gender Equality and Nussbaum's Political Liberalism." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7 (3): 1–33.
- Chambers, Clare. 2017. *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State*. Oxford University Press.
- Chambers, Clare. 2018. *Sex, Culture, and Justice*. Penn State University Press.
- Chambers, Clare. 2024. "Respect, Religion, and Feminism: Political Liberalism as Feminist Liberalism?" In *Freedom and Equality*. Oxford University PressOxford.
- Chan, Joseph. 2000. "Legitimacy, Unanimity, and Perfectionism." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (1): 5–42.
- Chaplin, Jonathan. 2022. *Beyond Establishment: Resetting Church-State Relations in England*. SCM Press.
- Christian Institute. 2024. *The "Gold Standard" Conversion Therapy Ban?* Christian Institute. https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/The-gold-standard-conversion-therapy-ban_.pdf.
- Christian Legal Society v. Martinez (U.S. 2010).
- Clarke, Sally C. 1995. "Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989 and 1990." July 14. <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/112785>.
- Clayton, Matthew. 2012. "Debate: The Case against the Comprehensive Enrolment of Children." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 353–364.
- Coalition, Ban Conversion Therapy. 2024. "Protecting Trans Victims of Gender Identity Conversion Practices." Ban Conversion Therapy Coalition. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5efc4344362f4379c92231da/t/62629af0ff5cf66e052c1a99/1650629361587/BCT+briefing_22+April+2022.pdf.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. 2015. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 10: On the Constitution of the Church and State*. Princeton University Press.
- Copulsky, Jerome E. 2024. *American Heretics*. Yale University Press.
- Cornell Law School. 2022. "Originalism." LII / Legal Information Institute. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/originalism>.
- Cowling, Maurice. 2011 [1963]. *Mill and Liberalism*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.
- Crean, Thomas, and Alan Fimister. 2020. *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy*. Editiones scholasticae.
- Cremer, Tobias. 2023. *The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dallmayr, Fred. 2019. *Post-Liberalism: Recovering A Shared World*. Oxford University Press.

- Darwall, Stephen. 2009. *The Second-Person Standpoint*. Harvard University Press.
- DeHanas, Daniel Nilsson. 2016. *London Youth, Religion, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2013. "Who Closed the American Mind? Allan Bloom, Edmund Burke, & Multiculturalism." *The Imaginative Conservative*, May 29.
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/05/who-closed-american-mind-allan-bloom-patrick-deneen.html>.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2015. "Week 7: Natural Rights Conservatism—The Case of Leo Strauss." *The American Conservative*, March 25.
<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/week-7-natural-rights-conservatism-the-case-of-leo-strauss/>.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2019. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale University Press.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2022. "Against Academic Freedom." *Postliberal Order*, March 17.
https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/against-academic-freedom?utm_source=publication-search.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2023a. "JS Mill and the Despotism of Progress." *UnHerd*, April 30.
<https://unherd.com/2023/05/js-mill-and-the-despotism-of-progress/>.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2023b. *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future*. Swift Press.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2024. "A Refuge from Liberalism?" *Journal of Democracy* 35 (2): 168–172.
- Deneen, Patrick. 2025. "Inaugural Neuhaus Lecture: We Are All Postliberals Now (Presented by: Patrick Deneen)." *First Things*, February 18. YouTube, 5632 sec.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOOnn04XE1o>.
- DeRose, Laurie. 2023. "Promising Trends in Marriage-Friendly Hungary." *Institute for Family Studies*. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/promising-trends-in-marriage-friendly-hungary>.
- Dershowitz, Alan. 2020. *Cancel Culture*. Hot Books.
- Dickert-Conlin, Stacy. 1999. "Taxes and Transfers: Their Effects on the Decision to End a Marriage." *Journal of Public Economics* 73 (2): 217–240.
- Dobrai, Csenge. 2023. "Gladden J. PAPPIN PhD." *Magyar Külügyi Intézet*, December 31.
<https://hiia.hu/en/gladden-j-pappin-phd/>.
- Dreher, Rod. 2018. "Vermeule, Deneen, Pappin, Muñoz At Notre Dame." *The American Conservative*, November 4.
<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/vermeule-deneen-pappin-munoz-at-notre-dame/>.
- Dreher, Rod. 2019. "We Live In Rieff World." *The American Conservative*, March 1.
<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/philip-rieff-donald-trump/>.
- Dreher, Rod. 2020. *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- Dreher, Rod. 2022. "Michael Hanby On Postliberalism." *The American Conservative*, October 19. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/michael-hanby-on-postliberalism/>.

- Dunbar, Robin. 2023. *How Religion Evolved*. Pelican Books. Pelican.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2020 [1996]. *Freedom's Law*. Harvard University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1983. "What Liberalism Isn't." *New York Review of Books*, January 20. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/01/20/what-liberalism-isnt/>.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1985. "Liberalism." In *A Matter of Principle*. Clarendon Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1990. "Bork's Jurisprudence." *The University of Chicago Law Review*. *University of Chicago. Law School* 57 (2): 657.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2000. *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Harvard University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2014. *Religion Without God*. Harvard University Press.
- Eberle, Chris. 2024. "Religion and Liberalism for McCain: What Liberalism Is... And What It Is Not." Preprint.
- Eberle, Christopher J. 2002. *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenstadt v. Baird, 405 US Supreme Court Rep. 438 (Supreme Court of the United States 1972).
- Elford, Gideon. 2021. "Freedom of Expression and Social Coercion." *Legal Theory* 27 (2): 149–175.
- Enyedi, Zsolt. 2024. "Illiberal Conservatism, Civilisationalist Ethnocentrism, and Paternalist Populism in Orbán's Hungary." *Contemporary Politics* 30 (4): 494–511.
- Eriksen, Michael D. 2010. "Homeownership Subsidies and the Marriage Decisions of Low-Income Households." *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 40 (6): 490–497.
- Escritt, Thomas, and Andreas Rinke. 2024. "Far-Right Party Denies Backing Deportation of 'Unassimilated' Germans." *Reuters*, January 10. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/afd-denies-any-plan-deport-germans-after-officials-hear-proposal-2024-01-10/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Farmer, Michial. 2025. "From Postliberalism to Preliberalism: A Review of The Church Against the State." *Front Porch Republic*, April 15. <https://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2025/04/from-postliberalism-to-preliberalism-a-review-of-the-church-against-the-state/>.
- Fawcett, Edmund. 2018. *Liberalism*. 2nd ed. Princeton University Press.
- Feldblum, Chai R. 2006. "Moral Conflict and Liberty: Gay Rights and Religion." *Brooklyn Law Review*, Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works, vol. 72: 61–123.
- Feser, Edward. 2024. "Political Liberalism and Rawlsian Religion." *Postliberal Order*, August 19. https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/political-liberalism-and-rawlsian?utm_source=publication-search.

