

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Political Science Faculty Research and
Scholarship

Political Science

1974

Virtue, Obligation and Politics

Stephen G. Salkever

Bryn Mawr College, ssalkeve@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/polisci_pubs



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Salkever, Stephen G. "Virtue, Obligation and Politics." *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 78-92.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/polisci_pubs/11

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Virtue, Obligation and Politics

STEPHEN G. SALKEVER

Bryn Mawr College

Recently, several students of moral philosophy have pointed out that even our most self-consciously philosophical understanding of morality and ethics is strongly conditioned by the concepts we use in discussing moral and ethical questions. It has been suggested by Anscombe,¹ Cunningham,² Frankena,³ and Hampshire,⁴ that the conclusions we draw concerning the answers to ethical questions depend heavily upon the concepts and categories we use in posing and interpreting those questions. One example of this kind of difference between various conceptions of morality is developed in Frankena's discussion of the distinction between an ethics of virtue and an ethics of obligation:⁵ our answer to the basic ethical question, What ought I do? will change as our interpretation of that question changes from What is the virtuous thing to do? to What am I obligated to do? Our subsequent ethical theory, it is suggested, will depend upon the way in which we interpret the "ought" of the basic question, whether in terms of "virtue" (or "way of life") or in terms of "obligation." If this is so, then one important task of con-

temporary moral philosophy becomes the clarification of significant differences between various characteristic ways of conceptualizing the basic ethical question. This project of clarification can have at least two important results: first, it can help us avoid confusion in the process of comparing various ethical theories; and second, we may be able to develop arguments to suggest that one or another ethical language is best equipped to deal with the broadest possible range of substantive ethical questions.

In this paper I am going to suggest that this particular project of clarification is as important for students of politics and political philosophy as it is for students of ethics and moral philosophy.⁶ In particular, I want to direct attention to two basic ways of interpreting or understanding the meaning of politics as an activity: politics conceived as a problem of moral and intellectual virtue, and politics conceived as a problem of obligation and legitimacy. While these two are surely not the only ways of thinking and speaking about politics, it may be fair to say that, leaving theological conceptions aside, the politics of virtue and the politics of obligation and legitimacy are the two alternative political languages presented to us most clearly by the history of political thought.

Politics and Virtue

Now the conjunction of "politics" and the problem of "moral and intellectual virtue" is not an ordinary or familiar one, especially to twentieth-century students of politics and political philosophy; indeed, one concern of this paper will be to explain why this pairing may appear to us to be not merely odd, but absurd. At any rate, I think it will be easily admitted that when we think about what constitutes the political, about what distinguishes the political relationship from other kinds of human relationships, such as love or war or trade or scholarship, we are not likely to regard the

⁶The distinction between ethics (or morality) and politics is itself the result of a particular way of understanding both ethics and politics. In my terms, the distinction is much more appropriate and important to politics conceived in terms of obligation (for which ethics tends to become the residual class of all nonobligatory "duties"), than to politics conceived in terms of virtue or ways of life.

¹G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," reprinted in *The Is-Ought Question*, ed. William G. Hudson (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 175-195.

²Stanley B. Cunningham, "Does 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest upon a Mistake' Make an Even Greater Mistake?," *Monist*, 54 (January, 1970), 86-99.

³William K. Frankena, "Prichard and the Ethics of Virtue," *Monist*, 54 (January, 1970), 1-17. Both Cunningham and Frankena take as their point of departure H. A. Prichard's paradigm-setting essay, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest upon a Mistake?," reprinted in Prichard, *Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-17.

⁴Stuart Hampshire, "A New Philosophy of the Just Society," *New York Review of Books*, February 24, 1972, pp. 34-39. Hampshire's article is an extended review of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). Both Hampshire and Marshall Cohen (in his review of Rawls's book in *The New York Times Book Review*, July 16, 1972, p. 1) praise Rawls's study; but both, and especially Hampshire, have reservations about the value of Rawls's political theory, reservations which are based on their feeling that Rawls has not sufficiently explored the possibilities of what I will be calling the language of virtue in political philosophy. See Hampshire, p. 38, and Cohen, p. 18.

⁵Frankena argues that "moral philosophy must fully explore the possibility of a satisfactory ethics of virtue as an alternative or supplement to one of obligation . . .," ("Prichard and the Ethics of Virtue," p. 17).

distinction between moral and intellectual virtue as being of critical relevance. Instead, I think it is fair to say that for the central tendencies of modern political philosophy, the basic *political* question is not about virtue of any sort, but rather about the reconciliation of the requirements (needs and desires) of the individual and the requirements of society as a whole. In other words, the modern answer to the question, What is politics? is characteristically dependent upon our answer to the question of political obligation, Why should I obey the law? Politics thus becomes that activity that occurs within the sphere constituted by legitimate authority.⁷ Although it may be excessively simple, I do not think it grossly distorting to say that for modern political thought the fundamental and defining political distinction is not between intellectual (and nonpolitical) and moral (or political) virtue, but between two forms of social control: power (which is nonpolitical) and authority (which is political).⁸ These distinctions are intended only as a description of what I take to be the major tendency in modern political thought. I am not suggesting that there is necessarily any logical incompatibility between politics understood in terms of virtue and politics understood in terms of obligation; rather, the distinction points to a difference in emphasis.⁹

Perhaps the best-known brief statement of this aspect of the modern view concerning the foundations of politics is Rousseau's: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains . . . How did this change happen? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I think I can resolve that question."¹⁰ Rousseau's political philosophy, like most serious political thought

from the seventeenth century down to the present time, takes as its theme the question of why free individuals should obey the law of society, if they were not in fact compelled to do so. If no plausible answer can be given to this question, then civil or legal authority as we know it is merely a mask for power, and politics is nothing more than a disguised or sublimated version of war or incarceration.¹¹ On this view, the problem of political philosophy becomes that of defining the difference between the political relationship and the conditions that obtain on battlefields and in prisons. All of this, on the surface at least, is very remote from the question of moral and intellectual virtue. The preoccupation of that political philosophy which develops around the question of political obligation seems to be with the difference between politics and slavery, rather than the difference between politics and

nebin and Marcel Raymond, eds. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, 1959-), III, 351. Cf. *Social Contract (First Version)*, book I, chapter 3, O.C. III, 289: "Man is born free, and nevertheless he is everywhere in chains" (emphasis added). Speaking of the paradigmatic character of this passage, John Carnes makes the following comment: "This paragraph . . . might be taken as the motto, not only of social contract theory, but of the whole of political theory." "Myths, Bliks, and the Social Contract," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 4 (Summer, 1970), 105-118, at 114.

¹¹ Or, less dramatically, of the marketplace. The view that the disappearance of politics is a necessary consequence of the fundamental premises of modern moral and political philosophy is stated in a plausible manner by R. P. Wolff: "If all men have a continuing obligation to achieve the highest degree of autonomy possible, then there would appear to be no state whose subjects have a moral obligation to obey its commands. Hence, the concept of a *de jure* legitimate state would appear to be vacuous, and philosophical anarchism would seem to be the only reasonable political belief for an enlightened man." *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 19. See also Wolff, "On Violence," *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (October 2, 1969), 601-616. The less than plausible aspect of Wolff's argument is that once he has shown that the political problem can not be solved in terms of the language of obligation and legitimacy, he concludes that the problem is simply insoluble. This conclusion neglects the possibility, that the problem might be solvable in some other terms, or (as I shall try to show) that the problem itself is the *result* of certain prior philosophical presuppositions, and hence is only one possible philosophical conception of politics among several, all of which must be considered before we say that political philosophy as such secretes philosophical anarchism. An interesting discussion of the relationship between descriptive conceptions of politics and normative political rules is provided by Charles Taylor, "Neutrality in Political Science," in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 3rd series, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 25-57.

