Enrahonar 43, 2009 131-152

Political Liberalism and the Characterization of the Moral Virtues[1]

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Abstract

The Virtue ethical approach to morality is generally thought to be in tension with liberalism in politics. Their incompatibility seems to be straightforward when considering political liberalism. This is because the virtue ethical approach to morality seems to be committed to a perfectionist view of society, whereas political liberalism resists this conceptualization. But this is not the only source of trouble between virtue ethics and political liberalism. A more basic problem seems to be that, in a liberal society, there are many incompatible though reasonable comprehensive doctrines. This fact of reasonable pluralism seems to imply that the very idea of characterizing the moral virtues constitutes an impossible task in a liberal society. This conclusion is too quick, however. A non-eudaimonist, consequentialist conception of virtue can find a place within political liberalism, though this account of moral virtue must be qualified in important ways.

Key words: Virtue, Political liberalism, Eudaimonism, Non-eudaimonism, Consequentialism.

Resumen. *El liberalismo político y la caracterización de las virtudes morales*

Tradicionalmente, la ética de la virtud es caracterizada como si estuviera en tensión con el liberalismo. Su incompatibilidad parece ser directa cuando consideramos al liberalismo político. La razón es que la ética de la virtud parece estar comprometida con una concepción perfeccionista de la sociedad, mientras que el liberalismo político resiste este tipo de conceptualizaciones. Sin embargo, esta no es la única fuente de conflicto entre la ética de la virtud y el liberalismo político. Parece haber un problema más general. En una sociedad liberal coexisten muchas doctrinas comprehensivas incompatibles entre sí. El hecho del pluralismo razonable parece implicar que la idea misma de caracterizar a las virtudes morales constituye una tarea imposible en una sociedad liberal. Sin embargo, esta conclu-

1. A version of this paper was presented at the *Segundo Encuentro Hispano-Argentino de Filosofía Analítica – Coloquio SEFA-SADAF 2008* in Buenos Aires on September 27, 2008. I thank Josep Corbí, Manuel de Pinedo, Eduardo Rivera López, José Luis Liñán Ocaña and Ezequiel Zerbudis. I also thank Julia Annas, Michael Bukoski, William D. Glod, Ben Kearns and Frans Svensson for their comments and suggestions on a previous draft of this paper. Finally, I thank the anonymous referee of *Enrahonar* for his/her commentary.

sión es inferida muy rápidamente. Una conceptualización de la virtud consecuencialista no-eudaimonista puede encontrar un lugar en el liberalismo político. De todas formas, esta conceptualización de la virtud moral debe ser calificada de forma importante.

Palabras clave: virtud, liberalismo político, eudaimonismo, no eudaimonismo, consecuencialismo.

Summary

1. Introduction

A common criticism of virtue ethics in liberal political thought is that virtue ethics comprises a perfectionist view of society. There seem to be both good historical and conceptual reasons for thinking that such a relationship obtains. As a matter of fact, the relationship seems to be a matter of mere logic. If we are committed to consider certain character traits of persons as *excellent*, the claim that a *just society* is one so arranged as to maximize the achievement of moral virtue[2] looks like its logical political consequence.

Now, perfectionism in politics (including liberal perfectionism) is commonly resisted in a major tradition in contemporary liberal thought, namely, political liberalism[3]. In this paper, I fully grant the liberal political framework as the appropriate starting point to political theorizing in modern democracies. Accordingly, I take it that the virtue of persons is something that the *liberal state* should not recognize; from a liberal perspective, virtue «is not its business»[4]. Stephen Macedo explains: «[g]overnment ought not to try to make people virtuous, liberals tend to say, it ought only to provide for equal freedom, order, security, and a few other widely acceptable public goods»[5]. In the

2. In this paper, I will sometimes use «virtue» as shorthand of «moral virtue».
3. This must not be taken as implying that political liberalism is the only coherent or defensible form of liberalism. In this context I will restrict my analysis to political liberalism, though. Thus, by «liberalism» and its cognates I will signify «political liberalism».
4. Costa (2004), p. 149.
5. Macedo (1990), p. 3. This position is actually not shared by Macedo himself, though: «liberalism […] presupposes the widespread existence of certain deep character traits». Ibídem, p. 56. Cf. Ibídem, Chapter 7 for an exposition of such a view. In the same

particular case of political liberalism, the justification of such a claim would rest on what «reasonable persons» may accept. Liberals would say that, were the state to act so as to endorse and promote the moral virtues, it would irremediably be sectarian, where a sectarian state is one that advances any «comprehensive» philosophical, moral or religious normative conception[6]. Thus, reasonable citizens would reject it. Reasonable normative disagreement is a *fact* of liberal societies and it is the key element that leads to antiperfectionism in politics.

Perhaps I am moving too quickly; maybe some conceptions of virtue ethics do not have this result[7]. Virtue ethics *might* not be incompatible with a liberal political framework. I don't want to take sides on this issue in this paper. But there seem to be other issues that bring political liberalism in tension with virtue ethics[8]. The supposed perfectionist commitment is not the only point of the virtue ethical approach to morality that seems to run against liberal politics. When we take the issue at face value, it seems that the very idea of *characterizing* the virtues within political liberalism is impossible. In this paper, I will analyze and investigate this issue in depth.

I have just said that political liberalism takes reasonable pluralism as a fact of modern democratic societies. Thus, within this framework, reasonable pluralism possesses the same status as other «circumstances of justice», like moderate scarcity of resources[9]. «The fact of reasonable pluralism» constitutes an inevitable consideration in the justification process of a just and stable political society[10]. The issue is that different reasonable persons *may* have different understandings of what constitutes the human good, associated with their

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vein, William Galston argues that «[i]n spite of the fact considerable evidence for the proposition that the liberal-republican polity requires no more than the proper configuration of rational self-interest, this orthodoxy has in recent years come under attack for scholars who argue that liberal theory, institutions, and society embody —and depend upon— individual virtue». Galston (1991), p. 215. In this paper I take the thesis that the virtues do not concern the liberal state to be the default liberal position.