- Field, Laura. 2024. "Forced to Be Free? America's 'Postliberals' on Freedom and Liberty." In *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, edited by A. James McAdams and Samuel Piccolo. Routledge.
- Field, Laura K. 2020a. "Revisiting Why Liberalism Failed Part 1: The Intellectual and Political Stakes." *Niskanen Center*, December 21.
<https://www.niskanencenter.org/revisiting-why-liberalism-failed-part-1-the-intellectual-and-political-stakes/>.
- Field, Laura K. 2020b. "Revisiting Why Liberalism Failed Part 3: Perversity Squared – Deneen's 'Individualist Anthropology,' Anti-Political Denialism, and 'Aristopopulist' Delusions." *Niskanen Center*, December 21.
<https://www.niskanencenter.org/revisiting-why-liberalism-failed-perversity-squared-deneens-individualist-anthropology-anti-political-denialism-and-liberalocratic-delusions/>.
- Field, Laura K. 2025. *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.30412956>.
- Finnis, John. 1967. "'Reason and Passion': The Constitutional Dialectic of Free Speech and Obscenity." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 116 (2): 222.
- Finnis, John. 1998. *Aquinas. Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought*. Oxford University Press.
- Finnis, John. 2001. "Is Natural Law Theory Compatible with Limited Government?" In *Natural Law, Liberalism, and Morality: Contemporary Essays*, edited by Robert P. George. Oxford University Press.
- Finnis, John. 2008. "Why Religious Liberty Is a Special, Important and Limited Right." *Notre Dame Law School*, ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1392278>.
- Finnis, John. 2011. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, Hayley. 2013. "The Effect of Marriage Tax Penalties and Subsidies on Marital Status." *Fiscal Studies* 34 (4): 437–465.
- Fodor, Eva. 2021. *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary*. 1st ed. Springer Nature.
- (Forstater v. CGD Europe) (Court of Appeal October 6, 2021).
<https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions/maya-forstater-v-cgd-europe-and-others-2200909-2019>.
- Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. 2023. *Scholars Under Fire: Attempts to Sanction Scholars from 2000 to 2022*.
<https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire-attempts-sanction-scholars-2000-2022>.
- Fowler, Tim. 2014. "Perfectionism for Children, Anti-Perfectionism for Adults." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44 (3-4): 305–323.
- Frampton, Martyn, David Goodhart, and Khalid Mahmood. 2016. "Unsettled Belonging: A Survey of Britain's Muslim Communities." Policy Exchange, December 1.
<https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/unsettled-belonging-a-survey-of-britains-muslim-c>

ommunities/.

Freeden, Michael. 1996. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Clarendon.

Freeden, Michael. 2013. "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology." *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, 115–137.

Freeman, Samuel. 2001. "Illiberal Libertarians: Why Libertarianism Is Not a Liberal View." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30 (2): 105–151.

Fukuyama, Francis. 2023. *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. Picador.

Fűrész, Tünde. 2024. "Results of Hungary's Family Policy over the Past Thirteen Years." *The Hungarian Conservative*, July 29.
https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/hungarian-family-policy_children_marriage_maria-kopp-institute_family-friendly-government_fertility/.

Fűrész, Tünde, and Balázs Molnár. 2021. *The First Decade of Building a Family-Friendly Hungary*. No. 7. Quaderns de Polítiques Familiars.
<https://raco.cat/index.php/Quaderns/article/view/397505/491198>.

Gallie, W. B. 2019 [1955]. "Essentially Contested Concepts." In *The Importance of Language*, edited by Max Black. Cornell University Press.

Gallup, Inc. 2007. "Moral Issues." Gallup.com, Gallup, September 14.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx>.

Gallup, Inc. 2025. "Marriage." Gallup.com, Gallup.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/117328/marriage.aspx>.

Galston, William. 1996. "The Reinstitutionalization of Marriage: Political Theory and Public Policy." In *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, edited by David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn. Rowman & Littlefield.

Gaus, Gerald. 2010. *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World*. Cambridge University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 2017 [1973]. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. 3rd ed. Basic Books.

George, Robert. 1995. *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality*. Clarendon Press.

George, Robert. 1999. "Making Children Moral: Pornography, Parents and the Public Interest¹." In *In Defense of Natural Law*. Preprint.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198267713.003.0011>.

George, Robert. 2000. "The Concept of Public Morality." *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 45 (1): 17–31.

George, Robert. 2022. "Religious Liberty and the Human Good." In *The Inherence of Human Dignity*, edited by Barry W. Bussey and Angus J. L. Menuge. Anthem Press.

George, Robert, and Gerard V. Bradley. 1995. "Marriage and the Liberal Imagination." *Georgetown Law Journal* 2 (301): 301–320.

- George, Robert P. 2001. *In Defense of Natural Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Gharbi, Musa al-. 2023. "The 'Great Awakening' Is Winding Down." Musa Al-Gharbi, February 8. <https://musaalgharbi.com/2023/02/08/great-awakening-ending/>.
- Gharbi, Musa al-. 2024. *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite*. Princeton University Press.
- Gilreath, Shannon, and Arley Ward. 2016. "Same-Sex Marriage, Religious Accommodation, and the Race Analogy." *Wake Forest University Legal Studies Paper* (no. 2748565), ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2748565>.
- Glasman, Maurice. 2010. "Labour as a Radical Tradition." *Soundings* 46 (46): 31–41.
- Gomez, Gabriel, and Sven Leunig. 2022. "Fidesz, Liberal Democracy and the Fundamental Law in Hungary." *Zeitschrift Für Politikwissenschaft* 32 (3): 655–682.
- Goodwin, Matthew. 2023. *Values, Voice and Virtue: The New British Politics*. Random House.
- Gray, John. 2002. *Two Faces of Liberalism*. The New Press.
- Gray, John. 2014. *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*. Routledge.
- Gray, John. 2018. "Hyper-Liberalism: John Gray on a New Cult at Odds with the Progressives of the Past." *TLS, the Times Literary Supplement*, March 27. <https://www.the-tls.com/politics-society/politics/problem-hyper-liberalism-essay-john-gray>.
- Gray, John. 2024. *The New Leviathans: Thoughts after Liberalism*. Vol. 260. Penguin Books.
- Grisez, Germain. 1983-1997. *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Vols. 1-3*. Franciscan Press.
- Grove, John G. 2021. "A Maxim for Power-Skeptical Conservatism – John G. Grove." *Law & Liberty*, November 23. <https://lawliberty.org/a-maxim-for-power-skeptical-conservatism/>.
- Guénon, René. 2002 [1927]. *The Crisis of the Modern World*. Indica Books.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage.
- Halla, Martin, Mario Lackner, and Johann Scharler. 2013. "Does the Welfare State Destroy the Family? Evidence from OECD Member Countries." In *Social Science Research Network*. February 23. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2223117.
- Harrington, Mary. 2024. *Feminism against Progress*. Regnery Publishing.
- Hazony, Yoram. 2018. *The Virtue of Nationalism*. Hachette UK.
- Hazony, Yoram. 2019a. "Conservative Rationalism Has Failed." *The American Mind*, June 24. <https://americanmind.org/salvo/conservative-rationalism-has-failed/>.
- Hazony, Yoram. 2019b. "Conservative Rationalism Has Failed, Part II." *The American Mind*, July 1. <https://americanmind.org/salvo/conservative-rationalism-has-failed-2/>.

