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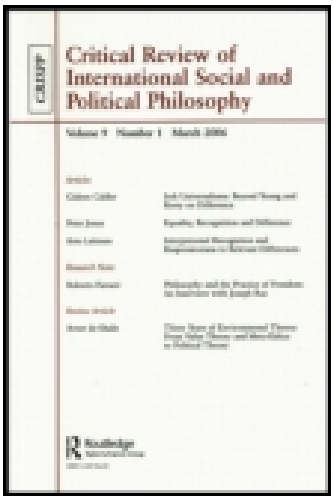

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Liberalism for the liberals, cannibalism for the cannibals

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Liberalism for the Liberals, Cannibalism for the Cannibals

STEVEN LUKES

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My title is an aphorism coined by the late Martin Hollis. Well, almost. The relevant passage from which it derives occurs in one of his last papers, delivered at a conference in Florence in answer to a question I posed him, namely: 'Is Universalism Ethnocentric?' The passage reads:

> ...I see no way to secure liberalism by trying to put its core values beyond any but internal or consensual reasoning. The resulting slide into relativism leaves a disastrous parallel between 'liberalism for the liberals!' and 'cannibalism for the cannibals!' (Hollis 1999: 36)

Citing an aphorism is an appropriate way to begin. For the aphorism, as John Gross has reminded us, is 'a form of literature', which 'bears the stamp and style of the mind which created it; its message is universal, but scarcely impersonal', it embodies a 'twist of thought', and it 'depends for its full effect on verbal artistry, on a subtle or concentrated perfection of phrasing which can sometimes approach poetry in its intensity'. Aphorisms, he goes on, are 'shafts aimed at the champions of an established viewpoint or a shallower morality. They tease and prod the lazy assumptions lodged in the reader's mind' (Gross 1983: viii). Malesherbes observed that 'a new maxim is often a brilliant error' (Gross 1983: 1) and Karl Kraus that 'an aphorism never coincides with the truth: it is either a half-truth or one-and-a-half truths' (Kraus 1986: 67). According to Vauvenargues, 'men's maxims reveal their characters' (Gross 1983: 1).

Martin Hollis's aphorism certainly reveals his. His shafts were perfectly aimed and he loved to tease and prod, employing delicate witticisms and ingenious wordplay in the service of what was, I believe,

a rather unrestrained passion for reason and its claims. I have never known a more passionate rationalist. His aphorisms, scattered throughout his writings, distil his philosophical outlook, much as those of Montaigne, Voltaire, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche distilled theirs. It would be worthwhile, and undoubtedly huge fun, to collect them together.

So let us turn to the aphorism in question. 'Liberalism for the liberals; cannibalism for the cannibals.' Does it state a deep truth, or a brilliant error, or a half-truth or, perhaps, one-and-a-half truths? The juxtaposition is offered us as a warning: a way of characterising the relativism into which we must not slide. Let us, then, analyse this 'disastrous parallel' in order to see what point this twist of thought is meant to make. Why compare liberalism and liberals with cannibalism and cannibals?

Let us begin with cannibalism and the cannibals. The word dates from the sixteenth century and was coined by Columbus and comes from the Spanish form of *Carib* or *Caribes*, meaning 'bold' or 'fierce' in the language of an Amerindian people, thus called, in the Lesser Antilles, held by neighbouring tribes to be *anthropophagi,* or man-eaters. I stress 'held to be' and will return to this shortly. Cannibalism is, we might say, a culinary practice or, better, a way of dealing with one's enemies after victory, held to be characteristic of totally alien cultures. In the context of the aphorism its role is clearly to represent a practice that is at once culturally embedded, exotic and utterly repellent.

But there is, of course, much more to say about cannibalism – and I will only be able to say a very small part of it here (see Lestringant 1997 and Rawson 1997). It has played a significant role in the history of Westerners' or Europeans' conceptions of 'the other' and thus in their self-reflection since the sixteenth century. It has been a classic instance, we might say, of adversary anthropology ('despotism' is another) to be found in fiction, philosophical reflection, satire and caricature and even, as we shall see, in anthropology.

Montaigne's essay 'On the Cannibals' (Montaigne 1991) reveals this with great clarity. He begins, in a way of which Martin Hollis would thoroughly have approved, by observing that we 'should be ... wary of accepting common opinions; we should judge them by the ways of reason not by popular vote'. So how does Montaigne judge the cannibals' society? The answer is: highly favourably, in comparison with his own. From what he has heard, he gathers that 'there is nothing savage

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or barbarous about those peoples'. For, he goes on, 'every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right reason than the example or form of the opinions and customs of our own society'. Their ethical system respects only two things: 'resoluteness in battle and love for their wives' and indeed 'their steadfastness in battle is astonishing'. As for their cannibalism, he exonerates it, noting that 'Chrysippus and Zeno, the leaders of the Stoic school, certainly thought there was nothing wrong in using our carcasses for whatever purpose we needed, even for food'. Montaigne's purpose is to ask the question: 'who are the real barbarians?' and his answer is clear. We can, he says, indeed 'call these folk barbarians by the rules of reason but not in comparison with ourselves who surpass them in every kind of barbarism'. For

> I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than eating him dead, more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting and eating him after his death.

