Koray Tütüncü

Liberalism, neutrality and the politics of virtue

Abstract

The relationship between politics and virtue has been a controversial issue. Some significant scholars make a sharp distinction between what is political and what is not, but others underline the impossibility of separating politics from virtue. This article aims to re-consider the problem of virtue in terms of liberal politics. In doing so, it distinguishes three different arguments, namely the 'inescapability of virtue', 'virtue lost' and 'reclamation of virtue' arguments. The first argument underlines the impossibility of separating politics from virtue; the second shows the impossibility of virtuous politics in modern liberal politics; while the third criticises liberal neutrality and individualism which undermines virtue politics. This article offers in their place a Rawlsian solution which centralises justice as the first virtue of a well-ordered liberal society. It argues that, without negotiating fundamental rights and equal liberties, a Rawlsian solution transcends the limitations of liberal neutrality by articulating political virtuousness into liberalism. The result is that it concludes that liberal democracies would be politically virtuous without imposing any particular virtuous life conceptions.

Keywords: *virtue, liberal politics, good life, procedural and substantive neutrality, inequalities, justice, rights, perfectionism, freedoms, obligations, relativism, utilitarian, Kantian, communitarian, individualism*

Introduction

The relationship between politics and virtue has long been a controversial issue. Some significant political scholars make a sharp distinction between what is political and what is not, and consider morality and virtues as apolitical issues,[1] while others underline the impossibility of separating politics from virtues, despite a unity of political and virtuous lives having been more apparent in ancient and medieval times.[2] Some argue that modernity aims to separate politics not only from the religious but also from the virtuous. And, in modernity, a secular critique of scholasticism and superstitious beliefs, as well as religious doctrines, has led to a moral void and an erosion of character

1 Carl Schmitt (2007) has a pioneering position in separating the political from the moral, aesthetical, cultural, religious and economic spheres. He gives great importance to noticing the peculiarity of the political, which defines the relationship between friend and enemy. Political enemies do not need to be morally bad, aesthetically ugly or economically threatening to one's own interests.

2 Peter Berkowitz (2000), in his book *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, defends the idea of the impossibility of separating the virtuous and the political from a rather conservative perspective.

because an alternative moral and virtuous order of society has not been established.[3] Others, on the other hand, celebrate the lack of such a prescribed virtuous alternative on the grounds that a multiplicity of good life conceptions and moral pluralism, as well as individual liberty and autonomy, require that any conception of a good life, either for an individual or for a society as a whole, should simply not be offered.

Liberalism, as an heir of Enlightenment philosophy, makes the separation of the political from the moral, the virtuous and the religious sphere thanks to a primary principle: that is, the neutrality of the state. Recently, the liberal principle of neutrality has become the most significant venue for the politics versus virtue controversy. However, it is not only the neutrality principle, but the whole liberal political tradition, that has become a venue for political and philosophical controversies after the collapse of communism which had been the most significant rival to liberalism. David Walsh argues that, after the collapse of communism, liberal politics initially:

> *Has emerged as the undisputed touchstone of the good in politics. (1997: 1)*

However, following this initial triumph, the liberal tradition of political thought has been faced with:

> *A confusion more profound and more pervasive than at any time in its history. (1997: 1)*

The theoretical confusions, along with the amplifying social and political cleavages in liberal democracies, have obliged scholars to find a convincing answer to what holds a liberal society together. Walsh further detects the increase in scholarly anxiety over liberalism and liberal society as follows:

> *The inclination of theorists has been to propose a return to the more robust emphasis on individual and civic virtue as the means of reinvigorating a moribund liberal politics. The call for a return to traditional values has become a staple of political rhetoric. A new emphasis on the education of virtue and a recognition of individual responsibility represents an important political factor on the contemporary scene…This is often associated with a 'conservative' orientation within politics, but the appeal of communal virtues is by no means absent from left-wing inclinations. (Walsh, 1997: 2)*

Given this framework, this article elaborates on the relationship between liberal politics and virtue by centralising the scholarly controversy over the liberal principle of neutrality. Scholars of political theory have contested arguments about the relationship between politics and virtue in modern liberal democracies. Most of the contested arguments on the politics of virtue revolve around liberalism as the most dominant form in the tradition of political thought in general and the neutrality principle of liberalism in particular. Starting an interrogation on the question 'Is virtue a political phenomenon?', this article deals with the relationship between the liberal tradition of political thought and the concept of virtue, as well as the relationship between the neutrality principle and certain liberal virtues such as toleration, freedom and equality.

3 Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), in his major work *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, underlines the impossibility of virtue in the fragmented moral world of liberalism.

Despite the multiplicity of arguments on the relationship between virtue and liberal politics, it is possible to draw three basic argumentative lines that illuminate the politics, virtue and neutrality debates. One argument is the 'inescapability of virtue', which underlines that, in ancient times and modernity alike, virtue has been a fundamental and unavoidable component of politics and political life. Liberalism as one form of the political thought tradition cannot get rid of virtue politics. The second argument is 'virtue lost', which underlines the impossibility of achieving virtue in the post-Enlightenment period. Liberalism as a strain of Enlightenment philosophy has nothing to do with virtue politics. Finally, the third argument, the 'reclamation of virtue' criticises the elimination of virtue in political deeds, particularly within a liberal democratic regime, while it is also optimistic about the establishment of virtue politics within liberalism.

