I. Introduction

Alfred North Whitehead’s achievements do not include a developed social and political theory. His most thorough address to this subject occurs in the first part of Adventures of Ideas, which centers on the historical adventure of freedom, or the humanitarian ideal, the “idea of the essential rights of human beings” (1961: 13). Given ancient expression in Plato’s conception of the human soul, smoldering during the middle ages and yet “nerving the race in its slow ascent” (1961: 18), this idea, aided by the senseless agencies of modern science and economics, reached a kind of triumph with the birth of democracy. “Finally it was democracy that freed the slaves” (1961: 20).

But “the success,” Whitehead continues, “came only just in time. For before and during the nineteenth century, several strands of thought emerged whose combined effect was in direct opposition to the humanitarian ideal” (1961: 28). Theories of political economy carried into social thought what he elsewhere calls the “historical revolt” of modernity: “the return to the contemplation of brute fact” (1963: 15). This persuasion rejected or refused the metaphysical project and culminated philosophically in “Hume’s criticism of the doctrine of the soul” (1961: 36). “On the other side of the account,” Bentham and Comte embraced the humanitarian ideal and its democratic expression. But they, too, “discarded metaphysics” by taking the “supreme worth” of humans as an ultimate moral intuition “requiring no justification and no ultimate understanding of . . . [its] relation to the rest of things” (1961: 37-38). In their own ways, moral and political theory joined the opposition, and, Whitehead concludes, democracy divorced from metaphysics “lost its security of intellectual justification” (1961: 36).
Whether or not all details in Whitehead’s review are correct, his general account of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is, I believe, incisive and sets terms for discussing the contemporary relation between process philosophy and political theory. I have in mind especially (1) his assessment of modern democracy as a kind of triumph, (2) his focus on the emergent divorce of moral and political principles from any metaphysical backing, and (3) his judgment that this divorce threatens the humanitarian ideal and its democratic expression. In a programmatic way, this paper will argue, first, that democracy divorced from metaphysics does indeed lose “its security of intellectual justification,” and, second that process philosophy has the resources to meet three widely persuasive objections to democratic theory dependent on metaphysics. I begin with a few words about the meanings of “democracy” and “metaphysics.”

Stretching back to classical Greece, the history of “democracy” includes diverse meanings. I will use the term to name the reversal in which modernity turned its back on the long Western tradition of rule by the one or the few, who were supposedly authorized by special gifts of wisdom or virtue or divine appointment, and affirmed instead rule by the many—so that governing power is accountable to the citizens. To be sure, who counts as a member of the many has often been decidedly restricted, and how best to make power accountable has been contested, and thus a continuing debate about what democracy means or requires has occurred. Still, precisely this question has become the question for political theory because the summary reversal is widely seen—rightly—as a profound triumph. At least during the past half century, on my reading, political theory in the West has been inseparable from democratic theory.

Recent proposals also perpetuate another consensus dominating political theory for a longer time, namely, that principles of justice are properly separated from any metaphysical backing—an agreement consequent in large measure on Kant’s effective critique of classical metaphysics. Here, I use “metaphysical” in the strict sense, that is, to designate the character of existence as such or possibility as such, and thereby distinguish it from “metaphysical” in the broad
sense, which designates the character of existence with understanding as such. The difference is important because one continuing project in moral and political theory, dependent also on Kant, takes democracy to be authorized solely by metaphysical features distinctive to subjects, that is, creatures who live by way of understanding or reason. In order to prevent confusion, I will insofar as possible use “metaphysical” without a qualifier to mean metaphysical in the strict sense and speak whenever possible of subjectivity as such when I mean metaphysical features in the broad sense. The complication is that “metaphysical” also appears in some prominent contributions to recent political theory, often without clarity about its different meanings, and thus restricting the term’s designation to existence as such will not be entirely possible. When a different meaning occurs, I will explicitly so note.

II. Democracy Without Metaphysics

I will now offer one typology of political thought within the dominant consensus and will mention in a programmatic way the most challenging criticisms of each type. Nothing I say will be decisive. But I do intend an outline of how one might provide an argument for Whitehead’s conclusion: In later modernity, democracy “lost its security of intellectual justification” because the humanitarian ideal was divorced from “the rest of things.” The typology consists of four types and is generated by, as it were, crosscutting two distinctions with respect to political and, specifically, democratic theory.