- Hazony, Yoram. 2020. "The Challenge of Marxism." Quillette, August 16.
<https://quillette.com/2020/08/16/the-challenge-of-marxism/>.
- Hazony, Yoram. 2021. "Yoram Hazony's Conservative Thoughts on Marriage." *The Hungarian Conservative*, November 19.
<https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/hazonys-conservative-thoughts-on-marriage/>.
- Hazony, Yoram. 2022. *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. Simon and Schuster.
- Hazony, Yoram, Josh Hammer, and Timon Cline. 2025. "Everson Must Fall." *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 48 (1).
https://journals.law.harvard.edu/jlpp/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2025/06/Hammer-FINAL_TC-JH-YRH-edits.pdf.
- Henrich, Joseph. 2023. *The Weirdest People in the World*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Herberg, Will. 2012 [1955]. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Hertzke, Allen D. 1998. "The Theory of Moral Ecology." *The Review of Politics* 60 (4): 629–660.
- (Higgs v. Farmor's School) (Court of Appeal (Civil Division) December 2, 2025).
<https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/higgs-v-farmors-school/>.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1991. *Rhetoric of Reaction*. Harvard University Press.
- Holmes, Stephen. 1996. *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*. Harvard University Press.
- Holm, Minda. 2025. *A Postliberal Global Order? Challenge(r)s to the Liberal West*. No. 1. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.
https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/29628/file/NUPI_Report_1_2025_Holm.pdf.
- Howes, Thomas. 2025. "S2 E5: Why Postliberalism Failed - Against Deneen." Youtube, August 20. 2346 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8-XDjAdsNw>.
- Hugger, Dan. 2023. "National Conservatism One Year Later." Acton Institute, The Acton Institute, April 10.
<https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-33-number-2/national-conservatism-one-year-later>.
- Hungarian Central Statistical Office. 2024. "22.1.1.19. Main Indicators of Divorces." Hungarian Central Statistical Office. https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/en/nep0019.html.
- Hungary About. 2019. "PM Orbán meets Patrick J. Deneen to discuss importance of family and God." About Hungary, November 15.
<https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-meets-patrick-j-deneen-to-discuss-importance-of-family-and-god>.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America*. Basic Books.
- Intercollegiate Studies Institute. 2023. "Regime Change and the Future of Liberalism | Patrick Deneen, JD Vance, Kevin Roberts & Christine Emba." Youtube, June 8. 6597 sec.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZbsiKEhy-8&t=2943s>.

Jaffa, Harry. 1984. "The Legacy of Leo Strauss." Claremont Review of Books.
<https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/the-legacy-of-leo-strauss/>.

Jaffa, Harry. 1987. "Equality, Liberty, Wisdom, Morality, and Consent in the Idea of Political Freedom." *Interpretation* 15 (1): 3–28.

Jaffa, Harry. 2018a. *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War (with New Foreword)*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jaffa, Harry. 2018b. "Humanizing Certitudes and Impoverishing Doubts: A Critique of the Closing of the American Mind by Allan Bloom." In *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics*, edited by Edward Erler and Ken Masugi. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jex, Chloe, and Janicka T. Burgess. 2021. "Cinderella Effect, the." In *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*. Springer International Publishing.

Jones, Andrew Willard. 2017. *Before Church and State*. Emmaus Academic.

Kahan, Alan S. 2023. *Freedom from Fear*. Princeton University Press.

Kallmer, Brent. 2017. "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism." *Journal of Democracy*, July 12. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-pipe-dream-of-undemocratic-liberalism/>.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2021. "Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship." Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, March 1.
<https://www.cspicenter.com/p/academic-freedom-in-crisis-punishment>.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2024a. *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*. Swift Press.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2024b. "The Woke Emotional Regime." Eric Kaufmann, June 17.
<https://erickaufmann.substack.com/p/the-woke-emotional-regime>.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2024c. "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism." In *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of Conservatism*, edited by Phillip Blond and Daniel Pitt. Ludovika University Press.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2024d. "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism." In *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of Conservatism*, edited by Daniel Pitt and Phillip Blond. Ludovika Press.

Kaufmann, Eric. 2025. "The Post-Progressive Condition: Meta-Critical Theory and the Rebalancing of Knowledge." *Theory and Society* 54 (1): 139–159.

Kearney, M. S. 2023. *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*. Swift Press.

Keating, James F. 2023. "Catholic Postliberalism in the Ruins of 'the Catholic Moment.'" *Nova et Vetera* 21 (3): 991–1017.