In opposition to these three arguments – which, respectively, aim at conceiving liberal politics as an always-already virtuous politics; as giving up liberal politics for taking a refuge in ancient virtues and politics; and as re-inscribing virtue into liberal politics at the expense of fundamental individual rights and liberties – this article takes a Rawlsian stand by emphasising his argument on 'justice as the first virtue' of a liberal democratic society. It goes on to claim that, without compromising individual rights and liberties, the basic structure of liberal society may enhance justice and fairness, as well as equality, as significant political virtues. Furthermore, it may bring about a substantive neutrality, which is a neutrality in the sense of establishing common ground for an overlapping consensus among citizens who have different conceptions of good and, yet, are able to share a common ground thanks to the public use of reason to realise a just and fair society. This essentially goes hand-in-hand with the presence of significant political virtues.

Liberal neutrality

In recent years, liberalism as a tradition of political thought has become more inclusive in the sense of the articulation of a wide range of arguments into its underlying philosophical thread. Additionally, it has become diversified in the sense that the debate among liberals has become, at times, harsher than the debate between liberals and non-liberals. What is common to all these debates, however, is that centralisation of the principle of neutrality appears as the common denominator of liberal political thought. In a similar vein, Simon Caney underlines that:

> *Many contemporary liberals claim that the state should be neutral between competing conceptions of the good life. (1991: 457)*

And yet, within the liberal tradition of political thought, the principle of neutrality is not understood identically; instead, it is defended in at least two separate ways. Procedural neutrality requires the impartiality, detachment and objectivity of the liberal state in implementing legal rules consistently. Substantive neutrality, on the other hand, goes beyond the procedural objectivity of the liberal state in terms of the legality of its actions. Substantive neutrality requires the liberal state to be impartial towards rival theoretical perspectives on a good life. The liberal state has to recognise differentiating

religious doctrines and conceptions of good, as well as secular doctrines and conceptions of good; however, it does not promote any of them (Gardbaum, 1991: 1351).

Without regard for the way it is defended and defined, the principle of neutrality has become the essential characteristic of contemporary liberalism, given that the advocators of liberalism as well as its critics have centralised the principle of neutrality as opposed to moral values, religious ideals and virtue ethics. Among others, Will Kymlicka underlines the importance of the principle of neutrality in stating:

> *A distinctive feature of contemporary liberal theory is its emphasis on 'neutrality' – the view that the state should not reward or penalize particular conceptions of the good life but, rather, should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued. (1989: 883)*

Kymlicka's statement also indicates that liberals have defended 'The neutrality of the state toward different conceptions of the good life', whereas critics of liberalism have attacked liberalism both for being neutral, by not ranking and encouraging virtuous lives, and not being truly neutral in terms of the problems of gender, class and race. Some of the significant critics of liberalism are known as republicans. They maintain that both the procedural and substantive neutrality of the state is politically paralysing, since the state has to possess stronger and wide-ranging ends. In particular:

> *The state should promote the primacy of public over private life and inculcate civic virtue among its citizens. (Gardbaum,1991: 1352).*

Other critics consist of various groups having similar opposing ideas about liberalism. Those scholars, engaging in critical legal studies, feminist theories and critical race studies, argue that the liberal state does not act impartially. That is to say, despite an apparent neutrality discourse, the liberal state rewards a particular conception of the good life along the lines of 'class, sex and race' inequalities. In addition, such scholars argue that, even if it is possible to be truly neutral, 'The neutrality of the state is a false political ideal' on the grounds that:

> *The state should promote meaningful freedom and equality by breaking down and regulating those social structures and hierarchies – both public and private – that keep some in chains. (Gardbaum, 1991: 1352).*

It is obvious that, along with its defining characteristics, the whole political and philosophical foundations of the liberal tradition of political thought have been criticised fervently by those who aim to eliminate liberalism, as well as by those who label their political identity as liberal. Mark J. Lutz explains the multi-faceted criticisms levelled at liberalism as follows:

> *Few beliefs so unite contemporary intellectuals as the conviction that the political philosophy that has grounded and directed liberal democracy since its inception requires serious reconsideration and perhaps even abandonment. The hope and pride once invested in liberalism's promise to protect equal and universal human rights, to foster self-government and provide everyone with the ever-expanding benefits of modern science and cosmopolitan culture has*

given way to a suspicion that the petty individualism and coarseness of modern society, its fragmentation and spiritual flatness are due in large part to liberalism's foundational accounts of human nature and natural rights. While some may be accused of criticizing liberalism without having fully confronted the subtlety or probity of its founders' thought, one cannot help but be impressed by the widening consensus among scholars of all stripes and calibers that we need to reconsider its theoretical foundations. (1997: 1128)

Given the scholarly consensus over reconsidering the capacities of the liberal tradition of political thought in satisfying the needs and ambitions of individuals and social groups in contemporary liberal democracies, the neutrality principle of the tradition is reconsidered in the following sections in terms of its relationship with virtue.