On the one hand, alternatives may be distinguished as theories of the good or theories of the right. “The good” here means the inclusive good, that is, defines a telos to which all purposes should be inclusively directed and, therefore, in terms of which each activity or purpose can be evaluated in its entirety. With this same meaning, theories of the good may be called teleological theories. Classical utilitarianism, to choose one example, is a teleological theory on which the good is maximal pleasure or happiness. Theories of the right are, in contrast, nonteleological. They are, to be sure, theories of good action and, further, may affirm certain other things as good. But neither
good action nor other good things are defined by an inclusive good. On these theories, therefore, morality evaluates human purposes only in some and thus not all respects. For instance, Kant’s moral law does not define a telos to which all ends should contribute but, rather, directs moral concern to whether actions respect the freedom of all rational beings. Given conformity with this obligation, our activities or purposes in other respects are nonmoral.

On the second or crosscutting distinction, *categorical* theories are contrasted with noncategorical or, as I will say, *contextual* ones. “Categorical” here means a theory on which some principle is applicable to strictly all human activities and thus all human decisions. In contrast, “contextual” designates a theory all of whose principles are restricted to some specified activities, typically to activities within some specific historical setting. Now, allowing that politics is concerned with the question of justice, we may distinguish alternatives for political theory in terms of the normative grounds to which the definition of justice appeals, and the four types are: *theories of the categorical good*, *theories of the categorical right*, *theories of the contextual good*, and *theories of the contextual right*—where each type as it appears within the dominant consensus asserts its independence from metaphysics. This abstract and, perhaps, rather lifeless outline will, I hope, become more clear and important through an explication and illustration of each type.

A. **Theories of the Categorical Good**

Within the dominant consensus, theories of the categorical good constitute a type having few contemporary representatives. Its most influential expression is utilitarianism, which has, during the past half century, received sustained and widely persuasive criticism. Still, a brief review of this type will prove useful, at least for the following reason: Political theory based on process philosophy also affirms a categorical good, for which I will reserve, wherever possible, the term “comprehensive,” and we should later ask whether the reaffirmation of metaphysics exempts process thought from the most telling criticisms of utilitarianism.
For Bentham, the categorical good is maximal happiness—or, as sometimes restated, maximal utility—and political theory assigns to government its proper part in pursuit of this telos. He affirms “objective utilitarianism,” on which the utility of differing things and activities can be objectively measured, so as to permit cardinal ordering within the psyche of a given individual and interpersonal comparisons. Severe doubts about the practicality and conceptual tenability of Bentham’s utility calculus led to “subjective utilitarianism,” which dispenses with interpersonal comparisons and assumes only that individuals rank their own preferences ordinally, that is, can tell which take precedence over which. A wedding of political thought and classical economics in the work of both James and John Stuart Mill, Hume, and Adam Smith, among many others, was the consequence.

For my purposes, noting two general problems of utilitarianism will be sufficient. For most recent thinkers, the most convincing point concerns the absence of inviolable rights. On all versions of the theory, this critique maintains, what matters is maximal utility overall, and hence the right of any given individual to a certain share in the enjoyment—or any share at all—can only be provisional, subject to being canceled when the overall summation so requires. Even rights to life and bodily integrity can be only prima facie, and the political community is permitted, if not bound, to sacrifice innocent individuals when empirical circumstances counsel that utility overall will thereby be maximized. More than anyone else, John Rawls drove this point home—and, indeed, his own massively influential theory began with the perceived need for a viable alternative to utilitarianism.

At least subjective utilitarianism, moreover, faces a second problem: Because happiness depends solely on preference, there is reason to doubt whether any moral or political principle can be based on utility. How can the difference between moral and immoral decision be publicly defined by a supposed telos that has no intersubjective content? In the end, so far as I can see, subjective utilitarianism simply counsels each individual to maximize satisfaction of her of his own
preferences, so that the theory is finally amoral. In practice, therefore, the wedding with neoclassical economics has filled the void, with money or exchange value serving as a stand-in for utility, and thinkers have sought to derive norms for politics whereby the proper setting for maximal economic achievement is provided.