Kelly, Paul. 2024. "The Post-Liberal Movement." In *Research Handbook on Liberalism*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Kelly, Paul. 2025a. *Against Post-Liberalism*. Polity Press.
- Kelly, Paul. 2025b. *Against Postliberalism: Why “Family, Faith and Flag” Is a Dead End for the Left*. Polity Press.
- Klein, Ezra, and Patrick Deneen. 2022. *What Does the “Post-Liberal Right” Actually Want?* The Ezra Klein Show, May 13.
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/what-does-the-post-liberal-right-actually-want/id1548604447?i=1000561003813>.
- Koppelman, Andrew. 2020. *Gay Rights vs. Religious Liberty?: The Unnecessary Conflict*. Oxford University Press.
- Koppelman, Andrew. 2022. “‘It Is Tash Whom He Serves’: Deneen and Vermeule on Liberalism.” *The Notre Dame Law Review* 98 (4): 1525–1558.
- Kramer, Matthew H. 2017. *Liberalism with Excellence*. Oxford University Press.
- Kristol, Conversations With Bill. 2015. “Harvey Mansfield on Leo Strauss and the Straussians.” Youtube, May 10. 5799 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-gH7Waedtk>.
- Kristol, Irving. 1995. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Simon and Schuster.
- Kruger, Danny. 2024. *Covenant: The New Politics of Home, Neighbourhood, and Nation*. Swift Press.
- Kukathas, Chandran. 2007. *The Liberal Archipelago*. Oxford Political Theory. Oxford University Press.
- Kupfer, Theodore. 2022. “The Neoconservative Shadow.” *City Journal*, November 23.
<https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-neoconservative-shadow>.
- Laborde, Cécile. 2013. “Political Liberalism and Religion: On Separation and Establishment.” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (1): 67–86.
- Laborde, Cécile. 2017. *Liberalism’s Religion*. Harvard University Press.
- Laborde, Cécile. 2020. “Can Religious Establishment Be Liberal Enough?” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33 (2): 215–223.
- Laborde, Cécile, and Sune Lægaard. 2019. “Liberal Nationalism and Symbolic Religious Establishment.” In *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*. Oxford University Press.
- Lægaard, Sune. 2017. “What’s the Problem with Symbolic Religious Establishment? The Alienation and Symbolic Equality Accounts.” In *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Larkin, Philip. 1974. *High Windows*. Faber & Faber.
- Lasch, Christopher. 1991. “The Fragility of Liberalism.” *Salmagundi (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.)*, no. 92: 5–18.
- Lasch, Christopher. 1995. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. W. W. Norton.

& Company.

- Laycock, Douglas. 2011. "Sex, Atheism, and the Free Exercise of Religion." *University of Detroit Mercy Law Review* 88.
https://www.ali.org/media/filer_public/5b/9f/5b9f7ec1-16b5-46dd-8040-1ed1f16a0098/sex_a_theism_and_the_free_exercise_of_religion.pdf.
- Lee, P., and R. P. George. 1997. "What Sex Can Be: Self-Alienation, Illusion, or One-Flesh Union." *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 42 (1): 135–157.
- "Lee (Respondent) v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and Others (Appellants) (Northern Ireland)." 2024. July 16. <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2017-0020>.
- Lefebvre, Alexandre. 2024. *Liberalism as a Way of Life*. Princeton University Press.
- Leland, R. J. 2019. "Civic Friendship, Public Reason." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 47 (1): 72–103.
- Lind, Michael. 2021. "The Pluralist Alternative To Neoliberalism." *American Affairs Journal*, December 20.
https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/12/the-pluralist-alternative-to-neoliberalism/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Linnamäki, Katinka. 2022. "Not in Front of the Child: Illiberal Familism and the Hungarian anti-LGBTQ+ 'Child Protective Law.'" *Politics and Governance* 10 (4): 16–25.
- Littlejohn, Bradford. 2017. *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty*. Emory University Studies in Law and Religion. William B Eerdmans Publishing.
- Lok, Wan Yee. 2021. "Why Do Some Straight Men Have Sex with Other Men?" *UBC News*, March 23.
<https://news.ubc.ca/2021/03/why-do-some-straight-men-have-sex-with-other-men/>.
- Loo, Jaden. 2024. "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2022." Bowling Green State University. <https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/FP-24-11.html>.
- Lowery, Mark. 1998. "The Dialogue between Catholic 'Neoconservatives' and Catholic 'Cultural Radicals': Toward a New Horizon." *Catholic Social Science Review* 3: 41–61.
- Lubac, Henri de. 1989a. "Political Augustinianism?" In *Theological Fragments*. Ignatius Press.
- Lubac, Henri de. 1989b. "The Authority of the Church in Temporal Matters." In *Theological Fragments*. Ignatius Press.
- Lukács, Márton. 2025. "The Christian Idea of Rights Always Comes with Duties — An Interview with Chad Pecknold." *Hungarian Conservative*, August 3.
<https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/chad-pecknold-mcc-feszt-2025/>.
- Lukianoff, Greg, and Rikki Schlott. 2023. *The Canceling of the American Mind: How Cancel Culture Undermines Trust, Destroys Institutions, and Threatens Us All*. Random House.
- Macedo, Stephen. 1992. "CHARTING LIBERAL VIRTUES." *Nomos* 34: 204–232.

- Macedo, Stephen. 1995. "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?" *Ethics* 105 (3): 468–496.
- Macedo, Stephen. 2015. *Just Married*. Princeton University Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2022 [1981]. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* University of Notre Dame Press.
- Maistre, Joseph de. 2012 [1796]. *Considerations on France*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Richard A. Lebrun. Cambridge University Press.
- Marriage Foundation. 2022. "Married Poor More Stable than Unmarried Rich." Marriage Foundation, April 30.
<https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/research/married-poor-more-stable-than-unmarried-rich/#~:text=Harry%20Benson%2C%20Marriage%20Foundation's%20Research,15%20year%20children%20are%20married.%E2%80%9D>.
- Masri, Hana. 2022. "Homonationalism's Viral Travels." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford University Press, October 19.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1315>.
- Masugi, Ken. 2015. "Harry V. Jaffa's Call for Liberation." *First Things*, March 2.
<https://firstthings.com/harry-v-jaffas-call-for-liberation/>.
- Maurras, Charles. 1970 [1922]. "Romanticism and Revolution." In *The French Right (from de Maistre to Maurras)*, edited by J. S. McClelland. Harper & Row.
- McAdams, A. James, and Samuel Piccolo, eds. 2024. *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy*. Routledge.
- McArdle, Megan. 2019. "Why Conservatives Feel Threatened by the Illiberal Left." *The Washington Post*, September 10.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-conservatives-feel-threatened-by-the-illibera-l-left/2019/09/10/8b41edc6-d40a-11e9-86ac-0f250cc91758_story.html.
- McCabe, David. 2014. *Modus Vivendi Liberalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- McLeod, Hugh. 2007. *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*. OUP Oxford.
- McTernan, Emily. 2015. "Should Fertility Treatment Be State Funded?: Should Fertility Treatment Be State Funded?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32 (3): 227–240.
- McWhorter, John. 2021. *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*. Swift Press.
- Metz, Tamara. 2010. *Untying the Knot*. Princeton University Press.
- Meyer, Frank S. 1962. *In Defense of Freedom*. Liberty Fund.
- Milbank, John. 2022. "On 'Left Integralism': Catholic Social Teaching as a Political Theology." *Teologia Polityczna*.
<https://teologiapolityczna.pl/john-milbank-lewicowy-integralizm-katolicka-nauka-spoleczna-j>

ako-teologia-polityczna-1.