⁷ Throughout this paper I will refer to "contemporary political philosophy" as if there were one single position or school that could be identified in this way. This is surely an oversimplification, but I think such an identification is plausible, as well as useful for the purposes of my argument. For examples of this position, consider *Concepts in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Richard E. Flathman (New York: Macmillan, 1973); *Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Quinton (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); and David Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1970). There are undeniably some notable nonconforming summary conceptions of the tasks of political philosophy, such as that of George Kateb, *Political Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), p. 3.

⁸ A different and more complex formulation of the distinction between power and authority is presented by Hannah Arendt in *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), pp. 44-45.

⁹ See Below, p. 90. For a similar characterization, see J. Peter Euben, "Walzer's Obligations," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (Summer, 1972), 438-459.

¹⁰ *Social Contract*, book I, chapter 1, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, eds. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, 1959-), III, 351.

philosophy.¹² It is by no means obvious that anything is intrinsically wrong with this lowering of the horizon of political philosophy. I will try to suggest, however, that the most important types of theory that characteristically result from an obligation conception of politics may be unsound insofar as they are unable to give an adequate account of some important political phenomena that can better be discussed in terms of moral and intellectual virtue.

The discussion of politics by way of the question of moral and intellectual virtue is a procedure followed not by Rousseau (at least, not in the *Social Contract*), but by ancient political philosophy. In the political works of Plato and Aristotle, the question of legitimate authority appears to be subordinate to the question, How ought human beings to live? or, What is the best life for man?¹³ Plato and Aristotle both seem to suggest that before it is possible to consider the question of legitimate authority, it is necessary to consider why anyone should choose to enter a political relationship in the first place. We enter into an economic relationship, for example, in signing a contract for the sale or purchase of some product, because by doing so we can expect to obtain something we desire. But what analogous but distinct value can be obtained from choosing to become a citizen? The answer to this question is surely difficult and complex, but at least we might begin by saying that any such answer would depend upon the answer to yet another question, namely, What kinds of things are good for human beings? That is to say, the problem of defining the political as distinct from (for example) the economic has something to do with the problem of distinguishing the public good from the private goods of individuals. The definition of the political involves the movement from the private to the public, and from the private to the public perspective on the question, What is desirable? Now, in order to give a perfectly adequate ac-

¹² I do not mean to suggest that these two concerns are necessarily mutually exclusive, although a concentration on one of these distinctions might well require an abstraction from the other (since each distinction tends to appear insignificant when viewed from the perspective of the other). Consider, for example, Aristotle's abstraction from (or at the very least, obscuring of) intellectual virtue when he presents the grounds for distinguishing between slaves and free men (citizens) in *Politics* 1. 5. 1259b22-1260a34.

¹³ See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, Inc., 1964), chapters 1 and 2. For Rawls, and for modern political thought in general, this question can not be rationally answered. See *A Theory of Justice*, section 50.

count of the public good, it is necessary to say something about the good of that most inclusive of all publics, the human species. Of course, in order to understand what the human good is, it is necessary to understand what the human, as such, is. In this way, it seems that there is a direct path from the political question to the human question, since we can fully answer the question of whether or how political life is choiceworthy only on the basis of an understanding of what human beings are—an understanding, that is to say, of human nature.¹⁴

For example, suppose we were to assert that the central or defining characteristic of human activity is the attempt to maximize (privately defined) pleasure or to minimize (privately defined) pain or both.¹⁵ Human beings could then have nothing in common but the common pursuit of individually determined goals. The political life, then, distinguished by a concern for the common or public good, would be worth following only if it proved to be instrumental or useful in terms of our nonpolitical (for instance, economic) goals. Of course, some people might simply find their private happiness in public life, but given this understanding of human nature, there can be no common or communicable reason for choosing politics for its own sake.¹⁶ On the other hand, if it

¹⁴ Anscombe's criticism of the ethics of obligation rests in part on the argument that an adequate moral philosophy is impossible without an adequate philosophical psychology; that is, it is impossible to say what a good action is until we are clear about "what a human action is at all." "Modern Moral Philosophy," p. 179. Stuart Hampshire argues that any idea of human goodness depends on some idea of "the distinctive powers of humanity." *Thought and Action* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), chapter 4. Stephen Clark discusses and defends the Aristotelian argument from "distinctive powers" to moral principle in "The Use of 'Man's Function' in Aristotle," *Ethics*, 82 (July, 1972), 269-283.

¹⁵ This is the basis of John Stuart Mill's proof of the utility principle in *Utilitarianism*, chapter 4. The difficulty here is that in this view of human action, rational interpersonal comparison becomes impossible. Rawls (p. 174) attempts to overcome this difficulty by specifying the existence of certain objective "primary social goods, things that every rational person is presumed to want whatever else he wants." A critical account of Rawls's attempt is given by Adina Schwartz, "Moral Neutrality and Primary Goods," *Ethics*, 83 (July, 1973), 294-307.

¹⁶ This view is suggested by, among others, Hobbes: "The passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn into agreement." *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Blackwell's Political Texts, Basil Blackwell, 1946), chapter 13, p. 84. The classical criticism of

were presupposed that human life activity is constituted or defined by the possibility of creating and obeying nonpersonal (or nonsubjective) public standards or goals, then it might reasonably be argued that political life is *always* choiceworthy so long as it is *not* only an instrument of private gain, and regardless of what particular public goal stands at the center of the political order.¹⁷

The procedure by which a discussion of the meaning of politics is linked to a discussion of moral and intellectual virtue by way of a consideration of the question of human nature, is followed explicitly by Plato and Aristotle; a brief summary of this procedure may be useful to show one way in which virtue and politics may be thought of as interdependent. Now although Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, for example, differ in many important respects, both works conceive human activity as being fundamentally threefold. Like other animals, human beings have a capacity for growth and a desire to promote that growth. We eat, drink, mate, and experience the pleasures and pains connected with these and similar movements. This range of experience is said to be private or nonpolitical in the sense that these activities and feelings would always occur, whether there were such things as politics (or publics) or not. This is not to say that survival and growth are politically irrelevant; however, ancient political philosophy as a whole appears to contend that if this were all there were to human life there would be no such thing as politics, strictly speaking. In fact, since these activities are in no way peculiar to the beings we call human, since they are common to many animals, it would be reasonable to say that if these activities were descriptive of the entire range of human activities there would be

no such thing as a separate human species, strictly speaking. This is perhaps what Aristotle means by saying that there is no human *virtue* or excellence in being healthy.¹⁸ Human activity connected with the provision of the commodities that can support and secure human life does not, by itself, yield an answer to the question of the best human life. The only virtue belonging to our desire for private possessions—food, wealth, ornament, and so on—lies in the subordination of that desire to some other principle. From the perspective of ancient political philosophy, then, there is no such thing as a good or excellent or virtuous economic man (meaning by this term someone who is entirely devoted to and adept in the art of survival).¹⁹

Roughly speaking, there are two ways in which this subordination can take place: the political life and the philosophic life. Politics here is understood to be a relationship among individual human beings in which some public value or law takes the place of private desire as the most authoritative guide to action. Politics, from this perspective, is not understood as being constituted by any contract or obligation, but rather by the attempt to replace the human capacity for selfishness by the human capacity for justice (however understood) and self-control as the principal motivating factor in human action. Politics is said to be a choiceworthy way of life because it is the medium within which the development of moral virtue

¹⁸ Aristotle *Politics* 7. 13., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 13.