Perhaps objective utilitarianism could avoid the latter problem. But Bentham's hedonism seems clearly inadequate to the task, and the relevant question in our present discussion is whether a conception of the good can be explicated and defended independently of our relations to “the rest of things.” A sustained effort to do so is found in the work of John Dewey, who (at least on one reading) defends a theory of the categorical good from which the democratic ideal follows, namely, that every action or decision ought always to pursue “the all-around growth of every member of society” (Dewey: 186). Dewey remains influential among some contemporary thinkers, Richard Bernstein being a principal example. On my accounting, however, growth cannot be the categorical good if, as Dewey intends, it occurs only in human existence—for the following reason: A good to which all purposes should be inclusively directed must compare everything to which humans do or might relate; but existence with understanding does or can relate to anything that is so much as possible, at least in the sense that it can be an object of thought; accordingly, categorical good can only be defined metaphysically, by the character of possibility as such, in distinction from any specification (for instance, human happiness or utility or growth) thereof.

B. Theories of Categorical Right

With those terse comments on theories of the categorical good, I turn to theories of the categorical right, a type that does remain a significant force in contemporary political theory, although not a majority view. Perhaps all theories within the dominant consensus are Kantian in a minimal sense, precisely because they seek moral and political grounds independent of metaphysics. If so, theories of this second type may be called Kantian in a maximal sense because they share with Kant his affirmation of necessary nonteleological principles—where, to repeat,
“nonteleological” means a theory that defines purposes as morally relevant only in some respect. Principles of the right, we can say, confine morality to constraints or limits on the purposes each person may elect, in a manner roughly analogous to how grammatical norms constrain what a language can be used to communicate. On Kant’s categorical imperative, for instance, we may pursue any interest or goal we please, so long as doing so does not treat other rational beings solely as means to our ends.

Typically, theorists of the categorical right formulate principles of humans rights by which all interaction is bound and from which democracy as the proper form of government is derived. Virtually all such thinkers take Kant’s categorical imperative to be empty of moral content and thus seek to revise his account. Nonetheless, they follow him in defending a principle presupposed by practical reason or subjectivity as such. Roughly speaking, the presupposed rights are sometimes limited to civil and political rights, as when Karl-Otto Apel argues for a “meta-norm” of communicative respect, and sometimes inclusive of certain economic and social rights, as when Alan Gewirth argues for generic rights to freedom and well-being—and, in either case, the democratic state has the duty to give these rights political form.

Theories of the categorical right may be criticized for restricting the objects of moral concern. In the absence of a metaphysical good, a necessary practical principle or set of principles is derived by demonstrating how any subject’s purpose necessarily includes a self-reflective affirmation of its own subjectivity or agency and how this implies an equal affirmation of all other subjects and thus a nonteleological obligation. Accordingly, such theories assume other individuals as mere facts, absent which there would be nothing one ought to treat in accord with certain nonteleological rights. But, then, these theories cannot prescribe responsibilities to future generations because such obligations involve only possible subjects, and a present affirmation of them requires an inclusive telos. Similarly, these theories limit the object of moral concern to the community of subjects or rational beings and thus cannot affirm the worth of other creatures
except as instrumental to whatever human ends do not violate human rights. For some critics, both limitations on the objects of moral concern seem counterintuitive.

Nonetheless, maximal Kantians might bite this bullet, insisting that no other kind of moral theory is defensible. But a third critique finds such theories incoherent. A principle or set of principles on which human activities are moral or immoral only in some respect implies that our purposes in other respects are morally indifferent. If moral obligation is, for instance, exhausted by respect for all subjects’ rights to freedom and certain other conditions, differences among alternative purposes a person might choose (whether to maximize one’s income, spend one’s life on the beach, pursue justice for the oppressed, and so forth) must be morally indifferent in respects other than their effect on the stated rights of subjects. But this implication, namely, purposes in respects other than those defined by the constraining principle make no moral difference, is itself a moral evaluation. In truth, we cannot evaluate our alternatives for purpose except as whole things, and what is and is not pertinent to moral in distinction from immoral activity depends on a moral assessment of the whole. Hence, categorical principles of the right imply, against themselves, another principle by which purposes are evaluated in their entirety—a principle of categorical good.