- Milbank, John, and Adrian Pabst. 2016. *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Milbank, Sebastian. 2023. "The Truth about Cancel Culture." *The Critic*, December 1. <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-truth-about-cancel-culture/>.
- Miller, David. 2021. "What's Wrong with Religious Establishment?" *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 15 (1): 75–89.
- Mill, John Stuart. 2012 [1859]. *On Liberty*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mirza, Shazia. 2021. "Cancel Culture Is a Myth: Nothing Can Shut Us Comedians Up." *The Guardian*, December 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/23/cancel-culture-comedians>.
- Mitchell, Joshua. 2022. *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time*. Encounter Books.
- MKI. 2023. "Philip PILKINGTON." Magyar Külügyi Intézet, October 31. <https://hiia.hu/en/philip-pilkington/>.
- Modood, Tariq. 2010. "Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion." *The Political Quarterly* 81 (1): 4–14.
- Morland, Paul, and Philip Pilkington. 2023. "Migration, Stagnation, or Procreation: Quantifying the Demographic Trilemma." ARC Research, November 3. <https://www.arc-research.org/research-papers/the-demographic-trilemma>.
- Moschella, Melissa. 2023. "Natural Law, Parental Rights, and the Defense of 'Liberal' Limits on Government: An Analysis of the Mortara Case and Its Contemporary Parallels." *Notre Dame Law Review* 98 (4): 1559.
- Moschella, Melissa. 2025. *Ethics, Politics, and Natural Law: Principles for Human Flourishing*. Catholic Ideas for a Secular World. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mounk, Yascha. 2023. "Sohrab Ahmari on Post-Liberalism." Persuasion, August 12. https://www.persuasion.community/p/ahmari?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Moyn, Samuel. 2015. *Christian Human Rights*. Intellectual History of the Modern Age. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Moyn, Samuel. 2018. "Neoliberalism, Not Liberalism, Has Failed." *Commonweal Magazine*, December 3. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/neoliberalism-not-liberalism-has-failed>.
- Moyn, Samuel. 2024. *Liberalism Against Itself*. Yale University Press.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. "Populism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, edited by Michael Freeden and Marc Stears. Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, Mark C. 2006. *Natural Law in Jurisprudence and Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Nadeem, Reem. 2022. "1. How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades." Pew Research Center, September 13.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1987. *Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy*. Princeton University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 2002. "Rawls and Liberalism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge University Press.
- National Conservatism. 2022. "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles." June 16.
<https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>.
- National Conservatism. 2024. "Victor Orbán Interview with Yoram Hazony | We Need Change In Brussels | NatCon Brussels 2." Youtube, April 19. 2981 sec.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Orlw-MiWM6U>.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. 2003. "Does Amount of Time Spent in Child Care Predict Socioemotional Adjustment during the Transition to Kindergarten?" *Child Development* 74 (4): 976–1005.
- Nelson, Sofia. 2024. "Sofia Nelson: I Can't Explain My Former Friend JD Vance's Heel Turn. But I Know It's Dangerous." MSNBC, September 14.
<https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/sofia-nelson-jd-vance-trump-maga-post-liberal-right-rcna171095>.
- Neuhaus, Richard J., and Peter L. Berger. 1997. "To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy." In *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume To The Present*, edited by Jerry Z. Muller. Princeton University Press.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1987. *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*. HarperCollins.
- New Zealand History. 2006. "Homosexual Law Reform."
<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/homosexual-law-reform/homosexual-law-reform>.
- Nicholas, Kyle. 2015. "The Progress and Future of Radical Orthodoxy." Telos Press, October 22.
https://www.telospress.com/the-progress-and-future-of-radical-orthodoxy/?srsltid=AfmBOorV9lqlyLNpuBqeei_fkSOYIZNaI9iw_kRkZ1ewtgPcA7ibgiy.
- Nisbet, Robert. 1953. *The Quest for Community*. Oxford University Press.
- Novak, Michael. 1990. "Thomas Aquinas, the First Whig: What Our Liberties Owe to a Neapolitan Mendicant." *Crisis Magazine*, October 1.
<https://crisismagazine.com/vault/thomas-aquinas-the-first-whig-what-our-liberties-owe-to-a-neapolitan-mendicant>.
- Novak, Michael. 1998. "Liberal Ideology, an Eternal No; Liberal Institutions, A Temporal Yes? And Further Questions." *The Review of Politics* 60 (4): 765–774.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2008. *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality*. Hachette UK.

- Oakes, Edward T. 2011a. "Coercive Liberalism." *First Things*, September 19.
<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2011/09/coercive-liberalism>.
- Oakes, Edward T. 2011b. "Coercive Liberalism." *First Things*, September 19.
- OECD Family Database. 2022. "Share of Births Outside of Marriage." OECD.
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/family-database/sf_2_4_share_births_outside_marriage.pdf.
- Orbán, Viktor. 2014. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp." Hungarian Government.
<https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>.
- Pabst, Adrian. 2015. "Blue Labour -- Principles, Policy Ideas and Prospects." In *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, edited by Adrian Pabst and Ian Geary. I. B. Tauris.
- Pabst, Adrian. 2023. "Three Faces of Postliberalism." In *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, edited by Marlene Laruelle. Oxford University Press.
- Pabst, Adrian, and John Milbank. 2024. "What Is Postliberalism Now?" *New Statesman*, December 13. <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2024/12/what-is-postliberalism-now>.
- Pappin, Gladden. 2021a. "Setting a Goal for Family Support." *American Compass*, February 24.
<https://americancompass.org/setting-a-goal-for-family-support/>.
- Pappin, Gladden. 2021b. "The Family Policy Imperative." *Public Discourse*, April 18.
<https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/04/75329/>.
- Pappin, Gladden. 2023. "Integralism - Why Is It Relevant? - Lecture by Gladden Pappin." Youtube, April 20. 3185 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=webegGQ22RA>.
- Pappin, Gladden, and Maria Molla. 2019. "Affirming the American Family." *American Affairs Journal*, August 20.
<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2019/08/affirming-the-american-family/>.
- Patterson, James. 2024. "What Is Postliberalism?" *The Dispatch*, August 26.
<https://thedispatch.com/article/what-is-postliberalism/>.
- Patterson, James, and Thomas Howes. 2024a. "Why Postliberalism Failed." X (formerly Twitter).
<https://x.com/whypostlibfail?lang=en>.
- Patterson, James, and Thomas Howes. 2024b. "Why Postliberalism Failed Ep. 1 - Introductions and Overview." Youtube, July 8. 3815 sec.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG7uCZXHdGg>.
- Patterson, James M. 2022. "An Awkward Alliance: Neo-Integralism and National Conservatism." Acton Institute, The Acton Institute, April 11.
<https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-35-number-1-2/awkward-alliance-neo-integralism-and-national-conservatism>.
- Paul, Darel. 2018. *From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same-Sex*

Marriage. Baylor University Press.