¹⁹ I will be using the opposition economic man/political man throughout this paper. It is intended to express the distinction between a life directed by private or personal desire or inclination, and a life directed by a strong sense of public duty. "Economic," as I use it, then, is not to be equated with "commercial" (since it could also refer to crime, self-defense, art, and hobbies), although commercial activity is one of the most common and important forms of economic activity, in my sense of the word. The idea of economic activity (in this broad sense) as opposed and in some way prior to political activity is discussed by Aristotle *Politics* 3. 5., and by Plato in his description of the immediate predecessor of the genuine *polis* in the *Republic* Book II, 371d4ff. The applicability of the concept of economic man to early modern political thought is suggested by C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), and by Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), chapter 5. John Rawls places himself squarely in this tradition of political thought when he argues for the appropriateness of the model of rational (economic) choice for all moral and political situations. For Rawls, political philosophy is understood to be a special case (choice under uncertainty) of the theory of rational choice. *A Theory of Justice*, p. 172.

this conception of politics as an alliance for the purpose of avoiding death is presented by Aristotle, *Politics*, 3. 5. 1280a25–1281a9. According to Aristotle, such an alliance is a necessary precondition of politics, but is not itself political.

¹⁷ This conception of human nature and politics is drawn from some modern writers who might be called existentialist or historicist, such as F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 188; Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, chapter 13 (beginning). Jean-Paul Sartre's contention that man defines himself by his "project" seems to be in line with this development; see *Search For a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Knopf, 1963), pp. 150 ff. A case might be made that such a view also informs Kant's moral philosophy; at least, it seems to be present in the neo-Kantian interpretations of Rousseau, such as those of Ernst Cassirer and Robert Dérathé. For example, see Dérathé's discussion in his *Le Rationalisme de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. 182ff.

or virtues (such as justice and self-control) are possible. Man is by nature the political animal not because he ordinarily lives in things called cities or polities, but because it is through politics and the political relationship (as opposed, say, to the economic) that human beings can achieve that excellence of character (moral virtue) which is potential in their nature. To say that an individual is living politically or according to moral virtue is to say something about the principles according to which he *acts*, the goals he tries to attain and the values he tries to maximize in his decisions and his practices. The character of these principles, goals, and values provides the critical difference between the private or economic life and the public or political life. Politics, then, is understood as the pursuit of a certain way or style of life, rather than as obedience to a certain type of authority;²⁰ what distinguishes politics from other activities are its ends or purposes rather than its manner of institution.²¹ The difference between these two conceptions of politics appears in the two questions which they might pose in the process of determining whether a particular association were political (as opposed to merely economic or despotic): Aristotle and Plato would ask, Is it according to nature (Does it enhance the strictly human aspects of human nature)?,²² while the greater part of modern political philosophy, following Rousseau, would say, Is it legitimate (Is control founded on consent)? For both Aristotle and Rousseau, a theoretical understanding of politics requires a distinction between what is *called* political and what is genuinely political;

²⁰ Rawls excludes the issue of ways of life from the range of rational deliberation on fundamental political questions. Rational public decisions can only be made about the distribution of primary social goods, not about the encouragement of certain life styles or ways of life making use of those goods. Rawls, pp. 142–145. Both Hampshire, p. 38, and Cohen, p. 18, in their reviews of Rawls, regard this as a shortcoming of Rawls's theory of justice.

²¹ This is not to say that the ends of a polity and its manner of institution (or integration) may not have real consequences for one another, but that what is most particularly important about *politics* (as a distinct human activity) are its ends or goals.

²² Plato is surely not as firmly committed as Aristotle to the appropriateness of the natural standard for evaluating politics. This will appear, I think, if we compare Book 1 of the *Politics* with the cave story and the myth of Er in the *Republic*. Plato's doubts, however, seem to center not on the suitability of the natural standard for judging politics, but on whether the differences among polities are significant in the light of the natural standard. In other words, the doubt is not about the standard, but about politics.

the two differ with respect to the terms in which this distinction should be drawn.²³

The problem of distinguishing politics as a separate way of life does end with the exhibition of the line between the political and the subpolitical; for ancient philosophy, the question, How ought we to live? can not be restated as the choice between pursuing politics and pursuing private (economic) goals. There is a third possible alternative for human beings, resting upon a third potentially dominant principle of human nature, and that is the life of the philosopher, the way of life displayed by Socrates. This life is the attempt to actualize to the fullest possible extent the human capacity for rational understanding. If the economic life is dominated by the love of self (or of life), and the political life by a love of the city (and of having a "good name" in the city), the philosophic life is controlled by the love of truth or of being.²⁴ The excellence which belongs to this way of life is called, by Aristotle, intellectual virtue. According to both Plato and Aristotle, the philosophic life is unquestionably superior to the political life for the same reason that politics is superior to the economic life: it corresponds to a superior aspect of human capacity, to a higher part of human nature.

One way to understand this determination of superiority is to compare the three possible ways of life with respect to their self-sufficiency. Economic man's needs are practically limitless; he is Hobbes's natural man, committed to a perpetual and (finally) perpetually hopeless search for security and well-being. Political man is less concerned with security than with acting well, being just, courageous, and so on. But political activity of this sort requires more than the simple possession of a good character, even where good character is accompanied by good judgment; opportunity and means are as necessary as motive for the commission of political or moral acts, and neither a citizen nor a city has much hope of achieving political excellence if restricted by poverty, weakness, and isolation. Although the dependence on con-

²³ For Aristotle, the distinction has to be made in teleological terms. See *Politics* 3, 5. Consider also his discussion of citizenship in Book 3 of the *Politics*, which turns on the difference between those who are *really* citizens and those who are only called citizens. The difference between the merely conventional and the real citizen is stated in terms of the purpose of politics.

²⁴ The description and comparison of different ways of life in terms of their desiring or erotic dimension is provided by Plato in the *Republic* Book 5, 474c8 to the end of Book 5.

tingency is less, successful politics, like the quest for security, requires favorable external circumstances. But this is not true of the wise man, of the person who can successfully pursue the philosophic way of life and claim intellectual virtue.²⁵ All that the wise man requires to exercise his wisdom is his mind and the universe. Of course, a wise man is still a human being and not a disembodied spirit; he at least needs food and shelter, just as you and I, and as such he is surely dependent upon circumstance in the way that all human beings are. But the philosopher *as* philosopher, that is, while he is engaged in the activity of understanding which marks him as a man of intellectual virtue, is utterly self-sufficient in a way that can not be matched by the man of moral virtue, the political man, in *his* characteristic activity.

This discussion began with a distinction between two kinds of political inquiry, the one (the more modern and familiar) beginning with the question, Why should I obey the laws? (or, What can make obedience legitimate?), and the other with the question, What is the best life for man? It was suggested that one difficulty with the first approach is that it may not be able to distinguish authority from power, or to give an account or defense of politics as an independently valuable kind of activity. But now it seems that the second variety of political philosophy leads by a different route to a similar difficulty. In the first case, politics threatens to slip beyond the horizon of human aspiration, while in the second it descends beneath human dignity. For if, according to Plato and Aristotle, the philosophic life is the best life for man, the way of life which best answers to the potentiality of human nature, then what becomes of politics, the way of life whose virtue is principally moral (of character or disposition) rather than intellectual (of understanding)? I have suggested that for ancient philosophy politics is understood to claim our admiration because at its best it can turn us from selfishness to moral virtue. But how can one continue to praise moral virtue in the light of the enormous superiority of intellectual virtue? From the perspective of the philosophic life, at least, differ-

ences between the best statesman and the worst murderer or tyrant may appear to be insignificant or largely accidental.²⁶

Now the thrust of this implicit attack on the political life is tempered to a certain extent because the perspective of philosophy is also presented by the ancients as being incredibly difficult to obtain, so difficult that a general recommendation to live a life of pure intellection would be as absurd as recommending a life consisting of an infinite series of four minute miles. Still, I do not mean to suggest that the assertion of the difficulty (and for most men, the impossibility) of living the philosophic life in any way removes the difficulty about justifying moral virtue or politics. No matter how few individuals have the natural equipment to aspire to a life of intellectual virtue, it remains the best life for human beings as such (and hence, in principle, for all human beings insofar as they are human); this conclusion about the best life has the force of consigning all but a very few to lives which are subhuman in that they can not be justified or defended by word or reason (*logos*) rather than by brute force. The human situation seems to be defined by the not altogether free choice between two alternatives: the philosophic life, which is incredibly difficult but of superhuman sublimity; and the private life, which involves satisfying the most powerful of human passions and desires, and is thus easy, but (nonmetaphorically) brutally inhuman. Politics and moral virtue, if they exist at all, are located between these two variously disquieting human possibilities. Strange as it surely sounds to our ears, the problem of politics, the question of whether or not (and in what way) politics is a valuable and justifiable life style appears, in this analysis, to be identical with the problem of moral virtue. Before turning to some of the consequences of this conception of the problem of politics, let me step back for a moment and try to clarify the basic vocabulary of the political problem understood as the problem of moral virtue.