6. In this vein, Rawls says that were «justice as fairness» to promote a certain set of virtues (and values) —those associated with liberalism— it would stopped being a form of political liberalism. Cf. Rawls (2001), p. 157.
7. Some virtue ethicists deny the existence of a necessary link between virtue in ethics and perfectionism in politics. For instance, in Annas's view, only *some* forms of virtue ethics are perfectionist; many are not. In particular, she believes that not all forms of eudaimonist virtue ethics, like not Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian forms, are perfectionist. From my point of view the issue is controversial, although I cannot analyze it in the present essay.
8. However, they are obviously connected to the antiperfectionism of political liberalism.
9. It is, in particular, a «subjective» circumstance of justice. Cf. Rawls (2001), pp. 84-85.
10. In John Rawls's view, the fundamental question political liberalism addresses is «how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who still remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?», Rawls (1993), p. 47.

philosophical, moral or religious normative conceptions, ideals, and values. It seems that the very fact of reasonable pluralism —independently of its purely political consequences—has consequences for virtue theory. In a liberal society reasonable persons may disagree about what traits are excellent. Thus, although some reasonable citizens may have good reasons to consider certain character traits to be human virtues, others might disagree, moreover with good reasons. The same problem that applies to conceptions of the good (and even perhaps of the right) seems to apply to the virtues. The consequences of the fact of reasonable pluralism are far reaching. Our question, therefore, is the following: could there be conceptual space to characterize the virtues in a liberal polity?[11].

I believe that the response political liberals would give is «no». The rationale they would offer in defense of this answer seems to be the following. The very issue is far beyond the actual limits of political liberalism. In this vein, María Victoria Costa writes that «[t]o try to offer a full justification of human virtue would be to go beyond the limits of the political conception of justice»[12]. The key issue is that a characterization of the virtues seems to be conceptually dependent on the truth of the thesis about the intrinsic perfectionist character of virtue ethics. I have remarked that some virtue theorists deny the perfectionist commitments of their theories and that I don't want to address the issue in this paper. Thus, insofar I am concerned the debate is open in this respect. But this is not the end of the story. In the (hypothetical or actual) case that we obtain a non-perfectionist virtue theory in the political domain, I take it that political liberalism would say that the characterization of the virtues violates the boundaries of political liberalism; the virtues are essentially associated with comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral conceptions[13].

As a matter of fact, the issue at hand seems to be even more complicated. Within a liberal political framework, it seems that the very proposal of characterizing certain traits as the moral virtues does not make sense at all. Any characterization of them seems to be contestable[14]. Some reasonable persons may

11. This point may be not relevant for some forms of liberalism different than political liberalism. Peter Berkowitz writes that «notwithstanding its focus on the political conditions that support personal freedom, the liberal tradition has provided a fertile source of reflections on such nongovernmental supports of the virtues that sustain liberty as civic association, family, and religion». Berkowitz (1999), p. 5. Berkowitz argues that Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill are representatives of the liberal tradition which includes an understanding of the virtues.
12. Costa (2004), p. 165.
13. Rawls writes that a comprehensive conception «includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of personal friendship and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole». Rawls (1993), p. 13.
14. This does not mean that political liberals believe there is no place for the virtues at all in a liberal society. But they conceptualize them as *political virtues*, not moral virtues. Political virtues comprise a set of features associated with the fulfillment of the politi-

agree with a particular account. But there is no reason to believe that other reasonable citizens may not reject the characterization at the same time[15]. Thus, it seems as if we are in principle incapable of justifying a certain number of traits as the moral virtues within a liberal framework. This argument is powerful. Certainly, when considering the most prominent, eudaimonistic version of virtue ethics, this evaluation seems to be correct (although some virtue theorists may resist the point).

Now, although I have just suggested that eudaimonist virtue ethics and political liberalism are not compatible (at least insofar as virtue ethics is committed to providing an explanation for considering certain traits as the virtues), I am not sure that the same situation occurs when considering alternative theories of the virtues. Thus, in this paper, I will discuss whether there is a possible way of characterizing the moral virtues which is fully compatible with political liberalism. I will defend the thesis that there are certain traits that we might consider moral virtues in a liberal society and thus that the idea of characterizing them within political liberalism is coherent. In particular, I will argue that these traits form part of a non-eudaimonist, consequentialist conception of the moral virtue. I will claim, however, that there are good reasons to believe that the virtues are not the traits traditionally considered to be so. Rather, I will suggest that in a liberal political society, there must be a revisionary account of the traits considered as virtues, and moreover, that these traits have to be established *a posteriori*.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I will present the basic ideas of political liberalism and the way a political conception of justice fits in this framework. In section 3, I will characterize the most important features of eudaimonist conceptions of virtue ethics and present reasons to ground the thesis that eudaimonistic virtue ethics is incompatible with liberal politics. Although I accept the reasons to dismiss eudaimonist conceptions of virtue within the framework of political liberalism, I will dispute the idea that this is the end of the story for virtue and liberal politics. Thus, in section 4, I will argue that a non-eudaimonist, consequentialist conception of virtue can find a place within political liberalism. However, I will argue that this account of virtue must be qualified in important ways. In section 5 I will continue arguing in this vein, particularly stressing the way the actual promotion of the good must be understood within a liberal polity. Finally, in section 6 I will present

cal role of citizens; they are not conceived as exhibiting forms of human excellence. Additionally, they are characterized in a fully political way. Costa defines the political virtues as comprising «a complex set of dispositions of perception, emotion, judgment, choice, and behavior that are essential to maintain fair social cooperation among free and equal citizens». Also, the political virtues «are exhibited in a nonsporadic and norarbitrary way». Costa (2004), p. 152. Rawls characterizes the political virtues associated to «justice as fairness» in Rawls (1993), pp. 122 y 194.

15. This claim is resisted by some virtue theorists. For example, according to Annas, the virtues are the kind of values about which there is *least* disagreement among people who disagree about other aspects of ethics. I address this point in the paper.

my conclusions. My basic point will be that within political liberalism, what counts as a good character trait is something that must be established empirically.

2. Political Liberalism, Neutrality, and Justice

Political liberalism claims that in societies characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism, principles that concern matters of «constitutional essentials» and basic justice should not be justified as if they were designed to advance normative conceptions, ideals and values which reasonable citizens may disagree about, even though they may be considered, by some of them, the quintessential moral truths[16]. Thus, according to political liberals, the proper justification of the «basic structure of society»[17] of a just regime cannot rest on elements which reasonable persons may find questionable in light of their own comprehensive views. Instead, the justification of the basic institutional arrangements must rely on public reasons and thus be acceptable to *all* reasonable persons. Liberalism understands that a conception of justice must be acceptable to all reasonable citizens rather than some fraction of them. A society that would advance human excellence or values of perfection, by the mere fact of appealing to elements about which there is no reasonable agreement among all reasonable people, would be at most acceptable to a fraction of the reasonable citizenry. However, it would not be acceptable to them all.