Paul, Darel. 2023. "The Liturgy of Pride." *Postliberal Order*, July 11.
<https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/the-liturgy-of-pride>.

Paul VI. 1965. "Dignitatis Humanae." The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_1965_1207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

Pecknold, Chad. 2022a. "Day 2 | Chad Pecknold | True and False Integralism: On the Religious Nature of the City." *New Polity*, June 6. 4145 sec.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CE0U5gVZSg>.

Pecknold, Chad. 2022b. "The Religious Nature of the City." *Postliberal Order*, January 24.
https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/the-religious-nature-of-the-city?utm_source=publication-search.

Pennanen, Joonas. 2015. "10. Political Liberalism and the Preventive Containment of Unreasonable Beliefs and Behavior." *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25 (December). <https://doi.org/10.20919/sspt.25.2015.34>.

Pennington, Jon C. 2003. "It's Not a Revolution but It Sure Looks like One: A Statistical Accounting of the Post-Sixties Sexual Revolution." *Radical Statistics* 83.
<https://www.radstats.org.uk/no083/Pennington83.pdf>.

Perry, Louise. 2022. *The Case against the Sexual Revolution*. Polity Press.

Perry, Louise. 2023. "We Are Repaganizing." *First Things*, October 1.
<https://firstthings.com/we-are-repaganizing/>.

Pilkington, Philip. 2025. *The Collapse of Global Liberalism: And the Emergence of the Post Liberal World Order*. Polity Press.

Pinkoski, Nathan. 2024. "Actually Existing Postliberalism." *First Things*, October 22.
<https://firstthings.com/actually-existing-postliberalism/>.

Pink, Thomas. 2024a. "The Church as Potestas for Faith." *The Josias*.
<https://thejosias.com/2024/01/12/the-church-as-potestas-for-faith/>.

Pink, Thomas. 2024b. "The Church as Potestas for Faith." *The Josias*, January 12.
<https://thejosias.com/2024/01/12/the-church-as-potestas-for-faith/>.

Pink, Thomas. 2024c. "The Church as Potestas for Faith." *The Josias*, January 12.
<https://thejosias.com/2024/01/12/the-church-as-potestas-for-faith>.

Pogány, István. 2013. "The Crisis of Democracy in East Central Europe: The 'New Constitutionalism' in Hungary." *European Public Law* 19 (2).
<https://doi.org/10.54648/euro2013021>.

Postmodernity, Cracks in. 2022. "Fight For Your Right (to Be Miserable): Postliberal Potpourri Pt. 1." Youtube, February 4. 2910 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpxaDfHo48w>.

Quast-Neulinger, Michaela. 2021. "Saving Nation, Faith and Family. Yoram Hazony's National

Conservatism and Its Theo-Political Mission. *Religions* 12: 1091." *Nonviolence and Religion*, 135.

Quong, Jonathan. 2011. *Liberalism Without Perfection*. Oxford University Press.

Radzik, Linda. 2020. *The Ethics of Social Punishment*. Cambridge University Press.

Ratcliffe, Susan, ed. 2011. *Oxford Treasury of Sayings and Quotations*. 4th ed. Oxford University Press.

Rauch, Jonathan. 2025. *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain With Democracy*. Yale University Press.

Rawls, John. 1993. *The Law of Peoples*. Harvard University Press.

Rawls, John. 1997. "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." *The University of Chicago Law Review*. *University of Chicago. Law School* 64 (3): 765–807.

Rawls, John. 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard University Press.

Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition*. Columbia University Press.

Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Clarendon Press.

Raz, Joseph. 1987. "Autonomy, Toleration, and the Harm Principle." In *Issues in Contemporary Legal Philosophy: The Influence of H.L.A. Hart*, edited by Ruth Gavison. Oxford University Press.

Rector, Robert. 2025. *Understanding Marriage Penalties in Welfare and Their Impact on Society*. Heritage Foundation.
<https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/understanding-marriage-penalties-welfare-and-their-impact-society>.

Reno, R. R. 2018. "Liberal Integralism." *First Things*, March 14.
<https://firstthings.com/liberal-integralism/>.

Reno, R. R. 2019. *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*. Simon and Schuster.

Rieff, Philip. 2006. *Sacred order/Social Order V. 1; My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*. Kenneth S. Piver. Sacred Order/Social Order. University of Virginia Press.

Rivers, Julian. 2020. "Is Religious Freedom under Threat from British Equality Laws?" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33 (2): 179–193.

Rosenblatt, Helena. 2021. *The Lost History of Liberalism*. Princeton University Press.

Roussinos, Aris. 2019. "America's Illiberal Pretenders and Europe's Post-Liberal States." *Tablet Magazine*, June 7.
<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/americas-illiberal-pretenders-and-europe-s-post-liberal-states>.

- Rozado, David. 2023. "The Great Awakening as a Global Phenomenon." In *arXiv.org; Ithaca*. Preprint, Cornell University Library, arXiv.org, April 4. <http://arxiv.org/abs/2304.01596>.
- Rozado, David, Musa Al-Gharbi, and Jamin Halberstadt. 2023. "Prevalence of Prejudice-Denoting Words in News Media Discourse: A Chronological Analysis." *Social Science Computer Review* 41 (1): 99–122.
- Rushdoony, R. J. 1973. *Institutes of Biblical Law*. P & R Publishing Co (Presbyterian & Reformed).
- Russell, Jesse. 2021. "'Whig Thomism' and the Making of the Catholic Neoconservative Movement." *Politics and Religion* 14 (2): 294–315.
- Saad, Lydia. 2019. "10 Major Social Changes in the 50 Years Since Woodstock." *Gallup.com*, August 16. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/265490/major-social-changes-years-woodstock.aspx>.
- Salmon, Caspar. 2019. *The Troubling Return of British Homophobia*. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/40680/the-troubling-return-of-british-homophobia>.
- Scheffer, Joakim. 2025a. "Hungary's Family Policy Is a Blueprint of Normality — An Interview with Balázs Hankó." *The Hungarian Conservative*, April 1. <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/hungary-family-policy-values-danube-institute-balazs-hanko/>.
- Scheffer, Joakim. 2025b. "JD Vance Could Lead the Post-Liberal Elite — An Interview with Patrick Deneen." *The Hungarian Conservative*, August 4. <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/post-liberalism-elite-change-jd-vance-donald-trump-us-europe-patrick-deneen-interview/>.
- Scheffer, Joakim. 2025c. "MCC Feszt Panel Featuring Patrick Deneen, Chad Pecknold Faces Liberal Backlash." *The Hungarian Conservative*, August 4. <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/post-liberalism-classical-liberalism-mcc-feszt-backlash-patrick-deneen-chad-pecknold-gladden-pappin-hungary/>.
- Schiffiano, Vincent G. 2023. "Why We Need a Federal Pornography Ban." *The American Postliberal*, November 6. <https://www.americanpostliberal.com/p/why-we-need-anti-pornography-laws>.
- Schindler, David L. 1996. *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*. T.& T. Clark.
- Schwadel, Philip. 2011. "The Effects of Education on Americans' Religious Practices, Beliefs, and Affiliations." *Review of Religious Research* 53 (2): 161–182.
- Schwartzman, Micah, and Jocelyn Wilson. 2019. "The Unreasonableness of Catholic Integralism." *San Diego Law Review* 56 (4): 1039.
- Scruton, Roger. 2000. *England: An Elegy*. Chatto & Windus.
- Scruton, Roger. 2013. *England and the Need for Nations*. June 24. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1636553/england-and-the-need-for-nations/2326886/>.