Inescapability of virtue

The inescapability of virtue argument starts with the assumption that virtue is one of the fundamental phenomena of political life, in a similar vein to the concepts of freedom, justice and equality, rights and obligations (Berkowitz, 1999: 3). Accordingly, then, any coherent political theories that aim to frame human needs and aspirations on political lines, as well as any political regime seeking legitimacy, has to give an account to virtue either in terms of cultivating certain virtues or promoting a particular conception of the good life, which seems to be superior amongst various good and virtuous conceptions of human life.

It is not obvious to many modern political theorists, especially liberal ones, that virtue is fundamental to political life, but Peter Berkowitz, among others, underlines that ancient as well as medieval political philosophies have centralised the concept of virtue as the 'ultimate aim of politics' (Berkowitz, 1999: 3). Rather than being obvious and inevitable, the modern tradition of political thought, thanks to the Enlightenment as well its liberal extension, aims to disregard the politics of virtue which sets its agenda for human perfection, instead embracing the idea that the ultimate aim of politics is freedom. The liberal tradition, in most cases, evaluates the ancient and medieval ideals of political morality, virtue ethics and human perfection via politics as 'impractical, delusive, and dangerous' (1999: 4). However, some scholars analysing the genealogy of liberal tradition argue that:

Contrary to much conventional wisdom, the liberal tradition not only makes room for virtue but shows that the exercise of virtue is indispensable to a political regime seeking to establish and protect freedom. (Berkowitz, 1999: 7)

Even so, one needs to make a reservation on the argument that liberal tradition and virtue go hand-in-hand, for the liberal idea of neutrality is such a well-established idea that arguing for the place of virtue in liberal thought requires rather convincing evidence of the practical as well as the philosophical life of liberalism. Berkowitz in this respect underlines carefully that:

It is one thing to say that it is not government's business to cultivate virtue and quite another to assert that virtue is altogether irrelevant to the maintenance of peace, the protection of individuals' rights. (1999: 16)

That is to say, even if the liberal state evades the cultivation of virtuous citizens as opposed to the ancient city states, it has to open space for certain virtues, such as tolerance and equality, which are considered fundamental for liberalism to survive. Bert van den Brink (2000) underlines the difficulty of liberalism in terms of keeping the ideal of neutrality as well as endorsing some sort of virtuous politics. More specifically, Brink detects a 'tragic predicament' within the liberal tradition of political thought because:

> *The universalist and egalitarian doctrine of liberalism cannot make sense of its own ideals without articulating a normative framework. (Brink, 2000: 1)*

This, then, means that liberalism has to rank conceptions of the good life and promote certain virtues and moral values which, in turn, undermines the principle of neutrality.

The inescapability of virtue argument is mostly supported by scholars who are not identified with the liberal tradition. Among others, Robert Bellah *et al.* (2008), in their *Habits of the Heart*, bring about the assumption that, even where liberal democratic societies seem to be liberal at first sight, with reference to the primacy of individuals and the neutrality of the state, at a deeper level 'habits of the heart' are at work in making possible human bonds, belonging and solidarity. However, liberal theory and its individuality and neutrality arguments are strong in blurring the vision of what holds human beings together as individuals and as communities. The point is that human bonds, human virtues and communal values are inevitable, despite the counter-rhetoric of liberal politics, because liberalism 'Cannot take personhood and bondedness away from us' (Walzer, 1990: 10). Torn between excessive individualism and human commitment, people need to attach common values and virtues which, in turn, require politics and the state to become involved in good life conceptions.

One of the strongest assumptions supporting the inescapability of virtue argument can be derived from within the liberal tradition. A strand of liberalism, which is known as 'perfectionism', defends a sort of virtuous liberalism. Perfectionism, as defined by John Rawls, is based on the argument that 'Virtue ought to be the end of politics.'[4] Brink also explains the assumptions of perfectionists as follows:

> *Perfectionists maintain that liberalism is a comprehensive moral doctrine that is ultimately grounded in specific conceptions of the good life. They see liberalism as a political instrument to not only protect and promote public or political principles, values, and virtues, but also to protect and foster at least those that they believe to be valid for all members of modern democratic societies. ..... The values of personal autonomy and an affirmation of pluralism stand out as values that each liberal society should actively promote… It helps unveil an inescapable dilemma within liberal thought.[5]… (2000: 40)*

The perfectionist strand of liberalism centralises individual autonomy and authenticity. In the eyes of perfectionists, liberals do not consider the ideals of personal au-

4 Beckman, Ludvig (2001), p. 101.
5 Brink (2000), p. 40.

tonomy and authenticity as hindrances to the principle of neutrality in a procedural sense. They argue instead that individual autonomy and authenticity 'Do not prescribe the content of conceptions of the good life,' but they do set limits to their structure; that is, to the way in which individuals are expected to form such conceptions and to identify with them. In this sense, pursuing a particular good life is not the concern of the liberal state, and is not the concern of communal groups but of autonomous individuals (Brink, 2000: 12).[6]