²⁶ It can be argued that this is, in fact, the Platonic view. See *Statesman* 257b2-4, and *Republic* Book 10, 619b7-d1. Sometimes Plato does suggest there can be substantial differences in quality among different nonphilosophic ways of life. But these suggestions often appear to rest upon what are for Plato suspect (or nonphilosophic) premises, such as the quantifiability of human happiness (*Republic* Book 9, 587b10-588a10; *Protagoras* 356c4-357b5), or the adequacy of traditional piety (*Crito* 53a9-54d1). This is not to say that these differences are unimportant from some nonphilosophic perspective—such as that of the citizen.

²⁵ In speaking of "philosophers" here I am not referring to the substantial professional group that sometimes goes by that name. I am also obscuring, because of the nature of this introductory context, any possible differences between a philosopher (a lover of truth and wisdom) and a wise man (a possessor of truth).

Kinds of Virtue

I have been employing the concepts "moral" and "intellectual virtue" without defining them directly, hoping to indicate some of their sense contextually. Any definition would have to begin by confessing that they are, in fact, fairly literal translations of the Greek expressions *aretē ethikē* and *aretē dianoētikē*. Undoubtedly, some more idiomatic and familiar translation would have been possible, but I have chosen to say "moral virtue" and "intellectual virtue" in spite of the odd and stilted sound of these phrases because I want to emphasize, rather than conceal, the fact that these concepts are foreign to our contemporary political vocabulary and political understanding. The value of discussing politics by means of these terms depends in large measure upon their difference from the political language we have become accustomed to using, the language which is informed by political obligation and legitimacy. If, as I shall try to suggest, there is some plausible doubt concerning the value or the usefulness of the language of political obligation, it would be foolish to try to translate all unfamiliar political philosophy into that language, as for instance by setting out to discover Aristotle's or Plato's theory of political obligation, when it would be much more important to know why these writers do not speak of a theory of political obligation, but speak of moral and political virtues instead. So it will be necessary to risk seeming pompous and stuffy, for the sake of exploring the meaning and consequences of this generally forgotten or rejected way of considering politics.

One of the major problems in translating *aretē* by "virtue" is that the Greek word has a much more extensive signification than does the modern English one. *Aretē* does mean virtue or goodness, but it also refers to a quality we would be more likely to call "excellence." For example, a skilled shoemaker, or painter, or athlete might be said to possess virtue in the sense of *aretē*; the same would be true for a fast horse, a strong ox, or a prize pumpkin: generally, a subject is said to be virtuous (possess the quality of *aretē*) when he displays skill in or aptitude for a particular sort of activity. A thing done well thus becomes a thing done virtuously, and the doer is said to be virtuous insofar as that particular activity is concerned; this does not mean that a virtuous shoemaker, or craftsman, or merchant is necessarily a virtuous human being. This is a very broad meaning of "virtue," much different from our own which seems to refer mainly to chastity or innocence and perhaps also to a rather more than slightly unbalanced

asceticism. From this perspective, it naturally seems very odd to see Plato and Aristotle talking about virtue being the principal concern of politics. The oddness is certainly and genuinely there, but it is possible and necessary to climb out of the confines of our ordinary language at least to the extent of not confusing oddness with unintelligibility. My purpose in thus contrasting the ancient and the contemporary meanings of virtue is certainly not to sneer at any supposed moral decay, but rather to warn against the warm and comfortable feeling that we have somehow or other gone beyond confusing virtue and politics. In a sense, we have "gone beyond" understanding virtue as being politically relevant—good conduct being understood for the most part as being a strictly private matter—but it is not true that this going beyond simply involves the obviously desirable rejection of an absurd and oppressive dogma.

It appears that according to ancient philosophy, the relationship between politics and virtue can be stated as follows: the city (or polity or political community) is that structure (or pattern of relationships) which has as its aim the development of moral virtue among its citizens. Polities or political systems can, in principle, be evaluated on the basis of how successfully they carry out this function, bearing in mind that the success or failure of a polity, like that of moral virtue itself, is dependent upon circumstance as well as upon intention. One can hardly blame a poor city or nation, or one which is under severe and continual military attack, for failing to educate its citizens in those virtues which require leisure and peace for their exercise. Still, the principle of moral virtue provides the basic rule for judging politics, and for deciding whether the political life (either as such or in a given city) is justifiable: the meaning and the possibility of politics stands or falls with the meaning and the possibility of moral virtue. This is not to say that the standard of virtue is an easy or a clear one to apply;²⁷ a much clearer assessment can be made by applying one of the more

²⁷ The most consistent application of a standard of this kind is to be found in Aristotle's *Politics*, perhaps most clearly in Book 7. J. J. Mulhern explains the complexity of the Aristotelian standard in "Pantachou Kata Physin hē Aristē," *Phronesis*, 12 (1972), 260–268. See also Plato *Republic* Book 10, 599c6–d4, Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*, vol. 1, Book 5, and Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. The applicability of such a standard to contemporary politics is considered by Walter Berns, "Pornography vs. Democracy: A Case for Censorship," *Public Interest*, 22 (Winter, 1971), 3–24, and by Wilson Carey McWilliams's response to Berns, in the same issue, pp. 32–38.

typical contemporary rules, like level of economic growth, or level of individual liberty, or even level of legitimacy (perhaps defined as the extent of public approval of the regime, or the consent of the governed). The great difficulty with moral virtue as a rule of political evaluation comes from the difficulty of saying just what moral virtue is, even if we grant the possibility that it is, in fact, some thing at all.

But leaving aside for the moment the question of what the content of moral virtue is, we are in a position to say what *kind* of thing it is we are looking for: moral virtue is that quality on account of whose presence we praise actions or characters as being good. Furthermore, it appears to be something different from and inferior to intellectual virtue, a quality which distinguishes good understandings or minds. Since human life can presumably be primarily devoted either to action or to contemplation (or understanding), the moral question of the greatest importance becomes how, and under what conditions, one should choose to commit oneself either to action or to contemplation. As suggested above, when the problem is stated in this way it becomes very difficult to see how anyone could defend, as opposed to simply excusing, the choice of the political life. But perhaps this problem can be avoided by examining more closely some other aspects of the relationship between moral and intellectual virtue, aside from the simple assertion of the superiority of intellectual virtue with respect to the criterion of self-sufficiency.