Even their poetry Montaigne judges to be not barbarous because it resembles Greek poetry ('their language is a pleasant one with an agreeable sound ... rather like Greek') (Montaigne 1991: 228, 231, 234, 235, 236, 236, 235–6, 240). Obviously Tsvetan Todorov is right in seeing Montaigne's view of the cannibals as a 'projection onto the Other of an image of the self – or, more precisely, of an ideal of the self, embodied for Montaigne by classical civilisation'. Todorov characterises Montaigne as an 'unconscious universalist' disposed 'simply to declare that his own values are universal' (Todorov 1993: 41, 42).[1]

Defoe's Friday was a cannibal whom Crusoe rescues from the danger of being eaten and converts, as a penitent, to Christianity. The authors of the *Encyclopédie* were concerned to make a different point about the relationship between cannibalism and Christianity. If you look up *Anthropophages* you will find a summary of standard classical views and then a cross reference: 'see *Eucharistie, Communion, Autel*'. (In this they were taking up the longstanding Protestant view of the Catholic Mass as a sanguinary sacrifice), A different, political point is made by Gillray's

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cartoon *Petit Souper à la Parisienne* which depicts a party of Sanscoulottes feasting on the carcases of dead aristocrats in an extraordinary carnivalesque scene just after the 1792 massacres.

Nearer our own time, I cannot resist quoting the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, widely regarded as an archetypal cultural relativist, who in 1925 wrote in satirical (and thus non-relativistic) vein an extraordinary anti-war piece entitled 'The Uses of Cannibalism', that is highly reminiscent of Swift's *Modest Proposal*:

> We have done scant justice to the reasonableness of cannibalism.... We have already had recourse to many quaint primitive customs our fathers believed outmoded by the progress of mankind. We have watched the dependence of great nations upon the old device of the pogrom. We have seen the rise of demagogues, and even in those countries we consider lost in a morally dangerous idealism we have watched death dealt out to those who harbour the mildest private opinions. Even in our own country we have come to the point of shooting in the back that familiar harmless annoyance, the strike picketer. It is strange that we have overlooked cannibalism.... Without the infantile ostentations and unfortunate appeals to the hatred of one's fellow being which characterise our Black Shirts and our Red Shirts, the Indians of Vancouver Island found a heightened excitation, disciplined in endless ritual and taboo, in a ceremonial show of cannibalism ... nothing could be more harmless to the community: one useless body per year satisfactorily satisfied the craving for violence which we have clumsily supplied in modern times in the form of oaths, blood-and-thunder, and vows to undertake the death of industrious households.... The Maoris of New Zealand ... before the feast took from their enemies the exquisitely tattooed heads which were their incomparable pride.... No-one who is familiar with the breakdown of emotional satisfaction in warfare as it is recorded in postwar literature of our time can fail to see in all this a hopeful device for the re-establishment of an emotional complex which shows every sign of disintegration among us. It is obvious that something must be done, and no suggestion seems more hopeful than this drawn from the Maoris of New Zealand. (Benedict 1959: 44–8)

Cannibalism, in short, has played a continuing role in Westerners' constructions of what it is to be civilised, and it has served the ends of

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both conservatives and critics. Its imputation to 'savages' has mirrored the historical geography of successive empires, being variously attributed to early Christians, Amerindians, Irish, Africans and Polynesians. (It has even, it appears, played this role among the 'natives' themselves. In James Marre's film *Spirits of Defiance*, I am told, the members of the Mangabeta tribe sit around the camp fire discussing their suspicions about cannibalism among whites).

Which raises, of course, the interesting possibility that not only is the meaning of cannibalism a 'social construction' for purposes of self-understanding and critique, but that the cannibals are themselves largely or even entirely fictitious. This is, it appears, becoming an accepted idea among archaeologists. According to Professors Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, there has been a reappraisal of the archaeological and ethnographic evidence previously interpreted as proof of cannibalism, and all of it has been found open to other explanations, such as 'violence and mutilation done to enemy corpses in warfare, or the varied and complex range of mortuary rituals documented around the world.' Even if cannibalism existed occasionally, they write, 'the contribution of human flesh to human diet must have been minimal and sporadic' (Renfrew and Bahn 1996: 270). Anthropologists and others have recently been expressing a similar scepticism (see Arens 1979) – a scepticism which, however, Professor Rawson sees as 'denial' of its existence both at home and abroad by '*bien-pensant* pedagogues' overcome by 'post-colonial guilt and imperial self-inculpation'. According to him, instances of its practice, both historical and present-day, are 'amply demonstrable, by the kind of evidence usually accepted for other historical events: reports and descriptions by witnesses and a variety of archival, anthropological and journalistic sources' (Rawson 1997: 3).