C. Theories of Contextual Right

If this last criticism is sound, argument to necessary nonteleological principles must finally be unsuccessful, and with this conclusion most recent political thought agrees. Typically, however, recent thinkers are not thereby led to reopen the possibility of metaphysics. In one way of another, most turn instead to theories of justice without universal principles and thus to contextual theories.

Contextual theories of the right are preeminently exemplified in the later political liberalism of John Rawls, whose purpose is to show how principles of justice can be independent of any
“comprehensive doctrine.” As mentioned, I wish to reserve “comprehensive” for a metaphysical good and, thereby, for a metaphysical teleology. Every view of that kind is included among what Rawls calls comprehensive doctrines. But his term—designating what he also calls religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines—has a far broader meaning, which includes nonmetaphysical beliefs about human life overall, and the extensive discussion he has evoked also uses “comprehensive” with something like his intention. I hope to avoid confusion by using “comprehensive doctrine” as Rawls does, while otherwise limiting use of “comprehensive” to my preferred meaning. But terminology here is the more complicated because all comprehensive doctrines are, on Rawls’s usage, metaphysical; at the least, in other words, they are marked by some understanding of distinctively human existence as such.

A democratic theory dependent on any such understanding cannot be convincing, Rawls argues, because it implies adherence by all citizens to the given comprehensive doctrine, and to the contrary, democracy not only emerged in response to but also has endorsed an internal plurality of religious and philosophical doctrines. On my reading, it is not too much to say that Rawls seeks a political liberalism independent of any comprehensive doctrine in order consistently to affirm the modern democratic principle of religious freedom. What he offers, then, is a conception of “constitutional essentials and basic justice” that is “political and not metaphysical” because the principles are “freestanding.” These principles are nonteleological because they define the constraints within which each citizen forms and revises her or his comprehensive doctrine, and they are contextual because their source is the public political culture specific to a modern democratic society. Modern democracy has now so developed institutions of political life and values they embody that appeal to these alone is sufficient to ground principles for the basic structure of society, and the society will be stable if the diverse comprehensive doctrines join in an “overlapping consensus” on a set of freestanding principles. Correspondingly, Rawls develops a

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*For Rawls’s distinctive terms that I cite, see Rawls.*
conception of “public reason,” the proper character of democratic discourse: In the last analysis, governing decisions about the basic structure should be advocated or contested by appeal to reasons that stand free from any comprehensive doctrine.

The massive attention given to Rawls’s work is a testimony to its originality and importance. His critics come from diverse quarters, and not the least troubling to many is his conception of public reason. As one critique argues, the call for “policing” one’s religious beliefs in the public arena “seems so contrary to the spirit of free expression that breathes life into democratic culture,” and the conclusion that, say, “religiously based oratory of the Abolitionists or of Martin Luther King, Jr.” is a mere “placeholder for reasons to be named later” makes sense only as the defense of a prior theory at all costs (Stout 68, 69, 70).

But the line of thought I take to be most pertinent to present purposes is this: Rawls’s assertion that democracy requires “political and not metaphysical” principles on which diverse religious and philosophical convictions overlap implies that all must commonly accept the freestanding character of justice. But just that requirement is, so far as I can see, inconsistent with adherence to a comprehensive doctrine. Belief that something about existence as such or, at least, human existence as such defines the good or the right means that all principles of morals and politics depend on what that belief affirms, and thus no adherent of such a belief can endorse the political liberalism Rawls advocates. His proposal is, in sum, internally incoherent because the assertion of entirely contextual principles is inconsistent with or denies any truly categorical good or categorical right. By implication, then, political liberalism becomes a kind of self-refuting comprehensive doctrine. The possibility of contextual principles anywhere implies the absence of categorical principles everywhere, and this conclusion asserts something about practical reason or human existence as such.

Now, having distinguished as precisely as I can between categorical and contextual theories of the right, I am bound to recognize the many recent political thinkers who appear somehow to
mix the two types. With Rawls, those in this company commonly reject the pursuit of a necessary principle or set of principles. Still, they see the specter of relativism in his reliance on the specificities of our democratic culture and, in one way or another, reach for principles having wider applicability, even to societies not currently democratic or, at the extreme, all contemporary political communities. Since they abandon arguments to normative presuppositions of subjectivity as such, they ground a conception of justice through a rational reconstruction of irreversible modern conditions; or through empirical generalization; or through some conception of mutually critical dialogue controlled by an appeal to “reflective equilibrium”; or as principles said to be intuitively compelling, at least on due consideration.