Berkowitz underlines the inescapability of virtue argument on the grounds that, since the liberal tradition of political thought aims to 'establish and protect freedom', its reference to virtue is inevitable (1999: 7). In addition, the inescapability of virtue argument, from within the liberal tradition of political thought, also opposes the neutrality principle as the primary principle in liberalism. The liberal neutrality argument is supported in that any move towards perfectionism, such as ranking the valuable conceptions of the good life, promoting certain virtues over others and not expressing equal concern for, or equal distance from, some political and religious doctrines, would mean 'intolerance and coercive repression'[7] which cannot be justified given the importance to liberalism of individual choice and freedoms. The inescapability of virtue argument puts liberal tolerance first instead of neutrality, on the grounds that the very premises of liberalism, in seeking out the political ideals of freedom as well as the equality of all, require it to embrace:

> *A set of characteristic themes including individual rights, consent, toleration, liberty of thought and discussion… Personal autonomy or the primacy of individual choice. (Berkowitz, 1999: 1)*

Virtue lost

The main argument here arises from the assumptions of Alasdair MacIntyre, in his significant work *After Virtue*. Here, the liberal tradition of political thought is criticised on the grounds that its argumentations and deliberations on various contemporary issues are not able to be reconciled. Liberalism is part of the problem – but the source of the indisputable conflicts is the Enlightenment philosophy. According to MacIntyre, Enlightenment philosophers, including its liberal advocates, have failed to establish 'A rational, secular defence of shared moral principles' (MacIntyre, 1984: 3). The only solution to the unending contemporary debates is to take refuge in ancient virtues. More specifically indeed, MacIntyre argues that:

> *The Aristotelian tradition of the virtues provides the only rationally defensible alternative to post-Enlightenment morality. (MacIntyre, 1984: 3)*

6 Of course, liberals such as John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman criticise these perfectionist claims on the grounds that they undermine a very crucial liberal principle; that is, neutrality (Brink, 2000: 12). However, other liberals such as Raz argue that liberalism is not a doctrine of neutrality in the first place; rather, it is a doctrine of moral pluralism.

7 MacLeod exemplifies the way that perfectionism and intolerance work together as follows: 'Legal prohibition of homosexual activity, legally-mandated school prayers and moralistically inspired censorship of pornography' (MacLeod (1997), p. 530).

It is not just liberalism, with its individualist obsession, that is a failure but Marxism in particular has failed in constructing 'The history of moralities embodied in the life of societies,' as well as in elucidating the relationship between 'Human actions and passions.' For the main purpose of this article here, instead of focusing on Marxism, we clarify the way in which MacIntyre criticises liberalism.

His main point revolves around defining the most excellent way of human life. According to MacIntyre, the most excellent way of human life follows a philosophical path where virtues are effectively articulated. In other words, MacIntyre searches for a route that includes a well-defined path for human life. This is what the liberal neutrality principle wants to escape, because it is wrong to establish a definite conception of the best human life. Even if there is one, the state has no right to promote any conceptions of the good life on the grounds that liberalism puts individual freedom and choice first. Free and autonomous individuals cannot be coerced to live up to a certain type of lifestyle.

Secondly, MacIntyre insists that a good and virtuous society 'Is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community.' This is significant because, without such a community constructed around shared values and virtues, there cannot be an ultimate human good to be achieved. Liberalism opposes the idea that there is a definite ideal of human good. And, individually, there are different conceptions of good for which pluralism and individual freedoms are adequate principles. MacIntyre goes on to argue that:

> *Liberal political societies are characteristically committed to denying any place for a determinate conception of the human good in their public discourse, let alone allowing that their common life should be grounded in such a conception.*

Apparently, what MacIntyre finds virtuous is what liberals think politically dangerous. Diametrical opposition can be connected to the liberal principle of neutrality. MacIntyre also observes that the liberal state is required to be impartial towards 'Rival conceptions of human good.' This very understanding undercuts the idea of achieving the best kind of human life through the proper type of community relationships. Here, MacIntyre differentiates his critique against liberalism from conservatives on the ground that conservatism is the mirror image of liberalism, via its commitment to the free market and individualism. In his argument, both liberalism and conservatism undercut the possibility of achieving the best human life. Liberalism uses a sort of repressive tolerance which MacIntyre explains as follows:

> *Where liberalism by permissive legal enactments has tried to use the power of the modern state to transform social relationships,*

conservatism produces the same results 'By prohibitive legal enactments.' In liberal democratic societies the result of such transformed social relationships is that virtue has been irretrievably lost.

Here, it is important to remember that MacIntyre's understanding of virtue has nothing to do with a modern understanding of politics. Salkever underlines, within the tradition of political thought starting from ancient and proceeding to modern times, that

there has been two different conceptions of politics. According to the first conception, politics is understood 'As a problem of moral and intellectual virtue' (1974: 79). In the second conception, on the other hand, politics is understood 'As a problem of obligation and legitimacy.' The politics of virtue and the politics of obligation have been two different ways of conceiving politics and two alternative political languages that divide the history of political thought into two different camps. Salkever claims that virtue does not constitute a central political theme in the contemporary tradition of political thought; rather, the politics of obligation and legitimacy is given primacy on the grounds that individual, as well as social, needs and aspirations may only be reconciled through the language of obligations, rights and legitimate authorities (Salkever, 1974: 79).