Whatever the truth about this, I propose that, returning to our topic, we take cannibalism as a representation of a practice that is culturally embedded, exotic and utterly repellent to us. So the suggestion is that liberalism is, in parallel fashion, to be seen as a practice that is no less culturally embedded, familiar and wholly attractive to us.

This is a helpful beginning but of course liberalism does not denote a practice, but rather, let us say, an outlook which underwrites and justifies a range of typically liberal practices and institutions–such as constitutions, separation of powers, citizenship, toleration, rights of free speech, free assembly and association, due process, private

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property and so on. It is, as Raymond Geuss has recently observed, an outlook that is practically engaged and historically located and this has three important consequences: '[a] it has no definition, [b] it tends to rewrite its own past sometimes anachronistically, [c] it is open to very significant modification in the future' (Geuss 2001: 69). Nevertheless it is possible to identify elements that distinguish the liberal tradition from non-liberal over time and space. So what is the scope of this outlook? I propose that we should for the purposes of the present discussion help ourselves to the useful Italian distinction between *liberalismo* and *liberismo*, the latter referring to the economic doctrine of *laisser-faire*, and that we take 'liberalism' to denote the former understood as the political morality that underpins and justifies liberal practices and institutions.

Is liberalism, thus understood, culturally embedded? And, if so, does it mean that our capacity to justify it – the reasons we can offer in its defence – are similarly embedded and thus, presumably, uncompelling to bearers of non-liberal cultures? It may help to survey a few current statements of the case for and against this claim. Is liberalism, as Michael Walzer suggests, to be understood and interpreted and criticised mainly from within and only sometimes from without, since 'morality is thick from the beginning, culturally integrated, fully resonant, and it reveals itself thinly only on special occasions, when moral language is turned to specific purposes' – as in appeals for international solidarity, across cultural frontiers (Walzer 1994: 4). Early Walzer, in his *Spheres of Justice*, claimed that 'a given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a certain way, that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members'; there are 'no external or universal principles' and every 'substantive account of distributive justice is a local account' (Walzer 1983: 313, 314). This certainly looks like cultural relativism – a suspicion reinforced by what Walzer wrote there about the caste system and the injustice of overriding the understandings of the villagers who 'really do accept the doctrines' that support it (Walzer 1983: 314). In his later writings, Walzer extracts from this account a further notion of thin, 'minimalist' morality, accessible only from the outside, and expressed in terms such as 'truth', 'justice', 'life' and 'liberty', put together 'by abstracting from social practices reiterated in many countries and cultures'. So murder, torture and enslavement are wrongful features of any social order, but for reasons unconnected with the variable cultural meanings or 'shared

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understandings' of 'social goods'. But it remains unclear how the thin, minimalist component qualifies the relativism of the thick, maximalist morality, especially since, according to Walzer, 'minimalism is not foundational' (Walzer 1994: 15, 18).

Another, more colourful and less qualified version of the case for the cultural embeddedness of liberalism comes from James Tully in the form of a fable (like all the best fables an animal fable) to illustrate the mistakes of contemporary liberal constitutionalism. There is a sculpture of a black canoe occupied by various animals from the mythology of the Haida nation of *Haida Gwaii* (The Queen Charlotte Islands) off the north-west coast of Great Turtle Island (North America). Tully writes:

> Imagine the large father grisly bear at the bow of the canoe addressing the other passengers.... He claims that the ways of the bear clan are superior to all the others in their civility or efficiency. Alternatively, he may claim that they are not bear ways at all, but universal ways that the bears, being at a higher stage, are able to discern. Or he confidently asserts that his articulation of the association comprehends and sublimates the constitutional ways of the others in a higher synthesis. The other passengers would accept these ways if they were reasonable, if they would think through the following thought experiment, or if they would only speak the language of constitutionalism he uses.

And Tully asks: 'if we now view ourselves as members of the black canoe, what carries over?' (Tully 1995, 203, 204). I agree with Brian Barry's answer to this, namely: 'precisely nothing'. For, as Barry argues, 'there is nothing intrinsically absurd in any of the argumentative strategies that Tully attributes to the mythological bear, once we have substituted a human being for the bear'. Barry asserts that it is 'quite legitimate to hope that eventually a common standard of reasonableness will prevail over a certain range of ethical questions, in a way similar to that in which acknowledgement of the soundness of the physical sciences has diffused throughout the world'(Barry 2001: 262). It may be legitimate so to hope, but is such a hope well-founded? Here I am much less convinced and will return to this crucial point shortly.