I will simply assert that the projects of Brian Barry, Seyla Benhabib, Ronald Dworkin, David Held, Charles Larmore, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Marion Young all fall somewhere within this mixed type. Further, I will simply assert that such theories suffer the problems of both types between which they fall. If principles are said to be “solely political,” one denies all comprehensive doctrines. If one then conceives of justice as the application to politics of some principles of the right applicable to human actions generally, these nonteleological principles imply the inclusive evaluation of purposes or categorical good they purportedly deny.

D. Theories of the Contextual Good

Why do theorists beware of relativism still so often deny not only moral and political principles dependent on existence as such but also the kind of necessary moral and political principles maximal Kantians affirm? Whatever else is involved, I propose, this denial expresses the measure in which modernity’s so-called subjective turn, of which Kant was exemplary, was subsequently redefined by linguistic and hermeneutical turns. To speak in very general terms, Kant’s distinctive project became unacceptable because the rational being he explicated is solitary and, therefore, its theoretical and practical understandings are divorced from the intersubjective worlds constituted by language and culture. The principal figures here are Wittgenstein and
Heidegger, of whom, it has been said, “each discovered the lifeworld in his own way,” and for each “the lifeworld . . . assumes the role of ultimate bedrock” (Apel: 139-40).

This role means that all human understandings are constituted by participation in a lifeworld, and thus all alike are acquired through learning or reflection on learning. Such reflection may indeed question inherited interpretations, so that creative transformations are possible, but new understandings remain transformations of that lifeworld in a sense that still circumscribes meaning and possible truth by some historically specific context. On something like this basis, I think, recent Western philosophy has been widely characterized by a denial of universal subjectivity. Understandings whose truth is independent of specific conditions cannot be found on land or sea; accordingly, neither metaphysics nor a priori principles of subjectivity are possible. Political thinkers of the mixed type I have just mentioned typically do or would, I suggest, share this general philosophical persuasion, and it also finds expression in theories of the contextual good.

For thinkers representing this fourth type, ideas of the good to be pursued and ideas of rights or right relations among differing persons are all in the same boat, circumscribed by linguistic and cultural context. Moreover, the Rawlsian attempt to separate contextual right from any inclusive good is said to be incoherent in a way analogous to the incoherence with which I earlier charged Apel and Gewirth: Principles of contextual right evaluate the activities of citizens only in some respects and, thereby, imply that their purposes in other respects are indifferent to justice, and this implication is an evaluation of their activities in their entirety. Hence, contextual justice cannot be divorced from contextual good.

Theories of the contextual good are most readily represented by some recent so-called communitarian thinkers. Michael Sandel is illustrative. Although he does not call himself “communitarian,” his project articulates politically how persons are constituted by their communities. His antagonists are, roughly, those I have called theories of the right, for which “the self is prior to its ends” (13) because proper ends are solely the consequence of its decision, and
this is why principles of justice can be defined as nonteleological constraints or “a framework of rights” (11). In truth, Sandel holds, persons are “encumbered selves,” whose identities are inseparable from communities and traditions “antecedent to choice” (14, 15) and thus whose moral obligations cannot be independent of some particular communal formation and some conception of the good in which communal conditions are included. We need, Sandel continues, a retrieval of republican theory, which “interprets rights in light of a particular conception of the good society—the self-governing republic” in pursuit of “the common good” (25). Republican self-government encourages “substantive moral discourse” about the community’s “purposes and ends” (323, 350), a proper interpretation of which defines an inclusive good on which self-government or democratic politics itself depends.

Sandel does not clarify how self-government can be commonly accepted by all citizens if it depends on one among the diverse accounts of the common good welcomed into democratic debate, nor does he state his conception of an inclusive telos for the community's life that might be defended in that discourse. One is left with the suspicion that he wishes to discuss democracy, the importance of which most will not contest, without an explicit affirmation about the inclusive good because the good can only be contextual, and he is finally at a loss to argue for any conception of it. Indeed, no such defense seems possible because theories of contextual good are, by implication, self-refuting in a way similar to theories of contextual right. Because Rawls's proposal implicitly denies the comprehensive doctrines from which political principles are meant to stand free, it becomes in its own way a comprehensive doctrine, defined by the universal principle that justice is everywhere and always entirely contextual. Similarly, a theory of the contextual good, because it denies any categorical good, affirms in its own way what it denies. Since the good must be everywhere and always contextual, some categorical good is implied as the basis for that evaluation.