The complexity of the relationship begins to appear when we notice that to state the problem of moral and intellectual virtue in terms of the necessity to choose between them obscures the fact that action generally involves thought of some sort (like the choice to act or not to act in a certain way) and that even the most abstract contemplation is in some sense relevant to action, at least in the sense that it involves or requires abstention from action. We might say that political or moral men necessarily philosophize to a certain extent, and that philosophers are politicians whether they will it or not. In other words, that thought and action cannot, as a matter of fact, be indifferent to one another; no account of politics can be complete without a consideration of the effect of politics upon contemplation, and any account of the pursuit of wisdom or scientific inquiry would have to be concerned with the political or moral consequences of following the life of intellectual virtue.²⁸ For example, if we

praise intellectual virtue (as ancient philosophy does) as being the best life a human being can choose to follow, we are not only providing an implicit criticism of the political or moral life but actually recommending a course of conduct which will tend to detract from the amount of human energy devoted to politics. Given the inaccessibility of the intellectual or scientific life for most people, it might well be that the praise of contemplation involves the commission of a very great wrong. Whether or how this is so can only be known if we can give an account of the value of moral virtue, if we can justify the political life as being preferable to the life devoted to the private pursuit of privately defined goals, which I have called the economic life. The problem of political philosophy, beginning from the question, What is the best life for man? becomes the problem of intellectual and moral virtue: How, on what grounds, can one justify the pursuit of a way of life which falls far short of the horizon of human potentiality? That this is a genuine *question*, one to which more than one answer is possible, is clear, I think, to anyone who has puzzled over the work of Plato and Aristotle,²⁹ or, for that matter, of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in a curious way appears to employ at different times both the language of virtue and, as noted earlier, the language of obligation.³⁰

I am suggesting here that the idea of moral and intellectual virtue is not in itself a *doctrine* or *theory*, but rather a *question* or *perspective* on the basis of which moral or political philosophy can be formulated.³¹ One might say that

public is that of the compatibility of the requirements of justice with the requirements of the happiness of the philosopher. As Simon Aronson says, "If Plato does opt for making the city happy, and thus devises ways of persuading the philosopher [to be just], his recognition of the possible need to 'compel' (520a8) indicates his awareness that the tension is a real one." "The Happy Philosopher: A Counter-Example to Plato's Proof," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 10 (October, 1972), 383-398, at 396.

²⁸ Consider, for example, Aristotle's criticism of Plato's analysis of the *polis* in *Politics* 2. 1., and of the Platonic analysis of the good in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 6.

²⁹ Compare the understanding of politics displayed in the *Social Contract* with that of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. For a discussion of the problem of Rousseau's political language, see Michel Launay, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ecrivain Politique," *L'Information Littéraire*, 22 (September, 1970), 157-163. Rousseau's awareness of the problem is indicated in his "Préface d'une Seconde Lettre à Bordes," *O.C.*, III, p. 105.

³¹ Another way of putting this would be to say that virtue is to be taken here as a general *concept* rather than a *particular* conception. For a discussion of this distinction with reference to American constitutional concepts and conceptions, see R. Dworkin, "Nixon's Jurisprudence," *New York Review of Books* (May 4, 1972), pp. 27-35.

²⁸ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10, 1178b1-10; *Politics* Book 8, 1325a-b; Plato *Republic*, Book 1, 347b5-d9. One of the great questions of the *Re-*

it provides the beginnings of a language for the discussion of political questions. As we have seen, the question of virtue turns out to involve a series of questions, starting with, What is the best human life? From this question arise the issues concerning the merits of different styles or ways of life founded upon the devotion to actions of various kinds, and of various styles of inactivity or contemplation: what is the good of being a craftsman or a statesman or an entrepreneur or a soldier, and what is good about being a philosopher or a scientist or an artist or a mystic. Once these questions have been considered, we are then faced with the question of the relationship between the virtues of contemplation and the political or moral virtues: Are they compatible? Are they simply the reflections of one single human excellence in different contexts? Is any mediation or compromise possible between them, and so on. As I say, these are simply questions, to which there are several conceivable answers, as might be seen from a comparative study of the works of Aristotle and Rousseau. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to stress the nature of these questions because they are fundamentally different from the questions which inform serious political inquiry at the present time. Given this relative absence of the concept of virtue from the vocabulary of contemporary political philosophy (as compared with the ubiquity of concepts like liberty, authority, obligation, legitimacy and related contract-linked concepts),³² two questions present themselves: *why* we no longer speak of virtue when we speak of politics, and *whether* there is any reason to be dissatisfied with the present state of affairs. In the remainder of this paper I will suggest that this transformation is by no means accidental or superficial, but is rather linked with particular conceptions of the purpose of politics and of the character of meaningful discourse about politics. I will also try to indicate that this conception of politics may be unsatisfactory by virtue of being too narrow to deal with many important phenomena that appear to be politically relevant. This criticism by no means calls for a rejection of the language of political obligation as in itself misleading or erroneous; rather, I suggest that there is a sufficient doubt concerning the utility of the modern conception of politics to make the serious consideration of an alternative conception a reasonable and even necessary undertaking.

³² This characteristic of the modern language of moral and political philosophy is discussed by Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."

Alternatives to Political Virtue

The central question of the language which understands virtue and politics to be nearly inseparable considerations is What is the best human life? Now if it can be shown that this question is absurd and unintelligible, if in principle no reasonable answer to it can be provided, then the question and the substantive political teachings which follow from it are meaningless and fit to be discarded. Plato and Aristotle presupposed that a rational, nonidiosyncratic answer³³ to this question is possible; such a presupposition is necessary if one is going to speak about politics in terms of virtue, although there is no necessity that the implicit assertion must itself always remain a presupposition: one may sooner or later be able to give a reasoned account of *why* the question is answerable, but in the beginning it is necessary to presuppose the meaningfulness of the question as a question. Now one of the defining characteristics of early modern philosophy is that it was, in several ways, engaged in the business of calling this presupposition into question, along the way to rejecting it as absurd. First of all, it was asserted that although we can give an answer to the question of how we ought to live, this answer will be so far removed from how we do in fact live as to be practically or politically irrelevant. According to this view, knowledge of how we ought to live is not in any way a reasonable or a sensible guide to conduct. The most famous expression of this assertion is Machiavelli's, in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*. According to this position, the question of moral virtue may be appropriate in some contexts, but not in the sphere of politics. It is not a very great step from asserting the impracticality of a political philosophy that takes its bearings from the question of virtue to an assertion of the unintelligibility or absurdity of this kind of political understanding—an understanding which claims to provide the true conception of practice or action, which insists upon the interdependence of morality and politics.³⁴

But if moral virtue is *not* a political term, then it can apply only to private relationships,

³³ The special quality of the answer in question could be expressed succinctly by the Greek *logō*, which would suggest an answer by means of that reason which is expressed in human speech. The argument that the task of any moral philosophy is to supply "the ultimate grounds for preferring one way of life to another" is made by Stuart Hampshire, "Morality and Pessimism," *New York Review of Books* (January 25, 1973), 26-33, at 27.

³⁴ This step is very concisely set forth in the first paragraph of Chapter 11 of Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

that is to say, to relationships that are not regulated by any common authoritative standard. There is then something fundamentally wrong with a political system which claims to have as its primary concern the production of moral virtue in its citizens; morality may be the appropriate concern of churches, of families, of voluntary associations, but not of politics and government. For Hobbes and Locke, the proper concern of the polity, the reason for which the social contract comes into being, is the protection and security of the individuals who, as it were, hold shares in the polity. Political authority, law, and constraint are justified not insofar as they tend to produce political or moral man, but rather insofar as they tend to protect economic man, the individual who is free to pursue whatever he desires. This idea of the purpose of politics, and of the true meaning of "political" or "civil," is expressed with admirable concision by John Locke in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*:

The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving and advancing their own civil interests.

Civil interests I call life, liberty, health and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture and the like.³⁵

Politics is not properly concerned with the promotion of a specific and distinct way of life, but only with the protection of privately determined enterprises.

The mention of Locke in this context no doubt tends to emphasize the connection between this view of politics—the view that the proper concern of politics is the service of economic man—and the liberal tradition. This conception of politics is surely linked with liberalism, but it is just as surely not identical with liberalism, being much more inclusive than that particular doctrine. The pervasiveness of this understanding of politics in modern times will appear if we consider that the beneficiary and the justification of the antiliberal and revolutionary politics of Karl Marx is presented not as a political man or a man of moral virtue, but as a free spirit. The purpose and justification of communist society is that it "makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the eve-

ning, criticize after dinner, just as I like. . . ."³⁶ In spite of the undeniable and important points of opposition in the substantive political teachings of John Locke and Karl Marx, both appear to understand true politics (as opposed to mere tyranny) to be fundamentally concerned with the protection of what I have been calling economic man. Thus what seems to many to be the principal political alternatives of our time are both animated (and thus to a certain extent defined) by a concern for liberty rather than for virtue, and by the understanding that the answer to the question of the best human life can not receive a political (or any sort of public) solution. For both Locke's householder and Marx's interested amateur, the question of how we ought to live must be treated as a matter of taste.