A third, more equivocal version of the case we are considering is advanced by Bhikhu Parekh, who, in his article 'Superior People: the narrowness of liberalism from Mill to Rawls', maintained that we have not shaken off the legacy of Millian liberalism which

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> linked diversity to individuality and choice, and valued the former only in so far as it was grounded in the individualist conception of man. This ruled out several forms of diversity. It ruled out traditional and customary ways of life, as well as those centred on the community. It also ruled out ethnically grounded ways of life, as well as those limited to a 'narrow mental orbit' or 'not in tune' with the dominant trend of the age. Although it may not entirely rule them out, Millian liberalism also takes a low view of ways of life that stress contentment and weak ambition rather than a go-getting character, or are centred on religion, or place little value on worldly success and material abundance. As one would expect, Millian liberalism cherishes not diversity *per se* but *liberal* diversity, that is, diversity confined within the narrow limits of the individualist model of human excellence.

Parekh is thus a critic of what he sees as the narrowness of this liberalism which he portrays as representing 'the British and European self-consciousness during the heyday of imperialism, and bears the deep imprint of an age in which the liberal way of life and thought exercised unchallenged intellectual and political hegemony over its defeated rivals'. Yet Parekh's critique of narrow liberalism also purports to be a defence of liberalism properly understood, since he argues for 'a more broad-based liberalism in which it must 'reassess its Millian commitment to a single mode of human excellence and evolve a view of the world in which different ways of life, including the non-liberal can converse as equals and enrich both individual and collective existence'. So a 'truly liberal *state* cherishes and gives public recognition' to 'diverse ways of life, both liberal and non-liberal', providing them, among other things, with 'such resources and conditions of growth as they need and cannot raise themselves' (Parekh 1994: 11–13). This last suggestion is clearly the most contentious, since it asks liberals not merely to finance but to promote the growth of non-liberal practices. If they are anti-liberal practices involving injustices or the violation of individual rights, can a liberal coherently justify them let alone advocate that a liberal state finance and encourage them? But my main point is that Parekh is here equivocating: criticising liberalism as culturally embedded and thus confined and advocating a 'true' liberalism that would be, one supposes, un-embedded and culture-free – or, at least, less embedded and less confined (he doesn't tell us which).

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One comment about these culturalist accounts of liberalism, that applies more particularly to Walzer and Tully (and also to Kymlicka, who focuses on the cultures of sub-state nationalities). They, and other writers in this vein, employ what Seyla Benhabib has called a 'poor man's sociology' (Benhabib 1995: 241–4 and Benhabib 1999) – a misconceived because far too holistic notion of culture. For cultures are always open systems, sites of contestation and heterogeneity, of hybridisation and cross-fertilisation, whose boundaries are inevitably indeterminate. Walzer's talk of cultural integration and shared meanings and Tully's analogy between animal species and cultural groups are deeply misleading. One should never forget that the simplifying perception of the internal coherence and distinctness from one another of cultures is invariably perpetrated by interested parties – by cultural entrepreneurs, by priests and elders, by populist and nationalist intellectuals and propagandists, and even by social anthropologists in search of unified and uncontaminated objects of study. As Mary Midgley has well put it, of course cultures differ but 'they differ in a way which is much more like that of climactic regions or ecosystems than it is like the frontiers drawn...between nation states' (Midgley 1991: 84). The important thing to see is that they are never coherent, never closed to the outside, never merely local, and never uncontested from within and from without – though, of course, the degree to which these things are true will vary from case to case.

The contrary case is that liberalism is culture-free – a set of principles formulable, intelligible and applicable anywhere and everywhere, though, of course, being responsive to local variations in circumstances. The classic formulation of such a case is, of course, that of the early Rawls. His *A Theory of Justice* concludes with an extraordinary irenic (that is, non-polemic) vision. He claims that to see our place in society from the perspective of the original position, from which liberal principles are to be derived, is

> to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view. The perspective of eternity is not a perspective from a certain place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world. And having done so, they can, whatever their generation, bring together in one scheme, all

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> individual perspectives and arrive together at regulative principles that can be affirmed by everyone as he lives by them, each from his own standpoint. (Rawls 1971: 587)