III. Democracy with Metaphysics
The four alternatives or types reviewed above exhaust the possibilities for political theory within the dominant consensus or without metaphysics, and the criticisms I have suggested might be summarized as follows: Theories of contextual right or good are self-defeating because they imply universal principles. Theories of categorical right are also self-defeating because they imply another principle in terms of which activities or purposes are evaluated in all respects. It then follows that democratic justice depends on a categorical good, and this good cannot be defined without metaphysics because an evaluation of all purposes in their entirety must include everything with which subjectivity does or might have to do, that is, must include possibility as such. If these assertions can be redeemed, the consequence will be a negative defense of Whitehead’s judgment: Divorced from an “ultimate understanding of . . . [its] relation to the rest of things,” democracy loses “its security of intellectual justification.”

But if democracy is intellectually insecure without metaphysics, one should not conclude that democratic affirmation, without or without such security, otherwise remains the same. In moral and political theory, why practical principles are normative is inseparable from what they require. Hence, the philosophical issues are politically consequential, and the promise of a metaphysical backing might be suggested by noting how the dominant consensus is expressed in contemporary United States politics. On my reading, theories of the right—categorical, contextual, and those that somehow mix the two alternatives—are foremost in the contemporary discussion. Justice is said to be independent of the diverse conceptions of the good by which pursuits of individuals and groups within the political community are defined. In this sense, the right is prior to the good; that is, the right implies nothing about the good life except that its pursuit cannot violate the demands of justice.

Taken together, such theories constitute the liberal alternative in political thought, at least insofar as liberalism is a contested option in democratic theory. Earlier liberal theories often shared with subjective utilitarianism the view that good for each individual is a matter of
preference and thus typically shared in the wedding with modern economics. Although recent liberal thinkers have been at pains to deny an economic account of the good, the marriage is difficult to dissolve. At the least, they are hard pressed to show consistently why substantive justice—beyond basic political and civil rights, the criminal law, and communal defense—should not be defined as the proper production and distribution of economic benefits. Because justice is separated from the good, the substantive conditions with which politics is concerned can only be instrumental to whatever diverse ends diverse citizens may elect, and economic resources are the preeminent kind of instrumental goods. If this line of thought can reach a convincing completion, theories of the right cannot provide principles to challenge (and, to the contrary, may be said to reinforce) the measure in which contemporary politics is driven by economic purposes.

On the whole, it seems to me, United States politics since the Civil War has been controlled by a liberal ideal in this sense. In recent decades, however, an expression of communitarianism has also become nationally effective. The ideal of a conservative moral community, long influential in local politics, emerged with force as part of the Reagan coalition. On this ideal, community is the context for cultivating and expressing private moral virtues—character traits that are, within very generous limits, indifferent to the differing stations of people in structures of power, privilege, benefits and burdens. Hence, the politics of this movement is focused on issues of family commitment and sexual control, personal responsibility, the discipline of work, religious piety, and the like. This may not be the kind of community Sandel and many communitarian theorists would endorse. But if theories of the contextual good leave themselves powerless to defend any definition of the good, the door seems open to any view thereof participants in Sandel’s “substantive moral discourse” advance.

I offer this rough reading of major forces in contemporary politics only to suggest that neoclassical metaphysics might indeed make a politically important difference, and another way to put the point is this: Democratic theory with a metaphysical backing might so transform the
communitarian alternative as to articulate a clear and defensible definition of how the comprehensive good should direct public purpose. Still, such a politically consequential contribution to contemporary political philosophy will not be convincing without successful address to certain challenges suggested or implied in our earlier review of the dominant consensus.

There are three challenges I wish programmatically to pursue, and I will order the challenges from the most generally philosophical to the most specifically political, with a view to suggesting at the last certain democratic principles based on neoclassical metaphysics.