Reasonable disagreement about normative ideals or comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral conceptions is irremediable in a liberal society, and so the idea of grounding a conception of political morality on one such particular ideal or conception is not an appropriate starting point —at least if we are committed to truly liberal politics. This statement must not be understood as expressing or granting the truth of liberal values. The same thesis applies to those forms of liberalism that argue that, say, a just society is grounded in, or best promotes, the liberal value of autonomy[18]. The most that those committed to normative liberal conceptions can get is a comprehensive version of liberalism, insofar as the values they affirm are historically associated with this political tradition. Liberal values like autonomy or, say, individuality or experimentation, form part of a comprehensive conception and so they

16. However, political liberals tend to argue that in matters of ordinary legislation, reasonable citizens may vote their consciences and appeal to their contestable (but reasonable) comprehensive doctrines.
17. The basic structure of society concerns society's main social, economic, and political institutions, and «how they fit together» into one «system of social cooperation from one generation to the next». Rawls (1993), p. 11.
18. Cf. e.g. Dworkin (1988), p. 20 for a characterization of the concept. Now, this value has a particular regulative aspect that is incompatible with, say, much of the substantive content of morality considered from a religious point of view. Cf. Dombrowski (2001), p. 49. Rawls himself claims that notions such as autonomy must not be appealed to when justifying a political conception of justice. Cf. Rawls (1997), p. 586.

are politically equivalent to any other non-liberal, reasonable value; in a liberal society they are as contestable as any other values and thus they are unable to gain the unanimous support of reasonable persons in societies characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism.

This is not the end of the story for liberalism, though. Liberalism and *a fortiori* liberal societies are characterized in terms of the thesis that the state is (or, at least, should be) neutral[19] regarding the way it evaluates the different plans of life or conceptions of the good of its citizens. Now, liberals typically claim that neutrality with regard to the good is not only a core liberal value, but a requirement of justice. It is, so to speak, the modern version and the appropriate generalization of the ideal of religious tolerance. Consequently, disagreement about the good does not affect the core of liberal politics, namely that a just liberal society is neutral regarding the life plans and comprehensive values of those who inhabit it. Surely, it is a matter of controversy how the «neutrality of the state» thesis should be understood. There are different ways to understand what a neutral, liberal state is[20]. In this paper, I will assume that *neutrality of justification* is the most plausible version of the ideal. Neutrality of justification requires that any policies pursued by the state should be justified independently of any appeal to the supposed superiority of any particular way or ways of life, and to any particular conception of the good.

As a consequence of what I have just stated, liberalism must not be comprehensive. Liberal principles of justice might not be questionable by reasonable persons. In this paper I will not engage in a full presentation or critical evaluation of any particular view of political liberalism. I will just grant that political liberalism is a project worth pursuing. The question I am interested in here is rather whether there is a place for a proper characterization of the moral virtues within a liberal political framework. In particular, I want to investigate whether it is possible to characterize the moral virtues in a way that is compatible with the liberal thesis of the neutrality of justification, or whether this is in principle impossible, as political liberals seem to argue.

3. Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics and Reasonable Pluralism

In the Rawlsian version of political liberalism, the elements that explain the fact that different persons fully using their rational capacities reach different views about the content of the human good are «the burdens of judg-

19. Rawls laments the use of the term: «I believe […] that the term *neutrality* is unfortunate; some of its connotations are highly misleading, others suggest altogether impracticable principles». Rawls (1993), p. 193.

20. They are neutrality of aim, neutrality of effect and neutrality of justification. Cf. Arneson (2003), pp. 193ff for a characterization of the different understanding of the concept. Arneson mentions that theorists claim that only one of them is the correct version that must be incorporated in the liberal landscape. Rawls also presents an analysis of the concept of neutrality and the way «justice as fairness» is related to them in Rawls (1993), pp. 191-193, although his characterization is different than Arneson's.

ment». Thus, they explain the *reasonable* character of pluralism. Rawls writes: «the sources of reasonable disagreement —the burdens of judgment— among reasonable persons are the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of the power of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life»[21]. According to Rawls, pluralism about the good is not a result of a defect or shortcoming of reason, but a necessary consequence of the full exercise of both theoretical and practical reason in a liberal polity.

The fact of reasonable pluralism seems to preclude the very idea of characterizing the virtues. As a matter of fact, the claim that there is no place for a proper understanding of virtue in a liberal political framework seems to be straightforward. At least in its most prominent, eudaimonistic version, virtue has a strong link with the good for humans, or what constitutes a good human life[22]. These are exactly the subjects about which reasonable persons have different understandings.

For example, Rosalind Hursthouse argues that «[a] virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well»[23]. Julia Annas writes that

> […] virtue is not just one value in life, which could reasonably be outweighed by others, such as money; it has a special status such that, on the weaker version [of the classical version of virtue ethics], those without it do not flourish whatever else they have, and, on the stronger version, virtue is necessary and sufficient for a flourishing life[24].

In this fashion, eudaimonistic versions of virtue ethics maintain that there is a true conception of what constitutes a good human life and claim that the virtues are somehow related to this ideal. Within what Annas calls the «classical version of the tradition»[25], different conceptions maintain that

21. Ibídem, pp. 55-56.
22. Some writers argue that what is good for humans and what is a good life are two distinct notions. In this vein, Charles Guignon says that «asking about the good life for humans is not the same —or is not obviously the same— as asking what it is to be a good human». Guignon (1999), p. vii, quoted by Swanton (2003), p. 56. In this paper, I don't distinguish between these two notions. It seems intuitive to claim that the two notions are related. Thus, Christine Swanton writes that «[e]udaimonism argues for a connection between goodness in humans and a good *life* for a human which is so intimate that for eudaimonism, the Ultimate Question of ethics is what it is for a human being to have a good life». Swanton (2003), pp. 56-57. Additionally, in case these two concepts were different, I take it that political liberals would say that both of them might be understood differently by diverse reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral comprehensive conceptions.
23. Hursthouse (2002), p. 167. In a similar fashion, Swanton characterizes eudaimonism as «the virtue-ethical view that [understands that] a virtue characteristically conduces to, or at least partly constitutes the flourishing of the agent». Swanton (2003), p. 15.
24. Annas (2005), p. 552.
25. Ibídem, p. 515.

there is a *necessary* relationship between virtue and eudaimonia[26]. Modern versions may understand the relationship in different terms. But it is surely the case that virtue and comprehensive ideals concerning the human good are somehow connected. For instance, Christine Swanton argues that a characteristic feature of the eudaimonist approach is that the virtues are *good* for its possessors[27]. And, certainly, this attribute is intimately connected with the good life[28].