This of course contrasts with the answer of the later Rawls, in *Political Liberalism*, according to which the principles in question constitute a 'reasonable political conception of justice', without metaphysical foundations, constructed from an overlapping consensus among the 'reasonable, comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modern democratic societies' (Rawls 1993: 46. 36). 'Reasonableness' is, indeed, a tricky notion and one that seems to me, at least at first sight, to be vulnerable to Parekh's critique that the range of permitted doctrines is confined to those that are already liberal, or at least liberalism friendly. This becomes clear in a well-known passage in which Rawls expounds on reasonableness:

> Thus, it is not in general unreasonable to affirm any one of a number of reasonable comprehensive doctrines... .Others who affirm doctrines different from ours are, we grant, reasonable also, and certainly not unreasonable. Since there are many reasonable doctrines, the idea of the reasonable does not require us, or others, to believe any specific reasonable doctrine, though we may do so. When we take a step beyond recognising the reasonableness of a doctrine and affirm our belief in it, we are not being unreasonable. (Rawls 1993: 60)

But this is to juggle with different senses of 'reasonable': that in which a *doctrine* can be said to be reasonable, that is justifiable by convincing or adequate reasons, even if not acceptable to all (in view of the lack of 'a public and shared basis of justification ... in the public culture of a democratic society'[Rawls 1993: 61]) and that in which *people* can be reasonable that is disposed to behave co-operatively within certain justifiable constraints (by requiring only 'what free and equal citizens ... can require of each other with respect to their reasonable comprehensive views' [Rawls 1993: 62]). Nor does it help to elide these senses by defining a 'reasonable doctrine' as 'one that can be affirmed in a reasonable way' (Rawls 1993: 60). It is hard to evade the impression that liberal principles are here being justified as constructed from an overlapping consensus of doctrines that reasonable liberal, or liberalism-friendly, people are prepared to affirm or accept.

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Brian Barry firmly rejects this development in Rawls's thought, seeing it as a 'rather muddled version of Michael Walzer's anti-Enlightenment particularism'. Indeed, he caustically observes that the same should be said about Walzer's later thoughts about combining thick maximalism and thin universalist minimalism. Rawls and Walzer, he suggests (inaccurately), have now converged: 'if anything, they have gone past one another, calling to mind Mark Twain's story about the two drunks who fought so hard that they finished up by struggling into one another's overcoats' (Barry 2001: 331, 346). In *Culture and Equality* Barry advances a defence of culture-free egalitarian liberalism of which I suspect Hollis would, in part, have approved. This defence consists in a detailed case for difference-blind liberal policies, negative and positive; an extended argument for a theory of group rights that seeks to specify what limits liberalism requires be set to the freedom of groups, such as illiberal religions, from external intervention in handling their own affairs (an argument aimed at refuting Parekh's claim that liberalism restricts their diversity); and a robust defence of 'moral universalism' and attack on the currently widespread idea that, in Hollis's words, liberal values cannot lie 'beyond internal or consensual reasoning'. This last involves showing how an appeal to culture has no justificatory force in defending liberal principles, and nor does contribution to cultural survival or cultural diversity. Nor does Taylor's idea of presuming the equal value of cultures convince, nor can it coherently be practised. Nor, finally, to be specific for once, is the right defence of the British government's not punishing Rushdie or handing him over to others for punishment (whether within some legal process or outside it) that 'this is the way we do things here' (the phrase is Richard Rorty's); it is, in Barry's words 'this is the way things ought to be done everywhere: we do things that way here not because it is a part of our culture but because it is the right thing to do' (Barry 2001: 284). But are things quite so straighforward?

Let us turn to this question of moral universalism. Hollis's approach to this issue suggests, as I have indicated, that he would have been sympathetic to Barry's, yet he would also, I believe, have been troubled by it – as indeed am I, though I am more troubled than he would have been. Liberals, he writes, 'are indeed universalists, committed to universal reason in pressing their ideas of a free, just and equal society on persons or cultures not of liberal persuasion'. 'Enlightenment liberalism', he spiritedly writes, echoing a phrase of Charles Taylor's,

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'was a fighting creed, armed with a universal account of human nature and of how societies arise and function, universal notions of human interests and human freedom, and universal prescriptions for education and moral progress, all of which could be established from a scientifically objective and universally attainable point of view' (Hollis 1999: 36). The question is: how much of this picture can we retain?