A. The Post-Enlightenment Challenge

As background for communitarian theories, the earlier discussion noted how twentieth-century linguistic and hermeneutical turns have led to a widely persuasive denial of universal subjectivity, based on the conclusion that all understandings are linguistically or culturally constituted and thus depend on learning or reflection on learning. Whether meaning and truth are said to be circumscribed by a “thrown projection” of “being-in-the-world” or by “life forms” and associated language games, the result may be stated in a dictum: Reality presupposes understanding. What is real as an object or objects of human experience is mediated by a lifeworld, and realities are differentiated from each other or have a given general character only by virtue of the terms with which they are understood within a specific historical setting. On this post-Enlightenment account, as we may call it, putatively necessary principles of subjectivity as such and, with them, putatively metaphysical understandings cannot be valid.

Although I will here only summarily state the critique, the post-Enlightenment account is, so far as I can see, pragmatically self-contradictory. To deny universal subjectivity is to claim validity for an understanding of all subjects in all contexts, and to circumscribe this understanding within some historically specific location is to imply contexts in which the claim may not be valid. Reason cannot function “merely as object and no longer as subject of critique” (Apel: 164). Still, this dialectical refutation leaves those for whom meaning and validity imply universal principles of
subjectivity with the following challenge: How can there be prelinguistic understandings, those not constituted by language or culture and thus not dependent on learning inherited interpretations?

Given neoclassical metaphysics, the dictum describing post-Enlightenment accounts is reversed: *Understanding presupposes reality*. Becoming with understanding exemplifies features common to all actualities; each "begins as an effect facing its past and ends as a cause facing its future" (Whitehead 1961: 194)—and subjective activities are distinguished by deciding consciously how to unify our past and thereby what to pursue in the future. Hence, distinct actualities and possibilities and the general character of reality as such are given to a subject prior to understanding, such that understanding is a subject’s consciousness of its prior relations to distinct things and their metaphysical character. With this accounting, the reality of prelinguistic understandings can be explicated, and due credit given to linguistic and hermeneutical turns, through a distinction between understandings in the foreground or focus and those in the background or dim apprehension of self-conscious activity—or between explicit and implicit understandings.

Here “implicit” means “contained in the nature of something although not readily apparent” (American Heritage Dictionary). This deeper level surrounds and provides the indispensable backdrop for our interest in whatever dominates our attention—and typically, at least, the more extensive or complex the relevant implicit understandings one enjoys, the more profound the understanding of whatever occupies the center of interest. We should agree that explicit understandings are mediated by culture and, further, that most implicit understandings at any given time were previously acquired through learning or reflection on learning and are now implicitly remembered. But it does not follow that strictly all implicit understandings depend on learning. If understanding presupposes prior relations to reality, then something always included in those relations may be always understood implicitly. Indeed, such prelinguistic understanding is confirmed if we note that one thing always present is the self that understands and if we agree that
becoming with understanding always includes a self-understanding. Self-understanding, then, cannot depend in all respects on learning, and it also follows that understandings of the larger reality are always included—because an understanding of self discriminates the self from strictly all others. “The primitive stage of discrimination is the vague grasp of reality, dissecting it into a three-fold scheme,” namely, “The Whole, That Other, and This-My-Self” (Whitehead 1938: 150).

Nothing in this view denies the fallibility of any given metaphysical proposal, because any scheme of this kind claims to make explicit an originally implicit understanding. Nor should we deny that any such explication occurs in the symbols and concepts of a lifeworld. Still, this account of universal subjectivity affirms, by implication, that any given lifeworld must include concepts and symbols, or the potential for concepts and symbols, in terms of which what is originally understood can be explicitly represented, and such explications occurring in terms of differing lifeworlds can be—in principle, however difficult in fact—sufficiently translated each into the others to permit common discourse, since finally they are all speaking about a common human experience.