The first modern criticism of the question of the best life for man is, then, that it is politically irrelevant. The second criticism to be considered here, and one which serves as the epistemological or theoretical foundation of the first, is the assertion that the question cannot be answered in a rational way. To inquire about the best life for man presupposes that there is some "best" or most "virtuous" life which is distinct from the lives which any number of particular individuals may choose to lead. In other words, it presupposes the intelligibility of the distinction between what is good *for* human beings as human beings and what is pleasant to (or desired by) individual men and women. But it can be doubted that goodness or virtue exists, or, at least, that these qualities can be perceived by the human mind as having an existence distinct from that of pleasure. It would be impossible to summarize here all the arguments that have been developed to support this doubt, and so I will simply refer to some of the better-known conclusions. The most fundamental of these may well be the assertion that the question of virtue, of the best life, cannot be settled by rational inquiry. Our ideas of virtue are (on this view), like our feelings of pleasure, the consequence of private and particular sensation, rather than of publicly

³⁶ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, Part I, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 424-425. Even in his direct confrontation with the liberal view, *On the Jewish Question* (in Easton and Guddat), Marx criticizes the liberals not in the name of equality or community, but of liberty or emancipation. An interesting commentary on the passage in question is provided by Michael Walzer, "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen," in Walzer, *Obligations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 229ff.

³⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. J. W. Gough (Oxford: Blackwell's Political Texts, Basil Blackwell, 1946), p. 128. See also *Second Treatise*, chapter 11, section 134, p. 67.

demonstrable reasoning.³⁷ We may say what virtue or the best life is, but (it is asserted) we cannot defend (by referring to supporting reasons) our answer against any other moral proposal or preference. The attempt to philosophize about the best life appears to rest upon a mistaken notion of our idea of virtue; it has become almost a philosophical commonplace to say that the attempt to discover the truth about how we ought to live is founded on a logical error. Indeed, it is claimed, there is no rational way to distinguish virtue from pleasure, or what is needed from what is wanted, or what is desirable from what is desired.³⁸ Moral and political philosophy become theoretically incapable of deciding among the claims presented by different life styles and callings; all that philosophy can do is to show that no way of life, whether of hunter, cattle raiser, entrepreneur or critic, has any reasonable claim to preferential treatment or regard over any other way of life.³⁹

The question of political obligation seems to arise almost naturally from the situation created by the demise of the question of how we ought to live; it is the logical candidate to fill the vacuum in political philosophy left by the rejection on epistemological and metaphysical grounds of the question of virtue.⁴⁰ If no way of life can authoritatively and finally claim to

³⁷ Perhaps the most influential and painstaking development of this position is David Hume's, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III, Part I, sections 1-2.

³⁸ As in J. S. Mill's famously ambiguous claim that "the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it." *Utilitarianism*, chapter 4, in *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Marshall Cohen (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1961), p. 363.

³⁹ Rawls attempts to demonstrate the rationality of a rule of justice requiring preferential treatment for the least favored members of society. As Rawls indicates, however, the rationality of this rule depends upon the rationality of something like what game theorists call a maximum strategy in matters of fundamental political choice. That this strategy is the rationally appropriate one in this circumstance is open to question, as in the reviews by Cohen (p. 18) and by Hampshire (p. 39) and by Kenneth J. Arrow, "Some Ordinalist-Utilitarian Notes on Rawls's Theory of Justice," *Journal of Philosophy*, 70 (May 10, 1973), 245-263.

⁴⁰ This is not at all to say that the prominence of the question of obligation was historically caused solely or even primarily by events in epistemology or metaphysics. At least part of the reason for the pre-eminence of obligation can plausibly be ascribed to a change in the form of the prevailing patterns of social interaction, roughly described by the transition from face to face communities to the distinction between state and society. See Euben, "Walzer's *Obligations*," pp. 439-440. Similarly, a strong case can be made for assigning the decisive part in this transition to Christianity, as suggested by Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York:

be superior to any other, and if each individual is thus in principle free to choose or create his own standards or rules of conduct, what are we to say about the ordinary human situation characterized by a submission to authority and an obedience to laws we never made? To ask this question is to state the modern paradox of liberty and authority posed in classic form by Rousseau in the *Social Contract*. What is the ground, the justification, of the obligation or duty to obey the law? When is obedience the result of obligation rather than of oppression and coercion? Perhaps the most obvious solution is to say that freedom itself is the ground of obligation: obedience to law alone makes possible that security which is the necessary condition of freedom.⁴¹ In this manner, politics would appear to be justifiable or legitimate (and "authority" thus different from "power") insofar as politics exists for the sake of economic man. In other words, we ought to obey the law because it is in the interest of our freedom to do so. Politics thus conceived appears as a second-rate and inconvenient activity, yet one which is necessary to protect us in our real (i.e., economic or private) existence. Public obedience is the necessary, though unpleasant, price of private freedom.

But the argument which thus employs a reference to liberty as the ground of political obligation creates certain difficulties. According to this argument, we are bound to politics by an obligation which is only prudential (valid only so long as it is in our interest) rather than strictly moral (always and necessarily valid as a matter of duty).⁴² If it is not in my interest (as economic man) to obey the rules

(Dover, 1956), introduction, p. 18 and part IV, p. 342, and by Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1935), chapter 4. My point is rather that the philosophic significance of the question of obligation (and thus its theoretical, if not its historical, justification) can be grasped by a consideration of the theoretical grounds for discarding the question of virtue.

⁴¹ Such a view is almost formulaic in early modern political thought. Among others, see Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*, Vol. I, Book 12, Chapters 1-2 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961), pp. 196-197, and Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 21.

⁴² This distinction rests on Kant's distinction between a kind of hypothetical (nonmoral) and a categorical (moral) imperative. See *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), section II, p. 33. For the use of this distinction in the context of the question of moral obligation, see Alan Gewirth, "Must One Play the Moral Language Game," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (April, 1970), 107-118. See also H. A. Prichard, *Moral Obligation*, pp. 90-91.

(as political man), then these rules are no longer legitimately binding or obligatory, so far as I am concerned. There can be no legitimate authority which runs counter to individual interest, since political (obligated) man is only a specialized role or aspect of economic (free) man. Law and government are either an exercise of power which is in my interest or one which is counter to my interest, but there is no reason to conclude that "authority" is anything more than a name we give to the useful or beneficial (to us) exercise of power (by others).⁴³ What we call "political obligation" turns out to be nothing more than a rather unimportant aspect of the general maximizing strategy pursued by economic man.⁴⁴ Now this conclusion may be absolutely true; I am not here suggesting that it rests upon false premises or bad argument. But leaving aside the question of its truth or error for the moment, it should be noted that the attempt to resolve the problem of political obligation by reference to the principle of liberty ends by calling into question the meaning of political activity as anything more than a special case of economic activity. This particular approach to the problem of political obligation, which we might without too much distortion identify as the liberal or utilitarian approach,⁴⁵ seems in the end to be unable to do what it set out to do, namely, to distinguish the political from the nonpolitical without recourse to the no longer accepted language of moral virtue and the question of the best life.⁴⁶ If it were not

⁴³ This confusion of authority and power would still exist even if we were to assume the rather unlikely condition that obedience to law will always be in our (or everyone's) interest.

⁴⁴ "Unimportant" in that it deals only with minimal and instrumental necessities, the items Rawls identifies as "primary social goods," and does not concern the more important question of what to do with the goods.