The *very idea* that the virtues are *tightly related* to a conception of goodness in human beings and the good life (though perhaps they do not guarantee it[29]) seems to make any characterization of them contestable in societies characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism —different reasonable persons may understand the relevant notions differently[30]. However, virtue ethicists are not ready to compromise their understanding of this ideal since it is constitutive of their whole approach to morality. Thus, Annas says that «there are some judgments about action which are not only widely shared but *not negotiable* when we think about virtue and the good life. This is just part of the background from which we all begin»[31].

Eudaimonistic conceptions of the virtues seem to be in great tension with the fact of reasonable pluralism. In a liberal society there are many different, incompatible comprehensive though reasonable conceptions of what's good for humans. Political liberalism takes as its starting point that our societies are characterized by pluralism regarding the good. Moreover, I have emphasized that

26. Some exponents of the classical version of the tradition (the Stoics surely being the most conspicuous ones) argue that virtue is *sufficient* for eudaimonia.
27. Swanton (2003), p. 19.
28. Ibídem, p. 57. The precise nature of the connection is subject to considerable debate within eudaimonistic virtue ethics. For example, Swanton writes that «[a] virtue by definition is partially constitutive of goodness qua human being, and to be (fully) good qua human being it is necessary to flourish. Hence the eudaimonistic idea that what makes a trait a virtue is in part a certain connection to agent-flourishing». Ibídem, p. 79. The analysis and evaluation of this point is beyond the scope of this paper.
29. Swanton says that «[o]n the views both of Aristotle and neo-Aristotelians, one might exercise the virtues needed for one's flourishing, but be dealt such a severe blow of tragic ill fortune that one's life, when seen as a whole, cannot be described as happy. Just as healthy living does not guarantee health, so being virtuous does not guarantee happiness. However, one should cultivate the virtues because that is «the only reliable bet» for one's flourishing, «though […] I might be unlucky and, because of my virtue, wind up on the rack».» Ibídem, p. 78 (note deleted). The quote is from Hursthouse (1987), p. 42.
30. The notion of the human's good may be understood substantially or formally. If the latter, the conception may be understood as a «final end» and thus be defined by formal constraints rather than by substantive content. This does not make it less contestable, though. For example, one traditional formal constrain is «completeness»: all actions are done for its sake; it is not sought for the sake of anything further. This may be incompatible with consequentialist conceptions.
31. Annas (2005), p. 524, my emphasis.

such pluralism is not considered a *mere* pluralism, but a *reasonable* pluralism. Political liberalism grants that there are different, sensible, rational ways to understand the human good, and that (at least many of) these different understandings are not unreasonable. Now, the key issue is that these different conceptions of what is the truly human good are incompatible (maybe even incommensurable). Different philosophical, moral and religious traditions may have different reasonable views of what constitutes a good human life, or when a person flourishes. Thus, it seems that in a liberal society, there are different incompatible understandings of what is a moral virtue. Now, as there is no reason to believe that these normative traditions may understand human flourishing in the same fashion, there is no reason either to think that their understanding of the virtues is the same. The two concepts of the human good and the virtues are connected in the eudaimonist tradition. Thus, eudaimonism is incompatible with political liberalism. Its characterization of the moral virtues —whatever it is in concrete— is going to clash with some reasonable citizens' understanding of the issue.

Let me briefly present an example to illustrate the point I am making, by looking at two plausible, though incompatible, views of the virtues. My goal will be to show that the existence of different, incompatible though reasonable views of what constitutes the human good implies the existence of different virtues. This issue is what puts pressure on the very idea of characterizing the virtues. It surely seems to be the case that an Aristotelian account would hold that rationality is a core feature of human beings. In consequence, Aristotelians would understand that human excellence involves the best display of this capacity. Since they argue that human rationality constitutes the characteristic feature of persons, they would claim that other elements of human beings are subordinated to this ideal[32]. The traits associated to the «lower» parts of human beings would not be considered virtues. Now, another reasonable person might deny that, and there is no reason to believe that she will necessarily do so without good reasons. For example, in *Uneasy Virtue*, Julia Driver vindicates a series of virtues associated with the systematic ignorance of matters of fact —traits she dubs «the virtues of ignorance»[33]. It is surely the

32. This point by no means implies that rationality is the unique feature of Aristotelian virtue ethics. For instance, Julia Driver writes that «Aristotle's account of virtue is enormously rich. Crucial is the integration of emotion and reason. While he gave emotional response a central place in his ethics, it is clear that, like many classical writers, he viewed reason and rationality as necessary to virtue as well. For Aristotle, virtue required the exercise of intellectual capacities and required the agent to know what she is doing —to see things as they are. Thus the connection between virtue and correct perception». Driver (2001), p. 12.

33. Driver mentions the following virtues of ignorance: modesty, blind charity, impulsive courage, a certain kind of forgiveness and trust. Cf. Ibídem, Chapter 2 for the treatment of the issue. It might be claimed that the issue is due to the fact that Driver's account is consequentialist. But this is not so. We may surely imagine an eudaimonist defence of the virtues of ignorance.

case that Driver's virtues of ignorance may be criticized on intuitive grounds[34]. But that does not mean that it is an *unreasonable* understanding of the virtues. Thus, it seems that different character traits, associated with different conceptions of the good, seem to be vindicated by different normative conceptions. I take it that —at least in some of the cases we may evaluate— political liberalism would say that the case at hand illustrates the fact of reasonable pluralism: both parties may certainly have good reasons for their claims[35]. Failing to understand a certain trait which one school of thought considers a quintessential moral virtue may not be unreasonable.