- Scruton, Roger. 2017. *Where We Are: The State of Britain Now*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Scruton, Roger. 2018. *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*. St. Martin's Publishing Group.
- Seglow, Jonathan. 2017. "What's Wrong with Establishment?" *Ethnicities* 17 (2): 189–204.
- Sherman, Carter. 2025. "The Rise of Pronatalism: Why Musk, Vance and the Right Want Women to Have More Babies." *The Guardian*, March 11.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/11/what-is-pronatalism-right-wing-republican>.
- Shields, Jon A. 2009. *The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right*. Princeton University Press.
- Shklar, Judith. 1989. "The Liberalism of Fear." In *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, edited by Nancy L. Rosenblum. Harvard University Press.
- Simpson, Thomas, and Eric Kaufmann. 2019. *Academic Freedom in the UK*. Policy Exchange.
<https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk/>.
- Sleat, Matt. 2025. *Post-Liberalism*. Polity Press.
- Smith, Steven D. 2021. *Pagans and Christians in the City*. Emory University Studies in Law and Religion. William B Eerdmans Publishing.
- Sokol, Sam. 2025. "Does the 2025 State Budget Encourage Haredim to Evade IDF Service?" *Times of Israel*, April 8.
- Solum, Lawrence B. 2011. "What Is Originalism? The Evolution of Contemporary Originalist Theory." *Georgetown University Law Center*, ahead of print.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1825543>.
- Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2002. "Beyond Church and Sect: Dynamics and Stability in Religious Economics." In *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, edited by Ted G. Jelen. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Stolz, Jörg, Nan Dirk de Graaf, Conrad Hackett, and Jean-Philippe Antonietti. 2025. "The Three Stages of Religious Decline around the World." *Nature Communications* 16 (1): 7202.
- Stone, Lyman. 2020. "Pro-Natal Policies Work, But They Come With a Hefty Price Tag." Institute for Family Studies.
<https://ifstudies.org/blog/pro-natal-policies-work-but-they-come-with-a-hefty-price-tag>.
- Strauss, Leo. 1957. "What Is Political Philosophy?" *The Journal of Politics* 19: 343–368.
- Strauss, Leo. 1975. "Three Waves of Modernity." In *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, edited by Hilail Gildin. Pegasus Publications.
- Strauss, Leo. 1995. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2020. "Has Liberalism Ruined Everything?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 19 (2): 175–187.

- Sunstein, Cass R. 2025. *On Liberalism*. The MIT Press.
- Szakacs, Gergely, and Krisztina Fenyo. 2023. "Hungary's Booming Wedding Market Doused by Soaring Inflation." *Reuters*.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-booming-wedding-market-doused-by-soaring-inflation-2023-03-27/#:~:text=The%20measures%20have%20fuelled%20a,figures%2C%20the%20latest%20comparable%20statistics.>
- Tahzib, Collis. 2018. "Survey Article: Pluralist Neutrality." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (4): 508–532.
- Tahzib, Collis. 2022. *A Perfectionist Theory of Justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Tasioulas, John. 2024. "'law as the Art of Justice': On Vermeule's *common Good Constitutionalism*." *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 69 (1): 61–76.
- Taylor, Charles. 1992. *Sources of the Self*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Paul, Richard Fry, Gabriel Velasco, and Daniel Dockterman. 2010. "The Reversal of the College Marriage Gap." Pew Research Centre.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/11/767-college-marriage-gap.pdf>.
- Than, Krisztina. 2019. "Hungary Government Scheme Sparks Marriage Boom. Will Babies Follow?" *Reuters*, November 26.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-marriages/hungary-government-scheme-sparks-marriage-boom-will-babies-follow-idUSKBN1Y01XG/>.
- Timothy, Nick. 2021. *Remaking One Nation*. Polity Press.
- Tollefsen, Christopher. 2013. "Pure Perfectionism and the Limits of Paternalism." In *Reason, Morality, and Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Tomasi, John. 2002. "Civic Education and Ethical Subservience: From Mozart to Santa Fe and beyond." *Nomos* 43: 193–220.
- Tomasi, John. 2021. *Liberalism Beyond Justice*. Princeton University Press.
- Toop, Alison. 2019. "Is Marriage Incompatible with Political Liberalism?" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16 (3): 302–326.
- Tsai, Brian. 2024. "Marriages in the U.S. in 2022 Returned to Pre-Pandemic Levels."
<https://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs/2024/03/15/7567/>.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2014. *Liberal Politics and Public Faith: Beyond Separation*. Routledge.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2017. *Religious Establishment and Public Justification*. Oxford University Press.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2023a. *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2023b. "Is Wokism a Religion?" *The Liberal Tortoise*, August 30.
<https://liberaltortoise.kevinvallier.com/p/is-wokism-a-religion.>