One camp, then, starting from the 17th century, conceives politics in terms of the question that searches for the reasons behind political obligations and obedience to political authority, as well as rights and freedoms. In particular, the main question of contemporary political thought is:

> *The question of why free individuals should obey the law of society, if they were not in fact compelled to do so. (Salkever, 1974: 79)*

The other camp embraces the ancient tradition of political thought, which revolves around the problem of virtue. Instead of asking 'What is the right thing to do?' or, 'Why should I obey the law?', the politics of virtue searches for answers to the questions: 'How ought human beings to live?' or, 'What is the best life for man?' In answering these questions, politics is conceived as a kind of relationship amongst people who prioritise public good and law. It is not connected to contracts, obligations or rights but to the 'Human capacity for justice.' In Salkever's words, politics means:

> *A choice-worthy way of life because it is the medium within which the development of moral virtue or virtues (such as justice and self-control) are possible. (Salkever, 1974: 81).*

In a similar vein, MacIntyre criticises modern politics because of its pointless reference to rights and obligations. He argues that:

> *Like the Polynesians who used taboo without any understanding of what it meant beyond 'prohibited', we use human right without understanding its meaning beyond 'moral trump'. (2007: 36)*

MacIntyre calls for an Aristotelian virtue in the sense that each and every human life (a good life or a virtuous life) has a *telos* (2007: 37).[8]

Without a *telos*, teleologically-defined and socially-embedded conceptualisations of life's moral issues, as well as virtuous deeds and assumptions, turn into unsettleable controversies. MacIntyre clarifies:

> *Debates concerned with the value of human life such as those over abortion and euthanasia, or about distributive justice and property rights, or about war and peace, degenerate into*

8 A *telos* is an end, or a purpose in philosophical terms.

confrontations of assertion and counter-assertion, because the protagonists of the rival positions invoke incommensurable forms of moral assertion against each other. (1984: 4)

In modern times, since the Enlightenment questioned and destabilised traditional and religious moralities as well as undermining the social philosophies embedded in proper historical and social contexts, 'inconclusive engagements' appear here and there as reflections of good life conceptualisations which, in turn, expect equal concern and state impartiality. In an alternative to modern politics and morality, MacIntyre offers to concede modern emotive and manipulative debates on significant human problems. Instead, he refers to the Aristotelian concept of politics and virtues. He explains that virtues are meant to be the:

Qualities without which human beings cannot achieve the goods internal to practice. (1984: 5)

And by 'practice' he means:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, or partially definitive of, that form of activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (1984: 5)

Given this definition of practice, and for as long as the ancient and medieval understanding of politics is accepted as practice, modern politics cannot be, because practice involves virtues and a path to excellence underpinned by a *telos*. In this sense, liberal politics is, in particular, not a practice. That is why people in liberal democracies:

Live after virtue in a period of unresolvable disputes and dilemmas. (MacIntyre, 1984: 6)

Here, what liberals see and appreciate as moral pluralism, MacIntyre sees as chaos and the loss of meaning and of purposive action.

Reclamation of virtue

In opposition to the virtue lost argument, which underlines the radical separation of politics and virtue in the tradition of liberal politics in particular, and in the post-Enlightenment moral and political structure in general, the 'reclamation of virtue' argument is optimistic about the re-articulation of communal virtues into liberalism. That is to say, the virtue lost argument objects to liberal politics and neutrality because of its foundational philosophy, whereas the reclamation of virtue argument criticises the consequences with which liberal societies are faced.

The reclamation of virtue argument is also different from the inescapability of virtue argument. The inescapability of virtue argument takes an absolute position in defending the idea that all societies, whether liberal or not, and whether ancient or not, are based upon virtues and that it is impossible to separate politics from virtue; even the liberal principle of neutrality does not stop the involvement of politics with virtue. This ar-

gument also shows how the liberal state cannot be neutral by engaging itself with the perfectionist strand of liberalism. In fact, some perfectionists see the principle of neutrality as a significant virtue of liberal politics.

Here, there appears a sort of paradox in terms of liberal political thought: some liberals appreciate liberalism because it has no virtue; while others criticise it because it lacks virtue; and still others appreciate neutrality as virtue. In this context, it is possible to follow Ludvig Beckman, who argues that liberalism is essentially inconclusive about the relationship between virtue and politics (Beckman, 2001: 2). That is why, without losing one's position within liberal politics, one would defend and argue against virtue politics. It is difficult to defend the state's active role in issues of virtue within the liberal tradition of political thought – but that is why some significant liberals, such as Dworkin (2000), argue that liberalism has its own virtues, such as tolerance. He particularly underlines equality as the sovereign virtue.