The fact of reasonable pluralism goes against the very idea of characterizing the virtues. The point seems to be that reasonable value pluralism implies reasonable virtue pluralism. Consequently, the question of what is a good character trait in a liberal society seems to have no *definite* answer. The most we can make of it is to say that it depends on the normative comprehensive conceptions *we* have and the values *we* hold in high regard. Reasonable religious persons may value certain traits associated with their doctrines, liberals might value those traits associated with values historically associated with their own tradition, and so on. Now, this seems frustrating for those interested in understanding what the virtues *are*. We are interested in characterizing the virtues, but necessarily we in principle cannot do so. It is in this way that liberalism and eudaimonistic virtue ethics seem to be in tension, at least if virtue ethics is understood as (among other things) providing an explanation of why certain traits are to be considered human excellences.

A possible reply to the point I have just made might be the following[36]. We may say that it is false that different reasonable understandings of the human good imply the existence of different virtues. For example, we may claim that Samurai warriors, Quaker pacifists and corporate whistle-blowers can all be brave, in the same understanding of bravery. They do different things in order to act bravely, but this does not create different virtues. Thus, the fact of reasonable pluralism does not imply different understandings of the virtues. However, I take it that this reply is inadequate —it does not address the real worry. The response presupposes that different, reasonable comprehensive conceptions agree that, say, bravery is a virtue. But there is no reason to think that such an agreement is going to occur in a society characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism. Perhaps reasonable persons may say, with good reasons, that they don't think such a trait is valuable. It is not just that reasonable cit-

34. The virtues of ignorance may involve obvious mistakes in self-assessment. Jeanine M. Grenberg writes that in Driver's account «[a]n agent could be entirely mistaken, even self-deceived, about a particular trait of character, and the trait could still qualify as virtuous». Grenberg (2003), p. 271. This point is surely counterintuitive.

35. That does not mean that the issue cannot be addressed on a rational basis. In this sense, Gerald Gaus writes that «[m]atters on which reasonable pluralism obtains still may be rationally discussed». Gaus (2005), p. 65.

36. The reply was suggested to me by Julia Annas.

izens may disagree about what constitutes, characterizes or best instantiates a brave person —say: a violent warrior or a pacifist farmer. They may say that being brave is not a good thing at all —it does not form part of those traits they consider to be the virtues. Reasonable persons have different, though reasonable ideals, conceptions, or values about what constitutes a good human life. And they may consider that the life of a brave person is not good. To claim so does not seem to be *unreasonable* (though perhaps it is *false*[37]).

4. A Place for Consequentialist Virtue Ethics within Political Liberalism

The answer to the question of whether we are able to characterize the virtues in a liberal society might be completely different when we consider some non-eudaimonsitic conceptions of virtue ethics. These forms may not be incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism[38]. Thus, the conclusion we have obtained so far —at least for the moment— only applies to eudaimonist accounts of the virtues.

The key issue of non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics is that they do not maintain that there is a *tight relationship* between virtue and eudaimonia. Instead, virtue is understood in other terms. In this section, I will concentrate my analysis on consequentialist accounts of the virtues[39]. In non-eudaimonistic, consequentialist versions of virtue ethics, moral virtues are roughly understood as character traits that promote the good of others[40]. Now, virtue consequentialism does not maintain that the virtues are those traits that *maximize* the good of others or the overall good (as in utilitarianism), but those that *promote* it. Moreover, they are not considered *human excellences*, but *useful dispositions*. Thus, on this view, virtue is not related to a comprehensive conception that some reasonable people might find unacceptable: Who could reasonably argue that advancing the good of others constitutes a sectarian claim? This statement does not claim that agents *should* advance other people's good; it only says that doing so *is virtuous*. Additionally, it does not have a maximizing character. Surely, if the statement were a virtue ethical reformulation of utilitarianism, it certainly may be rejectable by some reasonable

37. But this issue is irrelevant. Political liberalism avoids all kind of controversy at the level of truth values of comprehensive conceptions. It is in this vein that one of the key ideas of Rawls's view is that «reasonableness» is a good enough standard of evaluation. It lacks the ontological compromises of the concept of truth (This standard has other benefits. Cf. Rawls (1993), p. xxii for a discussion of the issue.)
38. Though this is not true of all forms of non-eudaimonistic virtue theory. For example, «Nietzschean» forms certainly understand virtue in a way incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism.
39. So perhaps there are other non-eudaimonistic conceptions of virtue ethics compatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism.
40. Consequentialist theories might say that traits that promote the good of the agent (but not at the expense of others) are also virtues. I will not focus my attention to them in this paper. They are *prudential* virtues, not *moral* virtues.

persons. But virtue consequentialism is not necessarily committed to the maximization of the good. In this section, I will argue that the virtue consequentialism should not to be understood in maximizing terms, but instead in a more relaxed, non-maximizing way. In the following section I will also argue that it should also be the subject of an additional qualification. The promotion of the good of others must be fully compatible with a key liberal ideal, namely, «the priority of the right»[41]. Thus, the claim that moral virtue must be understood as producing good consequences should respect the limits of, and serve a role within, the political conception of justice.

In *Uneasy Virtue*, Driver argues that «[c]haracter traits are simply another thing that, like action, can be evaluated along consequentialist lines»[42]. Thus, in her account, «a moral virtue is a character trait that produces good consequences for others»[43]. Virtue «produces more good (in the actual world) than not *systematically*»[44]. Now, one key issue is that this consequentialist account is not necessarily maximizing:

> For a trait to be a virtue it must produce more good than not, but this does not mean that it must produce the most good along any specific range of good. Also, I am not claiming that the good in question is pleasure. The good in question is the flourishing of social creatures, which does not always get cashed out in terms of pleasure[45].

It seems to me that this understanding of the moral virtues is fully compatible with liberal politics. The relevant issue is that it understands the virtues in a way that bypasses problems associated with the fact of reasonable pluralism and thus seems to be fully compatible with the very idea of political justification. In societies characterized by pluralism about the good life, instead of understanding justice in terms of the good with its distinctive set of associated virtues, we begin by determining what is right or just, independently of what's good and the character traits associated with that conception[46]. Dri-

41. Cf. Rawls (1993), p. 176 for a characterization of notion of «the priority of the right».
42. Driver (2001), p. 72.
43. *Ibídem*, p. 44. Driver understands «character trait» as «a disposition or cluster of dispositions». Ibídem, p. 60.
44. Ibídem, p. 82. It should be noted that on this account virtuous agents may not *aim* at producing good consequences.
45. Ibídem, pp. 91-92.
46. In Rawls's view, a political conception of justice is designed for a specific kind of *subject*, namely, the basic structure of society. Also, its *mode of presentation* is free-standing. This allows it to constitute a module, «an essential constituent part, that fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it». Rawls (1993), 12. Finally, the *content* of the political conception of justice is expressed in terms of «certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society». Id., 13. He writes that «[t]his public culture comprises the political institutions of a constitutional regime and the public traditions of their interpretation (including those of the judiciary), as well as historic texts and documents that are common knowledge». Id, 13-14.