- Vallier, Kevin. 2023c. "Video Lecture on All the Kingdoms of the World." The Liberal Tortoise, November 1. <https://liberaltortoise.kevinvallier.com/p/video-lecture-on-all-the-kingdoms>.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2024a. "The Main Argument for Postliberalism." The Liberal Tortoise, January 5. <https://liberaltortoise.kevinvallier.com/p/the-main-argument-for-postliberalism>.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2024b. "The Main Argument for Postliberalism." The Liberal Tortoise, January 5. <https://liberaltortoise.kevinvallier.com/p/the-main-argument-for-postliberalism>.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2025a. "The Fusionist Manifesto." *Religion and Liberty* 35 (3). <https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-35-number-3/fusionist-manifesto>.
- Vallier, Kevin. 2025b. "The Liberty-Virtue Dance." Religion & Liberty Online, January 7. <https://rlo.acton.org/archives/126385-the-liberty-virtue-dance.html>.
- Varacalli, Thomas F. X. 2023. "The Promise and Danger of National Conservatism." *Catholic Social Science Review* 28 (July): 43–47.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2014. *The Constitution of Risk*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2017a. "A Christian Strategy." First Things, November 1. <https://firstthings.com/a-christian-strategy/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2017b. "Liturgy of Liberalism." First Things, January 1. <https://firstthings.com/liturgy-of-liberalism/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2017c. "Liturgy of Liberalism." *First Things*, January 17. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/01/liturgy-of-liberalism>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2018a. "'According to Truth.'" The Josias. <https://thejosias.com/2018/07/19/according-to-truth/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2018b. "Integration from Within." American Affairs Journal, February 20. <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/integration-from-within/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2019. "All Human Conflict Is Ultimately Theological." Church Life Journal. <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/all-human-conflict-is-ultimately-theological/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2020. "Beyond Originalism." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2022a. "Against Right Liberalism." *Compact*. <https://www.compactmag.com/article/against-right-liberalism/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2022b. *Common Good Constitutionalism*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2022c. "'Who Decides?'" Postliberal Order, January 11. <https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/who-decides>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2023a. "Liberalism Consumes Itself at Stanford Law." Postliberal Order. <https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/liberalism-consumes-itself-at-stanford>.

- Vermeule, Adrian. 2023b. "Liberalism Consumes Itself at Stanford Law." *Postliberal Order*, March 17.
https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/liberalism-consumes-itself-at-stanford?publication_id=557283&%3BisFreemail=false.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2023c. "Liberalism's Good and Faithful Servants." *Compact*, February 28.
<https://www.compactmag.com/article/liberalism-s-good-and-faithful-servants/>.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2024. "Why I Lost Interest in the Liberalism Debate." *The New Digest*, February 3. <https://thenewdigest.substack.com/p/why-i-lost-interest-in-the-liberalism>.
- Veuillot, Louis. 2023 [1874]. *The Liberal Illusion*. Ignatius Kelly. Hassell Street Press.
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. 2022. "Have You Experienced a Change or Suppression Practice?" Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.
<https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/have-you-experienced-a-change-or-suppression-practice/>.
- Voorhes, Julie, and Marc Lendler. 2018. "Student Opinion on Campus Speech Rights: A Longitudinal Study." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3239686>.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 2004. *God, Locke, and Equality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wall, Steven. 2023. *Enforcing Morality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 2008 [1983]. *Spheres of Justice*. Basic Books.
- Walzer, Michael. 2024. "Notes on a Dangerous Mistake." *Liberties*, January 2.
<https://libertiesjournal.com/articles/notes-on-a-dangerous-mistake/>.
- Ward, Ian. 2024. "Is There Something More Radical than MAGA? J.D. Vance Is Dreaming It. - POLITICO." *Politico*, March 15.
<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/03/15/mr-maga-goes-to-washington-00147054>.
- Watson, Lori, and Christie Hartley. 2018. *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason: A Feminist Political Liberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Weaver, Richard M. 2013 [1948]. *Ideas Have Consequences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2015. "Is Civil Marriage Illiberal?" In *After Marriage: Rethinking Marital Relationships*, edited by Elizabeth Brake. Oxford University Press.
- Weigel, George. 1988. "Is America Bourgeois? A Response to David Schindler." *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15: 77–91.
- Weinreb, Alex, and Nachum Blass. 2020. "Trends in Religiosity Among the Jewish Population in Israel." Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, מרכז טאוב - Taub Center, December 1.
<https://www.taubcenter.org.il/en/research/trends-in-religiosity-among-the-jewish-population-in-israel/>.

- Weithman, Paul. 2014. "Educating in Autonomy and Tradition." *Social Philosophy & Policy* 31 (1): 229–256.
- Wilcox, Brad. 2024. *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization*. HarperCollins.
- Will Chamberlain, Christopher DeMuth, Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Daniel McCarthy, Joshua Mitchell, N.S. Lyons, John O'Sullivan, and R.R. Reno. 2022. "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles." National Conservatism, June 16.
<https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>.
- Williams, Jacob. 2024a. "Banning 'Conversion Therapy' Is a Threat to Religious Freedom." Spiked, February 21.
<https://www.spiked-online.com/2024/02/21/banning-conversion-therapy-is-a-threat-to-religious-freedom/>.
- Williams, Jacob. 2024b. "How Banning 'Conversion Therapy' Threatens Our Freedoms." Spiked, July 19.
<https://www.spiked-online.com/2024/07/19/how-banning-conversion-therapy-threatens-our-freedoms/>.
- Williams, Jacob. 2024c. "The Rise of 'Woke': Is Kaufmann's Account the Best?" *Academic Questions* 37 (4): 82–89.
- Williams, Jacob. 2025a. "After Liberalism, After Fascism? A Look at the Postliberal Movement." *St. Antony's International Review* 20 (1).
- Williams, Jacob. 2025b. "What Muslims Should Know about Intellectual Conservatism." Renovatio | The Journal of Zaytuna College.
<https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/muslims-islam-conservatism-liberalism>.
- Williams, Jacob, and João Pinheiro da Silva. 2025. "Postliberalism: A Genealogy." *Telos* 2025 (212): 60–90.
- Wilson, Douglas. 2023. *Mere Christendom*. Canon Press.
- Wilson, Robin Fretwell. 2008. "Matters of Conscience: Lessons for Same-Sex Marriage from the Healthcare Context." In *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*, edited by Douglas Laycock, Anthony R. Picarello Jr, and Robin Fretwell Wilson. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wolfe, Stephen. 2022. *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Canon Press.
- Woods, John. 2021. "PM Orbán Was Right? Marriage Boom in Hungary." *Daily News Hungary*, September 29.
<https://dailynewshungary.com/pm-orban-was-right-marriage-boom-in-hungary/>.
- Wright, Chris. 2023. "Postliberalism: A Dangerous 'New' Conservatism." The Philosophical Salon, October 16.
<https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/postliberalism-a-dangerous-new-conservatism/>.
- Xiii, Leo. 2020 [1892]. "Au Milieu Des Sollicitudes." Vatican.
https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_16021892_a

-milieu-des-sollicitudes.html.

Yenor, Scott. 2021. *The Recovery of Family Life: Exposing the Limits of Modern Ideologies*. Baylor University Press.

Zuckert, Michael, and Catherine Zuckert. 2008. *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press.

Zuckert, Michael, and Catherine Zuckert. 2014. *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press.