⁴⁵ Although this position is characteristic of a certain kind of modern political thought, it was by no means unknown to Plato and Aristotle. Consider Glaucon's speech about the value of justice in *Republic* Book II; the speech of Callicles in the *Gorgias* 483b4-484c4; Aristotle's criticism of the sophist Lycophron in *Politics* Book 3, 1280b11-13; and especially the statement by Antiphon the Sophist, *On Truth*, Fragment B44 in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 7th ed., ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951-54), vol. 2, 346-355. Something of a confrontation between this view and the position of ancient political philosophy is presented by Xenophon in his descriptions of three conversations between Socrates and Antiphon, *Memorabilia* Book I, chapter 6. The basic disagreement appears to be over the issue of human needs. On this meeting, see Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 28-31.

⁴⁶ One of the most systematic attempts to accom-

modate the question of the best life to the question of liberty is made by Mill in *Utilitarianism*, especially in the context of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures drawn in chapter 2 of that essay. Whether Mill was successful is extremely controversial. A neo-Kantian refutation of Mill is given by R. P. Wolff, *Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), chapter 1. That Mill was unsuccessful in his attempt to reconcile liberty and duty is also argued by Hilail Gildin, "Mill's *On Liberty*," in Joseph Cropsey, ed., *Ancients and Moderns* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 288-303. An argument for Mill's consistency is given by Rex Martin, "A Defence of Mill's Qualitative Hedonism," *Philosophy*, 47 (April, 1972), 140-151.

Perhaps the most interesting contemporary alternative to the appeal to liberty as a ground of obligation is the appeal to "community." This view, perhaps most forcefully presented by Hannah Arendt,⁴⁷ is in an important way a direct response to the difficulties that I have claimed are endemic in the liberal position.⁴⁸ I will ignore here the question of the foundations of the "community" position (except to say that it also, like the liberal view, rejects the orientation provided by the question of the best life), and merely present what I take to be its most important conclusions or assertions. Principally, it asserts that genuine political activity can have absolutely nothing to do with the needs of what I have referred to as economic man; a truly political relationship (such as the relationships of obligation and authority) can have no connection with private self-interest of any sort.⁴⁹ Politics itself must be

moderate the question of the best life to the question of liberty is made by Mill in *Utilitarianism*, especially in the context of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures drawn in chapter 2 of that essay. Whether Mill was successful is extremely controversial. A neo-Kantian refutation of Mill is given by R. P. Wolff, *Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), chapter 1. That Mill was unsuccessful in his attempt to reconcile liberty and duty is also argued by Hilail Gildin, "Mill's *On Liberty*," in Joseph Cropsey, ed., *Ancients and Moderns* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 288-303. An argument for Mill's consistency is given by Rex Martin, "A Defence of Mill's Qualitative Hedonism," *Philosophy*, 47 (April, 1972), 140-151.

⁴⁷ See especially Hannah Arendt "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 143-171, and *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), chapters 2 and 5. Arendt's argument that the source of this view can be traced to Greek political practice seems to me highly questionable; but this problem has no bearing on the significance of the conception of politics involved. See also Kirk Thompson, "Constitutional Theory and Political Action," *Journal of Politics*, 31 (August, 1969), 655-681.

⁴⁸ Wolff's argument in *The Poverty of Liberalism* proceeds from a rejection of the liberal position as logically inconsistent, to an attempt to demonstrate the existence (in principle) of a political community which can serve as the source of authority and obligation.

⁴⁹ Just as, for Kant, a truly good action can have no connection with self-interest. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface, p. 6; Section I, p. 13. On this point, Rawls is much closer to Mill than to Kant, in his argument that political principles must be in the interest of each individual for social control to be just or legitimate. See *A Theory of Justice*, Section 29.

considered a valuable activity, and the obligation to obey the law is simply a consequence of membership in the political community. As soon as we demand that politics be good for something other than itself (except insofar as it may be understood to satisfy the irreducible human need for communal ties) it ceases to be politics. Needless to say, political relationships of this sort are extremely rare in those activities we ordinarily call political, at least at the present time. Politics in this sense, or political community as the true ground of political obligation, appears as something to be achieved or recovered.

At first sight, these two relatively modern understandings of politics, revolving about the concepts of "liberty" and "community" respectively, appear to be diametrically opposed to one another. In fact, it may not be a great exaggeration to say that they constitute the poles of whatever contemporary debate there is about the nature of politics and the character of political relationships. But I want to suggest that these two positions have a great deal more in common than is ordinarily supposed, and that they do not exhaust (as we are too apt to suppose they do) the possibilities for understanding and evaluating political activity. One indication of the similarity of these two is that they both identify politics as the necessary condition of human freedom. According to Arendt, the political community (like the moral community for Kant) is *the* sphere of freedom;⁵⁰ according to liberals, politics is indeed the realm of constraint, but of a kind of constraint that is necessary to protect and enhance the realm of true freedom. To be sure, "freedom" is understood quite differently in the two different cases (the former generally implying a variety of self-determination, while the latter generally refers to a straightforward absence of external restraint), but the debate

between these two positions seems not to be about the respective merits of individuality versus communality as ways of life, as much as it is about the true meaning of being free.⁵¹ The reverse side of this concern with freedom is an almost complete avoidance of any serious consideration of virtue, or of any of the various questions which I indicated might come to light from an investigation of the problem of moral and intellectual virtue. Just as Plato and Aristotle can be understood to be quarreling over the question, Under what conditions can men become truly virtuous? modern political philosophy seems to be engaged in a debate over the question, Under what conditions can men become truly free?⁵²

Conclusion

Is there any reason for dissatisfaction with this transformation of the basic political question? Surely, it can be argued that the modern position represents an enormous improvement by being much more in accord with the genuine limitations of human knowledge. If such modesty is in fact an intellectual virtue, then whatever the merits of the ancient position, it might be based on the undoubtedly immodest presupposition that one can give an intelligible answer to the question of the best human life. Claims and criticisms of this kind raise a question of the greatest importance, but one that

⁵⁰ "Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of the same matter" ("What Is Freedom?," p. 149). This conception of freedom and politics as coterminous and inseparable is similar to Marx's assertion that unalienated (or free) human activity is species (or political) activity. See "Alienated Labor," in Easton and Guddat, p. 294. Another directly related formulation is implicit in Rousseau's position that since freedom and citizenship are inseparable, and since citizenship is not always pleasant or in one's interest (and hence not always or necessarily immediately chosen for its own sake), some men will have to be "forced to be free" (*Social Contract*, bk. I, chap. 7, *O.C.*, Vol. III, 364). For a comparison (from a liberal viewpoint) of something like the two concepts of liberty I have been considering here, see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-172.

⁵¹ An excellent illustration of the organization of the debate in terms of a conflict over the true meaning of freedom is provided by Marx in his attack on liberalism in the name of genuine liberation in the essay *On the Jewish Question*. In criticizing liberalism for achieving "political emancipation" only, Marx is criticizing the liberal insistence on the separation of politics and society, in which society stands for the realm which is emancipated from political control. But, according to Marx, the real liberation of man as species-being is the emancipation of a creature who has evolved beyond the stage of "man as an isolated monad" (or free economic man) and has "taken back into himself the abstract citizen [of liberalism] and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationship has become a *species-being*, . . . only then is human emancipation complete" (emphasis in text). *On the Jewish Question*, in the Easton and Guddat edition, pp. 235-241. A similar distinction is drawn by Hegel in his argument for political (or universal) freedom in preference to individual (or particular) freedom in *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, p. 38, and in *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), sections 182-187.

⁵² A good discussion of this in the context of constitutional issues is that by Walter Berns, *Freedom, Virtue and the First Amendment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), especially chapter 10.

will not be discussed here. That question, as difficult as it is important, concerns the determination of the reasonableness of a presupposition. Here, I would like only to suggest why I think it is worthwhile to go to the trouble of trying to revive a buried presupposition. To do this I will try to show why the two modern formulations of the political question that have been considered here are, taken together, unsatisfactory. I am not here concerned to provide a conclusive showing of the wrongness of these formulations, but only to show why it seems advisable to think seriously about alternatives.