Liberalism, Hollis wrote, 'has to remain a fighting creed with universalist pretensions':

> Liberal declarations of human rights, for instance, are robust and sharp-edged declarations, intended to lay anyone who breaches them open to moral condemnation. Their neutrality, if they have it, is to do with their being so undeniably well-founded that they can be assumed in all further discussion of how a just society should be organised. This has to remain a claim to universal standing, even if one becomes coy about quite what lies behind it. Otherwise Amnesty International could not speak out globally. (Hollis 1999: 36)

Compare what Walzer says about Amnesty International – that its success depends on self-restraint, on restricting itself to 'moral minimalism, since there is no single, correct maximalist ideology' (Walzer 1994: 49). Hollis also views liberalism's procedural values as 'a minimal universal morality, yet one with a cutting edge' (which 'weigh in somewhere between telling cannibals to use a knife and fork and forcing them to turn vegetarian'). But Hollis's strategy, to which I now draw attention, is to exert pressure on Walzer's suspect thick/thin distinction. Liberals, says Hollis, should stick to reason 'through thick and thin', and, by 'arguing that thinner concepts are still action guiding', 'open the way to a thinly developed local politics'. But this, he says, requires that there is 'a notion of "reasonable persons" able to hover between heaven and earth' (Hollis 1999: 36, 37, 40).

He suggests that there are two defences against the charge, expressed by the aphorism with which we began, that liberalism is ethno- (that is culture-) centric. One is empirical: that liberal values are in fact values which everyone does recognise, and I shall return to this at the end of this article. The other, which is of more interest to him, is metaphysical: 'a contentious, objectivist universal story about, for example, human nature, human interests, the fundamentals of law, the conditions of flourishing for civil society, or the character of citizenship'. So which values should liberals defend as universal? Hollis's answer is that the

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standard answer is 'procedural values backed by a separation of the right from the good' – an answer which needs 'substantive support', for

> procedural values which extend to a distributive principle of social justice and a robust view of what counts, for purposes of drawing a circle round every human being, as harm to others, call for reasoning which strains any separation of the right from the good. In short, even if muted for reasons of tactics or tact, a liberalism which believes in freedom, justice, inalienable rights, and equality is still a fighting creed. (Hollis 1999: 41)

Here you see Hollis expressing worries which Barry plainly does not share. For Hollis 'there is trouble over both "procedural" and "neutrality"': 'what counts as procedural is itself a substantive question'. Indeed, whether 'an appeal to neutrality has special force depends on the robustness of liberal distinctions between procedural and substantive values and between the right and the good'. 'Neither distinction', he remarks, 'seems very robust to me' (Hollis 1999: 36).

Brian Barry's approach is altogether less squeamish. Unlike the animals on Tully's canoe, he writes,

> precisely because human beings are virtually identical as they come from the hand of nature – at any rate at the level of groups – there is nothing straightforwardly absurd about the idea that there is a single best way for human beings to live, allowing whatever adjustments are necessary for different physical environments. Disagreements will in fact arise because there are bound to be differences of opinion about what is the best way to live – what, for example, is the true religion, if any – and there is no known method of resolving such disagreements. But it is consistent with that to hold that the human situation is sufficiently uniform to make it possible to say that there are quite a number of things that every society ought to achieve if it is to provide a tolerably good life for all its members. Moreover, the very fact of irresolvable disagreement over the nature of the good life, once we get beyond the basics, is itself a premise in the argument for liberal institutions. For, in the face of these disagreements, what we need is a fair way of adjudicating between the conflicting demands that they give rise to. This is what liberalism offers. But saying that is to make a universalistic claim. (Barry 2001: 262–3)

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But, to state that the idea that there is a single best way for human beings to live is not straightforwardly absurd is far from showing that it is plausible; and certainly the idea as thus stated does look (how can I put it?) somewhat incautious, and it is in no way supported by the premise that human beings come virtually identical from the hand of nature. Why should where they come from, and how they come, have any bearing on where they go? The human situation may be viewed as 'uniform' but there is no reason to think all will ever agree on what that uniformity consists in, or on what a 'tolerably good life' is or, indeed, that it should be 'provided' or that it should be available to all a society's members. Nor is it convincing to suggest that the admittedly irresolvable differences about what constitutes the good, arising from different religions for example, have no bearing upon the warrant of any claim to have given it an objective and universal answer. It is just this crux that leads Rawls and Walzer to their respective, but quite different, bolt-holes – Rawls to reasonable pluralism, based on the 'burdens of judgment', and Walzer to his idea of moral maximalism incorporating variable cultural meanings. Nor does the point that the fact of irresolvable disagreement over the nature of the good life is itself a premise in the argument for liberal institutions show that that argument can be conducted from a standpoint external to one of the contending sides in the argument. But nor is it clear that Barry thinks it can, since he has argued that we can no longer maintain the hope of the Enlightenment that liberal attitudes will, in the absence of persecution and censorship, prevail over time and thus that, faced with the choice between trying to persuade non-liberals to accept the principle of neutrality and trying to discredit their beliefs, 'I think that the second is clearly the better strategy'. (Barry 1990: 14). Nor, finally, is it clear how to arrive at a univocal answer to the question of what is a fair way of adjudicating conflicting demands that arise from conflicting moral viewpoints, where the very answer to what counts as such a fair way and indeed what counts as a reasonable answer may well be in dispute among such viewpoints. Martin Hollis saw these difficulties, or some of them, and was (perhaps insufficiently) troubled by them and Brian Barry is not.