ver's account seems to be fully compatible with that approach. In her non-eudaimonist, consequentialist approach, the virtues are *not* associated with a true conception of human flourishing. Moral virtues are merely dispositions that produce good consequences. Thus, their value is purely instrumental; the virtues are traits which serve values specified independently of them[47]. In Annas's apt wording, in a non-eudaimonist, consequentialist account the virtues «get their value from being productive of consequentialist good […] [and] it is this good-productivity which will determine their shape»[48]. I take it that this idea (when qualified in a particular way I will mention shortly) is fully compatible with political liberalism. Thus, in a liberal society, the virtues are those traits that promote the good of others. Perhaps this is somehow disappointing; the account is not substantive. The consequentialist characterization of the virtues is going to make them «plastic dispositions which take their changing shape from the shifting circumstances of good-productivity»[49]. This lack of substantive content leads obviously to a revisionary account of the virtues. Nonetheless, they are the virtues political liberalism can accommodate.

Is this so? The obvious problem this vindication of the moral virtues seems to face is that it relies on the truth of a certain form of consequentialism. Now, as such, this is just another normative conception —moreover, one that is not shared by all reasonable persons. However, this is not necessarily the case. Rawls convincingly argues that attention to consequences constitutes an issue that must be accommodated by *any* sensible, rationally defensible conception of justice[50]. This makes virtue consequentialism *prima facie* plausible. Moreover, Driver's account is *not* maximizing. For a trait to be considered a virtue it is sufficient that it produce more good than not —it is not necessary that it maximizes the good. Thus, it seems to follow that virtue consequentialism does not imply the truth of a particular conception of morality such as utilitarianism. And, therefore, the understanding of the virtues as those traits that produce good consequences is not tied to a normative conception reasonable citizens may find dubious. On the contrary,

47. There are some instrumental accounts that make some conceptual space for intrinsic value. For example, Hurka (2001) develops an account in this vein, characterizing virtue as a positive attitude towards the intrinsic good —loving the good— and, in consequence, has intrinsic value. Hurka's account is compatible with political liberalism, though. The consideration of the intrinsic good is subject to reasonable disagreement.
48. Annas (2005), p. 528. Annas herself does not consider virtue consequentialism a plausible conception of the virtues, though.
49. Ibídem, p. 529.
50. Rawls remarks that «deontological theories are defined as non-teleological ones, not as views that characterize the rightness of institutions and acts independently from their consequences. All ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account in judging rightness. One which did not would simply be irrational, crazy». Rawls (1999a), p. 26. I believe Rawls's point is sensible, though its defense is beyond the scope of this work.

it expresses an idea that any conception of social justice must somehow accommodate. Thus, virtue consequentialism seems to be compatible with political liberalism[51].

There is another issue to consider. The question is whether the notion of producing «good consequences», although understood in a non-maximizing way, is still compatible with neutrality of justification. Certainly, it may be claimed that the very idea of paying attention to consequences relies on a particular comprehensive understanding of the good —one that, say, equates good with pleasure or preference satisfaction. This particular view might be thought to be incompatible with the key liberal thesis I have endorsed in section 3. As a matter of fact, Rawls himself may be interpreted as arguing that such is the case. He writes in *Political Liberalism*, when defending the *distribuendum* of «social primary goods» characteristic of «justice as fairness»:

> In political liberalism the problem of interpersonal comparisons arises as follows: given the conflicting comprehensive conceptions of the good, how is it possible to reach such a political understanding of what are to count as appropriate claims? The difficulty is that the government can no more act to maximize the fulfillment of citizens' rational preferences, or wants (as in utilitarianism), or to advance human excellence, or the values of perfection (as in perfectionism), than it can act to advance Catholicism or Protestantism, or any other religion. None of these views of the meaning, value, and purpose of human life, as specified by the corresponding comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrines, is affirmed by citizens generally, and so the pursuit of any one of them through basic institutions gives political society a sectarian character[52].

Thomas Nagel may also be interpreted as advancing the same objection when he writes that «[t]o assign impersonal value to the satisfaction of all preferences is to accept a particular view of the good —a component of one form of utilitarianism— which many would find clearly unacceptable and which they would not be unreasonable to reject»[53].

Rawls's and Nagel's point is that a political conception of justice must necessarily adopt an objective standard of interpersonal comparison (such as a standard of social primary goods), instead of a subjective standard of utility

51. There is a difficulty to consider. Any sensible comprehensible conception has to pay some attention to consequences, but that may not commit it to the claim that something must have good consequences to be a virtue. Say: there is a trait that has slightly bad consequences overall, but which some people think is admirable for some other reason (as an expression or perfection of human nature, or as result of a religious injunction). From my point of view, this trait should not be considered virtuous, although some reasonable persons may believe it is so. The account I am presenting is revisionary, and thus may conflict with what we may traditionally think are the virtues.
52. Rawls (1993), pp. 179-180.
53. Nagel, (1987), p. 227.

(perhaps understood as preference satisfaction)[54]. The issue that interests me in this context is the claim that the idea of utility is incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism. In other words, Rawls and Nagel's point is that a subjective, welfarist standard of utility is not neutral. On the contrary, it is based on a comprehensive understanding of the true human good.

I think this argument is flawed. As I have shown above, Driver does not think that pleasure is the good in question. From my perspective, I take it that the best way to interpret the promotion of «good consequences» in Driver's account is in terms of *utility*. But the notion of utility is fully compatible with political liberalism —it does not violate the thesis of neutrality of justification. Surely, Nagel is correct when pointing out that the notion of utility is connected with a conception of the good. But it is a conception of the good fully compatible with neutrality of justification. The point to consider is the following: although to claim that peoples' utility is valuable constitutes a normative claim about the good, it is a «second order» claim about the human good[55]. It does not specify what people must prefer. Thus, insofar as we argue that people's utility is good, but don't specify what is or must be the content of citizen's preferences, we are not making a substantive claim incompatible with neutrality of justification[56]. Thus, Rawls and Nagel are wrong when they put at the same level substantive normative conceptions, like religious conceptions or ideals of human perfection, and the thesis regarding the value of utility typically associated with utilitarianism. Contrary to what they argue, the notion of utility puts on a «common scale» diverse first order normative conceptions[57].