This inconclusive position of liberal political thought, in terms of virtue and politics, creates room for a reclamation of virtues within the liberal democratic context. Sandel argues that:

> *Liberals often take pride in defending what they oppose — pornography, for example, or unpopular views. They say the state should not impose on its citizens a preferred way of life, but should leave them as free as possible to choose their own values and ends, consistent with a similar liberty for others. This commitment to freedom of choice requires liberals constantly to distinguish between permission and praise, between allowing a practice and endorsing it. It is one thing to allow pornography, they argue, something else to affirm it. (Sandel, 1998: 108)*

Here, Sandel criticises the liberal neutrality principle on the grounds that permissiveness and praise let conservatives attack liberals because they believe that giving permission to abortion or pornography means favouring abortion and pornography. Liberals need, as a matter of fact, to refer to some higher grounds in order to defend their permission which, eventually, requires the mentioning of some specific political virtues, such as toleration and freedom.

Sandel explains that it is not easy for liberals to find some moral ground on which to defend their principles, particularly if one asks 'Why should toleration and freedom of choice prevail when other important values are also at stake?' Sandel detects that the answer inevitably involves 'relativism'. Apparently, the liberal neutrality principle leads to moral relativism since liberals believe that the state's cultivation of certain virtues, as well as legislating morality, is wrong on the grounds that a plurality of good conceptions and individual liberties requires the liberal state to be impartial (Sandel, 1998: 108). The state should be impartial because, as Sandel underlines, in liberal understanding there is no one to be 'judge.' But, in this case, there is no grounds on which to defend certain liberal values and virtues such as 'toleration, freedom and fairness' (Sandel, 1998: 108). In other words, moral relativism makes any moral value and virtue defenceless; liberalism makes itself defenceless, particularly in opposition to conservative claims.

However, Sandel does not argue that there can be no exit from the liberal neutrality *impasse*. On the contrary, the political philosophy tradition has offered two significant

alternatives to empower liberal values and virtues. The utilitarian tradition, which is based on the arguments of John Stuart Mill:

> *Defends liberal principles in the name of maximizing general welfare. The state should not impose on its citizens a preferred way of life, even for their own good, because doing so will reduce the sum of human happiness, at least in the long run; better that people choose for themselves, even if, on occasion, they get it wrong. (Sandel, 1998: 109)*

Utilitarian argument is a viable way of defending liberal values for both individual and general welfare, but the Kantian tradition, on the other hand, underlines the impossibility of defending liberal values in terms of utility and other empirical principles: for Kantian liberals, instrumentality makes human dignity vulnerable. In this regard, the utilitarian calculation:

> *Treats people as means to the happiness of others, not as ends in themselves. (Sandel, 1998: 109)*

Instead, the Kantian tradition searches for a better defence for individual rights than the total welfare and total happiness underpinning all the arguments of utilitarians. Then, the separation of right from good becomes an exit for Kantian liberals who want to defend fundamental freedoms and rights without intervening in conceptions of the good life. Sandel clarifies by drawing a distinction:

> *Between a framework of basic rights and liberties, and conceptions of the good that people may choose to pursue within the framework. It is one thing for the state to support a fair framework, they argue, something else to affirm some particular ends. (1998: 110)*

Accordingly then, for Kantian liberals there are two principles to be defended: individual rights should not be sacrificed for the general good (welfare); and justice cannot be premised on any particular conception of good (Sandel, 1998: 111).

Despite the two different liberal ways of defending individual rights without disregarding liberal society at all, many communitarians, including Etzioni, attack liberalism on three grounds. First, liberalism in its various forms is essentially individualistic; it over-emphasises the individual and his or her rights at the expense of society. Second, liberalism greatly, if not totally, abandons communal bonds and common responsibilities. Last but not least, liberalism disregards the virtues and purposes achieved by the community as a whole (Etzioni, 1990: 215). The spirit of citizenship evaporates in a liberal society; that is why the state, embracing neutrality, is not interested in promoting or cultivating civic virtues. Instead, it tries to enable individuals to pursue their individual values (Sandel, 2005: 11).

In such a context, the reclamation of virtue argument offers a mild formula to make liberal politics a virtuous one. The starting point should be 'less individualism' or, rather, a healthy individualism by treating 'Individual and community as moral equals' (Etzioni, 1990: 215). This makes it possible for liberal politics to recognise civic and communal claims and articulate a cultivation of civic and communal values instead of isolating its politics into an abstract and rational choice liberalism. The result is that

liberal politics may strip off its neutrality armour and understand that the community is itself a constitutive element in the making of the individual and his or her rights.

The Rawlsian alternative: politically liberal and politically virtuous

As opposed to the utilitarian and intuitivist strands of liberal political thought, John Rawls has brought a Kantian and social contractarian strand to the creation of a liberal, 'well-ordered society' based upon 'fair co-operation' between free and equal individuals. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls starts with the premise that:

> *Justice is the first virtue of social institutions... laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. (Rawls, 2003: 3)*

Giving justice primary status, Rawls understands that a good society – in his words, a 'well-ordered society' – is a society which favours the advancement of 'The good of its members' and arranges 'A public conception of justice' (2003: 4).