So can we 'secure liberalism' by putting its core values 'beyond internal or consensual reasoning'? To approach an answer to this, we must ask: internal to and consensual within what? One answer, suggested by several of the writers we have been considering is: *culture*. So the question becomes: can we secure liberalism by trying to put its core

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values beyond the reasoning internal to and shared within liberal cultures, or to cultures hospitable to liberalism? But, in the light of what was said above about the erroneous 'poor man's sociology' that views cultures as undifferentiated and integrated wholes, this cannot be the right answer. For cultures, and in particular liberal cultures, are sites of contestation. Those who proclaim the latter's virtues count as prime among these their very openness to such contestation, their commitment to debate and pluralism – though, of course, in reality, such cultures all fail to live up to this ideal; some do so poorly, some less poorly and all patchily and inadequately. From Mill to Rawls (as Parekh might say), *dissensus*, in the form of open public debate and the clash of value positions, is what liberal cultures are supposed to promote and sustain. Mill, of course, thought that out of such conflict conclusions would be reached that would come to be widely accepted: that both individuals and societies would progress, through 'experiments in living' towards higher rather than lower ways of living, while Rawls makes no such assumption. But whatever its predicted outcome, most liberals defend liberal cultures in the hope that they will be maximally open to the challenge of non-liberal and illiberal reasoning.

So perhaps the answer to our question should be to return to our original characterisation of liberalism as an *outlook*, or, to use Rawls's terms, *perspective* or *standpoint*. Can we secure liberalism by putting its core values beyond the reasoning that is internal to and consensual within a liberal outlook? I suggest that two distinctions need to be made here. One concerns the *content* of such an outlook – which, as Geuss has been quoted as observing, is undefinable and continuously self-reinterpreting. Assuming that it nevertheless exhibits core beliefs, some of these will be seen (from such a perspective) as first-order beliefs about substantive issues. At this level we are discussing norms of conduct, and in particular norms of conduct enforceable by the State. Which freedoms should be guaranteed and protected – of speech, of association, of religion, of property ownership, and so on? How should benefits and burdens, freedoms, resources and obligations be distributed? Even more specifically, how should the abortion question be decided? What should the policy on immigration be? Typically, within liberalism, such questions are answered in the language of rights – whether human or civil or social or economic or cultural and whether attributed to individuals or collectivities (liberalism displaying generally some reluctance here). Such rights are enshrined in Bills of Rights and constitutions, but the language

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of liberal politics is increasingly pervaded by rights talk. And these answers, framed in this way, are typically justified by distinctively liberal background assumptions: chief among them humanism, individualism ('giving pride of place to autonomous individuals, determined to demand their rights, even (indeed especially), in the face of widespread social consensus' [Taylor 1999: 128]) and equality as non-discrimination, arising with the idea of Natural Right and challenging the alleged naturalness of successive forms of human differentiation, held by pre- and non-liberal world views to be rooted in the cosmic order of things.[2]

But such first-order beliefs and their justifying assumptions contrast with second-order or meta-beliefs characteristic of (internal to and consensual within) the liberal outlook. These are beliefs about how to argue and how to justify your political morality. So liberals typically say that alternative principles, dictating norms of conduct and policies have to be stated in universalistic form, they have to be accessible to 'public reason', they have to be acceptable to all those affected by the consequences of their implementation, or to all those engaged in a free and unforced discussion on equal terms, and so on. So liberalism, seen as an outlook or political morality, contains meta-principles that specify what is going to count as adequate reasoning, whether directed to liberal conclusions or not.

The second distinction we need to make concerns the very standpoint from which we ask the question at issue here: can liberalism be secured by putting its values beyond internal or consensual reasoning? We can ask this as enquiring anthropologists who view political moralities as specimens, each with its own organising principles of reasoning. From this viewpoint what counts as a compelling reason is whatever convinces the relevant community. A good reason, from an anthropological standpoint, is *a reason apt to convince*. Alternatively, we can ask it as engaged participants in political discourse, seeking answers to practical, first-order substantive questions of the kind indicated above: what freedoms should be protected? What would be the just solution? What should we tolerate? and so on. Here liberal and other answers are in competition, and the question is: which answer is the more convincing? A good reason, from a participant's standpoint, is *a reason fit to convince*.