5. What We Are Justified in Doing when Acting Virtuously?

There are two final issues to consider in the vindication of virtue consequentialism from within the political liberal framework. The first one is whether the promotion of good consequences by the virtuous must by com-

54. Cf. Scanlon (1975), p. 658 for a characterization of «objective» and «subjective» standards of interpersonal comparison. As a matter of fact, the Rawlsian notion of social primary goods seems not to be compatible with neutrality of justification, though I cannot address fully in this paper. Cf. e.g. Alexander and Schwarzchild (1987), esp. p. 89-90 for an argument in this sense.
55. Cf. Barry (1995), p. 129. Barry illustrates the point with the notion of autonomy. This is inadequate, though. As I have argued in *supra*, section 2, the very idea of autonomy is part of a liberal comprehensive conception.
56. Perhaps there is still a problem here. A religious person *might* reject the appeal to preference satisfaction because she might consider that there are immoral preferences that should not be satisfied. I take it that, insofar as she is reasonable, she must accept that the evaluation of the content of the preferences is something that concerns each individual citizen.
57. In this vein, Arneson argues that «the proposal to evaluate public policy proposals in utility terms is itself a suggestion for coping with the fact of [reasonable] pluralism». Arneson (1990), p. 232.

patible with the limits on the conceptions of the good specified by the reasonable conception of justice adopted in the liberal polity. Rawls writes that in a liberal society

> The intense convictions of the majority, if they are indeed mere preferences without any foundation in the principles of justice antecedently established, have no weight to begin with. The satisfaction of these feelings has no value that can be put in the scales against the claims of equal liberty […] Against these principles [of distributive justice] neither the intensity of feeling nor its being shared by the majority counts for anything […] Indeed, we may think of the principles of justice as an agreement not to take into account certain feelings when assessing the conduct of others[58].

In a context characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism, reasonable persons endorse different conceptions of what is good for humans and what constitutes a good life. Thus, reasonable citizens must recognize that *other citizens* may have a different understanding of the good. The production of good consequences must respect the way different reasonable persons understand the issue —they endorse them in light of reasonable considerations, not unreasonable or wrong considerations. Thus, reasonable virtuous persons should not promote the good of others as if they were not reasonable persons endorsing reasonable normative conceptions. The promotion of *their* good must respect the way *they* understand the issue. In other words: virtuous persons should accord *equal concern and respect* to those that hold different comprehensive views[59].

One way to make my point may be the following[60]. We must not understand the promotion of, say, religious values within the polity as a form of advancing the interests of the religious persons in question[61]. Such promotion

58. Rawls (1999a), p. 395. In this passage Rawls is criticizing utilitarianism, but I take it that the points he raises illustrate the issue at hand.
59. The issue is traditionally characterized in the context of discussion of liberal policymaking. Thus, Macedo writes that «[w]here a minority's good (or a majority's good) and its view of its own good are simply left [out] of the account in policymaking, there can be no public justification for the resulting policy: no justification that all ought to be able to accept. Those who have not been accorded 'equal concern and respect' will rightly feel they have no reason to recognize the legitimacy of the lawmaking process». Macedo (1990), p. 122.
60. My example follows Garreta Leclercq (2007), p. 183.
61. Rawls's own position might be interpreted in such a way, though. When arguing in favor of the «veil of ignorance» in his characterization of the «original position», Rawls writes that «the fact that we affirm a particular religious, philosophical, or moral comprehensive doctrine with its associated conception of the good is not a reason for us to propose, or to expect others to accept, a conception of justice that favors those in this position. Similarly, the fact that we affirm a particular religious, philosophical, or moral comprehensive doctrine with its associated conception of the good is not a reason to propose, or expect others to accept, a conception of justice that favors those of that persuasion». Rawls (1993), p. 24.

may occur in virtue of a genuine concern for the good of others. But this does not mean that the religious person is justified in her promotion of her values with respect to other citizens. A religious believer may think that, insofar as she has already made the correct choice —she believes she endorses the true religious comprehensive conception— it is her duty to help other people to live fully valuable lives. Thus, she may think others should endorse the (religious) truth, that it is her duty to impose it, and that the state should do so —perhaps through public education. But this action is not justified. Assume that the liberal conception of justice has as part of its normative content principles like liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. This implies that there are some boundaries on the actions a virtuous person interested in the good of her cofellow citizens may perform. In a liberal society, these boundaries impose justified limits to the actions of the citizenry, even when some particular citizen acts in a particular way for the sake of her fellow citizen's interests. Those that may try to show the benefits of endorsing the principles of the religion in question —perhaps endorsing such a conception will improve the quality of people's lives— must not advance their good through the means of the liberal state, nor use unjust means to make people take such a choice. To do so is to violate the limits a liberal conception of justice imposes[62].

There is a final, though related, point to evaluate, namely, whether the liberal state can endorse and promote those traits identified as the virtues within political liberalism. The issue is complex. On the one hand, it seems that if they *are* the true virtues, and *known* to be the virtues such that they are justifiable to all reasonable persons, then there is nothing questionable in the state endorsing and promoting them. After all, they are the true moral virtues —or at least this is what I am arguing for in this paper. On the other hand, if the state happens to do so it might violate the principle of neutrality of justification[63].