More significantly, in Rawls's 'well-ordered society', the primacy of justice is significant because:

> *If men's inclination to self-interest makes their vigilance against one another necessary, their public sense of justice makes their secure association together possible. Among individuals with disparate aims and purposes a shared conception of justice establishes the bonds of civic friendship. (2003: 5)*

Rawls recognises individuals' self-interest and competition, but he also acknowledges their public character and sense of justice. This double emphasis on self-interest and public justice paved the way for various interpretations of his liberalism. Amitai Etzioni also underlines the changing arguments about Rawls's liberalism by stating:

> *Some find him somewhat more concerned with community than he admits… Rawls's position remains primarily a rights-oriented, individual choice liberalism, although his work has become somewhat more communitarian over the years. (p. 216).*

Rawls is neither a communitarian nor an advocator of virtue politics; however, he does not ignore virtues as soon as they are conceived as political rather than the ethical virtues of private conceptions of a good life. In this sense, Rawls's arguments on virtues and politics do not fit into the 'inevitability of virtue', 'virtue lost' or 'reclamation of virtue' arguments.

Rawlsian liberalism prioritises justice as the first virtue of a well-ordered society and as the precondition of other political virtues, such as civic friendship. Despite his articulation of virtue into liberalism in a political sense, Rawls is put into the same basket as other liberals by the critics of the liberal tradition of political thought because his political liberalism ignores virtues and virtuous life styles by reiterating the liberal neutrality principle of the state, and by expecting impartiality from all individuals in choosing the principles of justice under the veil of ignorance. In a nutshell, Rawlsian liberalism is attacked because it prioritises the right (justice) over the good (virtues, and virtuous ways of life). Underlying this attack is that the distinction between the

right and the good is politically irrelevant and morally wrong. Anti-liberals condemn Rawls for his individualist and rights-based arguments, but some liberals criticise Rawlsian liberalism on the grounds that a liberal understanding of justice 'Cannot use any ideas of the good except those that are purely instrumental' and also that, if the good is used in a non-instrumental way, then it must be grounded in terms of 'A matter of individual choice' (1988: 251). In opposition to these two different criticisms for the same arguments elucidated in political liberalism, Rawls states mainly in one phrase that:

> *Justice draws the limit, the good shows the point (1988: 252).*

This phrase underlines the complementary character of the right and the good by adding that:

> *A political conception of justice must leave adequate room for forms of life citizens can affirm, the ideas of the good it draws upon must fit within the limits drawn – the space allowed – by that political conception itself. (1988: 252)*

Furthermore, Rawls finds neutrality to be an unfortunate concept but, as a significant liberal philosopher, he also addresses the neutrality problem of the liberal tradition of political thought. He acknowledges that the neutrality of the liberal state has been a common argument in the liberal tradition. He clarifies the principle of neutrality in terms of his concepts by stating that the liberal state is required to be impartial 'With respect to comprehensive doctrines and their associated conceptions of the good.' Yet, he is well aware that the liberal state is often criticised because of not being neutral by 'Favour of one or another form of individualism' (1988: 261). He specifies his position in terms of the neutrality principle first by making a distinction between procedural and substantive neutrality. Procedural neutrality requires impartiality with respect to various moral values. Given the difficulties of procedural neutrality as such, Rawls underlines that procedural neutrality may involve some values which must be neutral ones, such as impartiality and consistency, particularly in the application of laws and rules.

Rawls argues that his 'justice as fairness' is not procedurally but substantively neutral. The principles of justice defined in the understanding of 'justice and fairness' are substantive (1988: 261). However, the substantive neutrality of Rawls's liberalism arises from it being based upon an overlapping consensus between multiple individuals having various religious and moral doctrines. In fact, an overlapping consensus is rather expressed through common, or neutral, ground. Here, there are fundamental intuitive ideas that are embedded into the 'public political culture' of a constitutional liberal democracy and, yet, there is not one particular religious, moral or philosophical doctrine (1988: 261-262). That is to say, Rawls's political liberalism entails the principle of neutrality in order to constitute a common ground given the plurality of conceptions of a good life.

In not rejecting procedural neutrality, Rawls argues that it is, nevertheless, not sufficient for the realisation of justice as fairness since this also requires the neutrality of aims:

In the sense that the basic institutions and public policy are not to be designed to favour any particular comprehensive doctrine.

Rawlsian liberalism is neutral in terms of both procedures and aims, yet it still maintains:

The superiority of certain forms of moral character and encourages certain moral virtues. Thus, justice as fairness includes an account of certain political virtues – the virtues of fair social cooperation such as civility and tolerance, reasonableness and the sense of fairness. (1988: 263)

Here, Rawls makes a significant distinction between defending certain virtues as part of certain moral, philosophical and religious doctrines and as political conceptions. Rawls opposes any form of perfectionism in the sense that the liberal state involves the cultivation of certain virtues and the promotion of certain ways of life. Rawls argues that his 'political' conception of justice and political virtues do not lead to 'The perfectionist state of a comprehensive doctrine' (1988: 263). As soon as politically defined, Rawls sees no problem of virtues and good conceptions in liberal democracies. He clarifies this point as follows:

Ideas of the good may be freely introduced as needed to complement the political conception of justice, so long as they are political ideas, that is, so long as they belong to a reasonable political conception of justice for a constitutional regime. This allows us to assume that they are shared by citizens and do not depend on any particular comprehensive doctrine. Since the ideals connected with the political virtues are tied to the principles of political justice and to the forms of judgment and conduct essential to sustain fair social cooperation over time, those ideals and virtues are compatible with political liberalism.