When I say that the modern formulations neglect virtue, I am using that word to refer to *any* possible answer to the question of the best way of life, and not to some particular answer: when we say how men ought to live, we say what human virtue is.⁵³ Now, in a sense, the modern political formulations *do* have something to say about how we ought to live (although this question, for them, arises only incidentally): we ought to be free,⁵⁴ and politics is either the most reasonable means to that end or itself the process within which the end is realized. In a very broad sense, we are even presented with a choice between two ways of life each of which has certain claims to be considered the most worthy of praise or virtuous: the life of individual liberty (of economic man liberated from unnecessary political control) versus the life of the autonomous citizen in the free community (political man liberated from the impurities of economic life). But just what sort of a choice do these alternatives offer us? Both appear to involve what amounts to a one-dimensional understanding of politics, in which politics are classified and evaluated according to the degree to which either liberty or community is said to be present.⁵⁵ I do not mean to deny that this dimension is an important one; but it would be difficult to show that it is in fact *the* primary

political dimension of variance, from which all other aspects of political life are derived.

Let us try to see what might happen if we were to take seriously the idea that the question of the presence or absence of freedom (defined in either of the two ways considered to this point) is the key or essential political question. Consider the following situation: let us assume a fairly constant level of either individual liberty or community, and then ask whether at this level we will find other differences which appear to call for other, unrelated, distinctions, or whether knowledge of the level of liberty or community tells us, in principle, all we need to know about the politics in question. If we were to choose several relatively strong communities—say, the early Catholic Church, Sparta, the People's Republic of China and the Mafia—and several relatively liberal polities—say, the United States of America, Athens, Great Britain and Sodom—I believe that we would be confronted by a problem in political understanding which could not be resolved by the language of liberty or community alone. In this example, we should want to be able to say something about the values or the goals which are characteristic of each of these polities, in addition to considering the matter of liberty and community. These examples would appear to suggest the possibility that differences in the uses of liberty, and in the purposes for the sake of which communities may be organized, may be decisive for the character of the polity in question. If this is so, then a political philosophy which is incapable of explaining and evaluating these differences may turn out to be of very little use in the face of the most important and the most difficult political questions.⁵⁶ The purity of community appears to match, in narrowness and blindness to a wide range of politically relevant things, the well-known poverty of liberalism.⁵⁷

That political philosophy which takes its be-

⁵³ Again, at this point in the argument "virtue" is intended as a concept rather than a conception, in terms of the distinction referred to in note 31.

⁵⁴ Freedom here is understood very broadly, and in this sense can include an idea of security or secure preservation. An example of this usage can be found in the passage in Montesquieu referred to in note 41 above: "Political liberty consists in security, or at least in the opinion that one has of one's security."

⁵⁵ This is the source of the distinction between the open and the closed society. The not so remote vulgarizations of these paired oppositions are the popular divisions of contemporary politics into Free World vs. Slave World, and Third (communitarian nationalist) World vs. Imperialist (capitalist) World.

⁵⁶ Of course, these may be classified as "cultural" differences, and since (given cultural relativism) they are therefore incommensurable (at least morally), they are not fit subjects for a generalizing and evaluative political philosophy. I am not concerned here with the possible truth of this claim (it would be necessary to examine the plausibility of the asserted moral incommensurability of cultural phenomena); but note that this position implies a political philosophy which, at least in its explicitly evaluative procedures, must ignore the political consequences of "culture."

⁵⁷ This point is brilliantly, though perhaps too briefly, made by Benjamin DeMott in his essay, "Pure Politics," which reviews the work of Arendt and others. DeMott, *You Don't Say: Studies of Modern American Inhibitions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), pp. 169-182.

ginnings from the question of political obligation appears to end by abstracting from the variety of purposes or goals which may be said to belong to different polities. This abstraction is not accidental or unprepared, but follows from the kinds of questions that are regarded as the proper subjects of modern political philosophy, questions about liberty, obligation, legitimacy, and so on. These questions are all focused, in various ways, on the manner in which the polity is constituted, rather than on the goals or values of life styles which the polity explicitly encourages or implicitly rewards. These latter considerations appear to lie outside the perspective provided by the two principal varieties of modern political philosophy discussed in this paper (although they form the major theme of ancient political philosophy). What we might describe as the shift from the virtue paradigm to the legitimacy paradigm appears to have been accompanied by a severe narrowing of the range of questions which inform philosophic inquiry into the political things.⁵⁸ This narrowing, as I have tried to suggest, *may* be distorting with respect to our grasp of political reality, in confining our attention to an insufficient, and perhaps even occasionally unimportant, range of political phenomena. Now I want to be very clear in indicating that I have in no way "refuted" the legitimacy (or obligation) paradigm; I have made no effort in this discussion to deal with the epistemological, logical and moral is-

⁵⁸ I am using "paradigm" here only for clarification, and with almost the same meaning that I wish to convey by the word "language." Paradigm refers to the heart or grammar of the language, the rules for the proper ordering of concepts and vocabulary, the element that gives the language its particular character and structure. This usage is like the one established by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), chap. 5; however, I do not share, and the use of "paradigm" here should not be taken to imply, Kuhn's relativist assertion of the incommensurability of competing paradigms. The case for considering the history of political ideas in terms of paradigms is presented by Bhiku Parekh and R. N. Berki, "The History of Political Ideas: A Critique of Q. Skinner's Methodology," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (April, 1973), 163-184, and by W. H. Greenleaf, "Hume, Burke and the General Will," *Political Studies*, 20 (1972), 131-140, especially 139-140.

ues which are involved in the question of the justifiability of the paradigm change.⁵⁹ What I have tried to do is to suggest that there are serious objections which can be made to the necessary products or consequences of the legitimacy paradigm, and that these objections provide sufficient warrant to examine the possibilities of another approach to the problem of understanding and evaluating political relationships. That alternative approach is one which formulates the problem of the best human life in terms of the problem of intellectual and moral virtue.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Leo Strauss's controversial discussions of these issues are of continuing importance. Relevant here are the Introduction to *The City and Man*, Strauss's "Epilogue" to *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1962), and his essays "What Is Political Philosophy?" and "On Classical Political Philosophy," reprinted in Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959). The strongest and broadest defense of the modern understanding of political philosophy is still Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945), Vol. I. An interesting discussion and criticism of some of the central features of the modern paradigm is provided by Bruce Aune, "The Paradox of Empiricism," *Metaphilosophy*, 1 (April, 1970), 128-138. An interesting consideration of the theoretical alternatives underlying the alternative conceptions of morals and politics is presented by Kenneth Dorter, "First Philosophy: Metaphysics or Epistemology?," *Dialogue* 11 (March, 1972), 1-22.

⁶⁰ The importance and interest of Rousseau for a study of the strengths and limits of the two conceptions of politics discussed here can hardly be overemphasized. Rousseau's treatment of politics in the *Social Contract* and elsewhere presents one of the best known uses of the legitimacy paradigm, "community" variation. And yet Rousseau also insists, in a way that other legitimacy theorists (like Hobbes and Locke) do not, on the intimate connection of (a kind of) virtue and politics. Moreover, no reader of Rousseau can avoid being impressed by the depth, complexity, and even by the uncertainty, of his concern with the question of the best life. Unlike almost any other modern writer, Rousseau was led by this concern to consider not only the question of the best political life, but also that of the best alternatives to politics or citizenship, thereby compelling his readers to engage in the process of comparing political virtue with nonpolitical virtue or virtues. In the terms of this analysis, Rousseau holds a unique position as an uncommonly brilliant (though not necessarily successful) link between the language of legitimacy and obligation on the one hand and the language of virtue on the other.