I think that even though we may say that there are certain traits that are virtuous, the endorsement and promotion of the moral virtues must be a personal issue, a concern in which the state should play no role[64]. Thus, the point is that in a liberal society *individuals* are free to pursue their own comprehen-

62. This point may be recognized by comprehensive doctrines themselves due to their substantive content. Traditional religions support liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Moreover, Leif Wenar shows that religions like Roman Catholicism have a substaintive content indistinguishable from Rawls's «justice as fairness». Cf. Wenar (1995), pp. 42-43.
63. The political virtues may be understood as grounded on public reasons and thus be acceptable to all reasonable citizens, independently of the religious, philosophical, or moral comprehensive conceptions they hold. On the contrary, moral virtues seem to be rejectable by reasonable persons even if they are known to be true by some.
64. This point is independent of Driver's account. Perhaps it might be the case that she may have something different in mind. For instance, she *might* argue that politics may properly be arranged to instill in persons virtuous dispositions to produce good consequences (in some sense). I am not *interpreting* her position here, but *using* it to characterize the virtues within political liberalism, though.

sive conceptions of the good, with their associated beliefs about virtue, but the liberal state should not recognize, endorse, and promote them[65]. One key phenomenon of a liberal society I have emphasized in this paper is the fact of reasonable pluralism. In such a society, there are many different and perhaps incompatible ways of life and conceptions of the human good. If the state were to endorse and promote one set of virtues even if we (somehow) knew they were the true virtues, it would become *ipso facto* sectarian. In particular, were the liberal state to act so, it would impose on the citizens a conception reasonable people may find contrary to their own comprehensive views. I have defended virtue consequentialism as a conception of the virtue that is compatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism insofar as it is a conception of the virtues that is not associated with a comprehensive conception of the human good and the good life. But that is not sufficient. Were the liberal state to endorse and promote certain traits, it would be supporting a conception some reasonable citizens may find unreasonable. Some reasonable persons —say, religious believers— might find some traits associated with virtue consequentialism unreasonable, although it happens that these traits are beneficial to other persons. Thus, if the state promotes these traits it will surely be treating religious persons as unreasonable, when liberal politics is compromised by taking their reasonability *ex hypothesi*[66].

I therefore admit that the state has no role in endorsing and promoting those traits that have good consequences. Although they may be considered virtues, some reasonable persons may still disagree that they are the virtues. Those that reject the traits that produce good consequences for others might be challenged on a rational basis, but that does not imply that the liberal state is justified in endorsing or promoting them. Insofar as they find the traits questionable —they are contrary to what they believe are the true virtues— it seems that there is no basis for the liberal state to endorse or promote them. In this paper I have endorsed the idea that the promotion of good consequences for others must respect the values reasonable persons hold. This implies that the liberal state should not embrace those traits we may characterize as the moral virtues. Were the liberal state to endorse and promote the virtues, it would treat certain people as if they were unreasonable[67].

65. Writers like Steven Wall target this claim, asking why civility considerations should always trump content considerations, particularly if persons acting on the content considerations know they have the true/correct view. Thus, person not already inclined to accepting political liberalism might find this paragraph tendentious, although addressing that issue is beyond the scope of the paper.
66. This does not mean that political liberalism considers all religions reasonable. But it does consider so some of them —at least, the major monotheistic religious traditions.
67. Nagel puts it as follows: «we should not impose arrangements, institutions, or requirements on other people on grounds that they could reasonably reject (where reasonableness is not simply a function of the independent rightness or wrongness of the arrangements in question, but genuinely depends on the point of view of the individual in question to some extent)». Nagel (1987), p. 221.

I take it that this point does not undermine the conceptualization of the virtues as those traits that promote other people's good. However, they must be taken as a matter of private action. It makes no sense to criticize the actions of citizens claiming that they are sectarian. They are, almost by definition. Therefore, I believe that there is nothing questionable in claiming that citizens may act virtuously when promoting the good of other persons. They are acting virtuously. Insofar as they act so without violating the limits imposed by a liberal conception of justice, these actions are not incompatible with the priority of the right. They might be only in those cases where the production of good consequences violates the strict boundaries of justice[68].

6. Conclusion: The Virtues A Priori and the Virtues A Posteriori

It is time to conclude. In this paper, I have argued that there is conceptual space to accommodate the moral virtues within political liberalism. Virtue ethics seems to be necessarily associated with a substantive conception of the good and thus it seems to be in tension with the very idea of political liberalism. However, if what I have argued in this paper is correct, that link, although very powerful, is not logical or conceptual. Moreover, I have argued that political liberalism is not necessarily incompatible with a characterization of the virtues. In particular, I have claimed that a liberal society is fully compatible with a non-eudaimonistic, consequentialist though non-maximizing understanding of virtue. There are certain traits that may be considered as virtuous in a liberal society. Following Driver's account, I have claimed that they are those traits that generally produce more good than not, insofar as these good consequences are understood in a non-maximizing way and are compatible with the boundaries drawn by the political conception of justice.

Once we have reached this point, it seems we are able to characterize those traits which are indeed the moral virtues. However, the philosopher as such has little to declare here. *A priori*, all we can say is that they are traits that produce good consequences for others. The virtues are going to be plastic and changeable, in relation to the shifting circumstances and thus of the way of promoting the good. But that's all. To give an account of the real *content* of the answer is not philosophical, but causal. It depends on empirical issues, and so must be investigated as such. But this is not the end of the story. There are *some* things concerning the moral virtues we can consider *a priori*. Despite the fact that we cannot know without empirical investigation what is to be considered a virtue in a liberal society, it seems that there is no reason to believe that the understanding of the moral virtues as those traits that aim at the good of

68. This conclusion is also true of the political virtues since they are part of a political conception of justice *by definition*. Now, the issue about whether the liberal state can endorse and promote the political virtues is the subject of considerable debate within political liberalism. Its analysis and evaluation is beyond the scope of the present essay. Cf. e.g. Costa (2004) for a discussion of the subject.

others vindicates those traits that are traditionally considered to be «moral», nor that traits we usually think are *not* moral will be seen as such in a liberal polity. Virtues are tied to good consequences, and defined by them. There is no reason to think that what we may think of as «virtuous» really is virtuous on this account. Virtue consequentialism is potentially revisionary. Thus, the traits we may characterize as virtuous within political liberalism might not be what we pretheoretically consider as instantiating the moral virtues.

Let me make a final point. I believe that the fact that the moral virtues are not those traits we might pretheoretically considered so is not something we should regret. Political liberalism offers an understanding of liberal politics that might be different to what we may pretheoretically think is the truth of the matter. But this does not constitute a point against it. Our intuitions —moral and otherwise— are not the end of the story for normative theorizing[69], though within political liberalism they have their due place in the process of «reflective equilibrium» that we should perform once we have reached a substantive conception. This may not convince some people, though. However, there is still place for consolation in a liberal society for those not satisfied with the consequentialist vindication of the virtues. The liberal state cannot endorse and promote them, only individuals can act so. In any case, if what I have argued in this paper is correct, they would have *no* reasons to claim that reasonable persons may not be acting virtuously when acting in new, revisionary ways to promote the good of their co-fellow citizens. But they must to do in a manner fully compatible with the priority of the right.

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69. This point is deliberately strong. I entirely accept that many people may have a completely different understanding of the issue.

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