Rawls seems to establish a golden balance amongst neutrality, virtue and politics within the boundary of the liberal tradition of political thought. What makes a Rawlsian stance peculiar, as opposed to the inescapability of virtue, virtue lost and reclamation of virtue arguments, is that he brings a political filter both to the neutrality principle and to conceptions of virtues and good life. That is to say, the much-debated liberal neutrality turns into a positive value in the sense that it signs a common ground rather than being a disinterested legality of the state. Procedural neutrality is significant, but it is only one step to be complemented with neutrality of aim in the sense that the basic structure of society must be aligned with the principles of justice, while none of the comprehensive doctrines is promoted or discriminated. This eventually guarantees a plurality of good conceptions as well as equal liberties for all.

In addition, Rawls makes a distinction between virtues as such and political virtues. For him, virtues as such cannot be generalised, for they are tied to different conceptions of good life nurtured by comprehensive philosophical and religious doctrines. Associational ideals, such as those of religious institutions and scientific centres, including universities, as well as of all forms of clubs and teams, are not political virtues. This separation is significant. Rawls appreciates the public use of reason and common bond amongst the members of a well-ordered society, prioritises justice as the first virtue

and promotes political virtues, but he does not favour a 'Perfectionist state of the kind found in Plato or Aristotle' (1988: 264).

In this sense, the Rawlsian alternative is neither perfectionist in the sense of an expectation that the liberal state will both promote and define as essential a conception of a good life, nor is it ancient in the sense that it pursues virtuous life as a teleological aim of the polity. According to Rawls, a liberal democratic regime may promote virtues such as toleration and mutual trust while discouraging religious and racial discrimination. In this sense, the Rawlsian alternative requires the liberal state to be neither perfectionist nor religious; however, it may promote fair co-operation amongst free and equal members.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the relationship between politics and virtue. Rather than focusing on the problem of virtue politics as such, the relationship between liberal politics and its relationship with virtue has been taken up on the grounds that liberalism has dominated the political sphere for the long period since the collapse of socialist regimes. The only viable political alternative, liberalism has gained many advocators as well as critics. Liberalism has been enriched both by criticism from outsiders who are diametrically opposed to liberal philosophy and liberal politics. More significantly, liberalism has been criticised from within the liberal tradition which, in the final analysis, deepens liberal politics. In this context, the liberal politics and virtue debate has been a significant venue, intersecting pro- and anti-liberal arguments as well as arguments from both outside and inside the liberal tradition of political thought.

In this article, it has been detected that the liberal neutrality principle has gained centrality in liberal politics. On the other hand, the very principle of neutrality has become the most debated issue by scholars engaging in liberal politics and virtue relations.

This article distinguished three different arguments on the relationship between liberal politics and virtue, including the inescapability of virtue, virtue lost and the reclamation of virtue. All these arguments attack the neutrality principle, as opposed to virtuous politics, in the sense that a well-ordered society should promote, integrate or create the conditions for the cultivation of certain virtues that prevent absolute individualism. Absolute individualism and absolute neutrality are threatening to liberal politics and democratic societies because they may leave liberal and democratic values vulnerable. Inescapability of virtue offers a shallow and ahistorical virtue claim by underlining that politics, modern and ancient alike, is always-already virtuous, but it loses ground by not offering a sound hierarchy of virtues for liberal democratic societies. The virtue lost argument, on the other hand, totally leaves modern politics by rejecting its foundational philosophy, turning back into an ancient form of politics and virtue in which a rather holistic vision of political life and citizenship is required to be embraced for all.

The problem here may be formulated as follows: how can we reconcile the ancient ontology and epistemology with that of the modern? If there is no room for reconciliation then how can we bring back ancient ontology and epistemology into a modern context? Reclamation of virtue arguments aim to bring virtue back into liberal politics;

however, they fail to imitate liberal principles by simply replacing individual with community. This leads to the bargaining of individual rights and liberties at the expense of society and community, which would be threatening to individuals, marginal groups and minorities.

Neither the defence of absolute neutrality nor a defence of an absolute virtue claim has been considered viable in this article. That is why, in re-thinking liberal politics and the virtue problem, a Rawlsian perspective is integrated on the grounds that Rawls's political liberalism successfully offers an articulation of the substantive neutrality of the liberal state, which has nothing to do with the impartiality of the state in the implementation of rules and regulations. Rather, it reflects a common ground and overlapping consensus amongst various comprehensive world views, beliefs and doctrines.

A Rawlsian solution to virtue and politics is based upon the integration of political virtues, mainly justice as the primary virtue of society. Political liberties and political neutrality go hand-in-hand so that individuals are not forced to embrace a particular good life conception. However, at the same time, they are encouraged to embrace liberal democratic values. In this sense, political virtues are supportive of the maintenance of liberal democracies as well as of the fundamental liberal principles, mainly those of individual rights and equal liberties.

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