It is evident that, from the anthropological standpoint, the answer to our question is obviously no, since what counts as reasoning is taken to

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be both internal and consensual. How about the participant's standpoint? Liberalism offers the questioning participant not only first order answers (or rather principles from which to generate answers) but also principles specifying what good reasoning – reasons fit to convince – consist in. Moreover, these meta-principles are tightly linked to the rest and in particular to what I have called the background assumptions. Thus, for instance, the idea that political principles, of justice for example, must be acceptable to all those affected by their implementation is, obviously, itself an expression of humanism, individualism and equality. So, it would appear that, although there are obviously canons of reasoning that are, and must be, common to all those who reason, in crucial respects, liberalism, as an outlook, is, at once, both fighting creed and referee.

But suppose we now modify the question and treat 'liberalism', not as an outlook, but as a set of practices and institutions, as specified at the beginning of this paper – such as constitutions, separation of powers, citizenship, toleration, rights of free speech, assembly and association, due process, private property, and so on. Can these be secured only by reasoning internal to a liberal outlook? And, even if they can be so secured from within alternative outlooks, are those practices themselves equally secure when motivated by non-liberal beliefs? (How secure are they when motivated by liberal beliefs?) I believe these to be genuinely open and important questions. The process of answering them will involve debate and mutual efforts at understanding that may well change both liberal and non-liberal outlooks, perhaps in convergent ways (along the lines of what Gadamer calls a 'fusion of horizons') but perhaps not. Charles Taylor has suggested, for example that reformed or 'protestant' interpretations of Theravada Buddhism can exemplify the possibility of alternative variations in 'philosophical justifications or in legal forms that would still be compatible with a meaningful universal consensus on what really matters to us, the enforceable norms'. Others have made similar claims for contemporary interpretations of Confucian ethics (Taylor 1999: 129; see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).[3]

Let me, finally, turn to what Hollis refers to as the empirical defence against the charge that liberalism is culture-centric. Here we return to the cannibals. For recall that, whatever the actual prevalence of man-eating may have been, both abroad and indeed at home, 'cannibalism' was a social construction of the self-reflective Western mind. As Rawson well puts it,

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> the common factor in the long history of cannibal imputation is the combination of denial of it in ourselves and attribution of it to 'others', whom 'we' wish to defame, conquer, appropriate or 'civilize'. (Rawson 1997: 3)

Recall that in Hollis's evocative aphorism, the cannibals stood for culturally embedded, exotic and utterly repellent practices. I have in what I have said put in question the idea of cultural embeddedness. I want to conclude by putting the idea of the exotic into similar doubt. To what extent, I wonder, are the very ideas of culturally-based 'difference', 'otherness' and diversity themselves (as the current jargon goes) 'socially constructed'? To what extent have these notions been promoted and exaggerated for a variety of reasons and in pursuit of a variety of interests, including group interests but also liberally minded generosity and compassion, perhaps inspired by post-colonial guilt and imperial self-exculpation? I believe that these questions merit close attention from philosophers, but especially from sociologists and anthropologists. We need, I think, to return to a lost discipline, or sub-discipline, the sociology of morality and to a question that used to be central to studies and debates among sociologists and anthropologists, a question captured by the title of a book by Morris Ginsberg: *The Diversity of Morals.* I think we have no real idea either how to answer or even properly to investigate the question; how much moral diversity is there? I was struck when conducting an interview with the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, often thought of as an arch-advocate of value pluralism, by his statement that 'more people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed' (Berlin 1998: 119). Political philosophers and others talk and write as though we have a handle on this question, but we do not. Perhaps, after all, the cannibals have more to teach us liberals than we realise.

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NOTES

1. Todorov continues:

> Bravery in warfare and polygamy, cannibalism, or poetry will be excused or offered as examples, not in terms of the ethics of the other but simply because these features are found among the Greeks, who embody Montaigne's personal ideal.
>
> The relativist does not pass judgment on others. The conscious universalist

> may condemn others, but he does so in the name of an openly assumed morality, which may therefore be called into question. The unconscious universalist is unassailable, since he claims to be a relativist; however, this does not prevent him from passing judgments on others and imposing his own ideal on them. He has the aggressiveness of the latter and the clear conscience of the former: he is an assimilator in all innocence, because he has not noticed that the others are different. (Ibid.)

One difficulty with Todorov's view of Montaigne is that it attributes unconsciousness to this supremely self-reflective thinker.

2. As Taylor writes: 'once right inheres in nature, then it is hard in the long run to deny it to anyone. The connection to equality is the stronger because of the thrust of modern humanism..., which defines itself against the view that we are embedded in a meaningful cosmic order.... This has been a very common form of thinking in almost all human societies' (Taylor 1999: 139).
3. For a somewhat similar argument, see Chan 1999. Several Chinese scholars, some less skeptical than Chan, are currently working along these lines.

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