If an argument for universal subjectivity seems far removed from moral and political theory, we might mention that subjectivity with a neoclassical backing implies an original understanding of the metaphysical or comprehensive good, on which the fundamental meaning of the moral and political enterprise depends. Because “creativity”—“the many become one, and are increased by one”—is, on neoclassical metaphysics, the “category of the ultimate” (Whitehead 1978: 21), it not only describes all final real things but also defines them as good in greater or lesser measure. Unity-in-diversity is the comprehensive good, and greater creativity, the possibilities for which depend on the particular past an actuality inherits, is greater good. When an actuality becomes with understanding, the good realized depends also on moral decision to pursue greater creativity. Hence, we may also speak of a comprehensive purpose, namely, aim at maximal creativity or unity-in-diversity in the future as such, and subjectivity as such is constituted by an original understanding of and original decision for or against that purpose.
B. The Nonteleological Challenge

But democratic thought determined by a comprehensive good articulates to politics a teleological moral theory. On the second challenge to neoclassical metaphysics, developed principally in response to utilitarian theories, teleology is inconsistent with inviolable rights. Rights have reciprocal duties, and if the rights are inviolable, the duties must be met whatever the overall consequences. Because a teleological theory prescribes pursuit of the maximal good, the challenge contends, even basic human rights to life and bodily integrity can only be provisional, their force erased in situations where the best overall consequences so require. Indeed, the charge is far more radical. Teleology it is said, is inconsistent with all social practices, that is, patterns of interaction in which reciprocal actions are constituted by norms or rules to be observed whatever the overall consequences. In terms of a traditional distinction, every teleological theory is said to deny all perfect duties, duties “not to do, or not to omit, action of a certain [specific] kind” whatever the overall consequences, because all such duties can be canceled by the imperfect duty “to promote a certain general end” (Donagan: 154).

Given the latter, in other words, all other norms can only be “rules of thumb,” subject to rebuttal by the overriding obligation to create the best overall consequences. All social practices are thereby nullified, and without them, social cooperation and coordination become impossible. Because maximal good may require or permit nonobservance of expected roles, no person can have specific expectations about what others will do, even assuming they will act morally. Moreover, the unpredictability is, as it were, cumulative. Once all actors must decide without settled expectations regarding the actions of others, what any given actor can expect of others becomes radically indeterminate. If this critique is sound, not only human rights but also democratic political community must be included among the casualties.

Still, the critique depends on the following assumption: A comprehensive good prescribes its own direct application to each action; that is, the alternatives open to any given decision should
be assessed directly in terms of contribution to the maximal good and thus without attention to the social consequences of having all actions so assessed; each action should be “separately taken” (Barry: 224). At least to first appearances, however, a teleological ethic would not so prescribe, precisely because direct application to each action would prevent social coordination and cooperation. If such social order is necessary to maximizing the good, the application to some actions will need to be indirect, that is, through social practices, perhaps including a practice constituted by human rights. The relevant question, then, is whether the given teleological ethics consistently prescribes a principle or principles for required and permitted social practices. We might designate such principles and the norms they authorize “deontological”—and thereby distinguish this term, as many do not, from “nonteleological,” in order to leave open whether deontological principles or norms do or do not apply indirectly a teleological ethic.

Given this distinction, political theory backed by neoclassical metaphysics might respond to the second challenge by showing why pursuit of maximal creativity consistently prescribes deontological obligations—and this will be so if (and, I am inclined to think, only if) subjectivity as such implies not only the comprehensive purpose but also a universal deontological principle and thus a universal social practice. Because both the purpose and the principle will then be necessary conditions specific to subjectivity as such, they will be mutually implicative, and the universal practice will be an indirect application of this teleological ethic.

In Whitehead’s terms, a universal social practice follows from the character of every human activity as not only “subject” but also “superject” and, therefore, of every human decision as decision for a self-expression—whereby every activity makes of implies a claim for its self-expression as morally valid, at least as morally permissible. Insofar as other subjects are affected by the activity, it also claims validity for a moral prescription applicable to them, namely, that they ________________________________

\(^3\) Whitehead here uses “subject” to designate any given final real thing. In the present discussion, I confine the designation to existence with understanding.
should evaluate the effects in accord with the same understanding of the comprehensive good affirmed and expressed in the initial activity's decision. This follows because the claim to be morally valid claims for the self-expression conformity to the comprehensive purpose by which all subjects are morally bound. But, now, “ought implies can,” which here means that recipients must be able to decide for the prescription applicable to them because it is valid. It then follows that every human activity is morally bound to respect the moral freedom, that is, the capacity to decide one’s own claim to moral validity, of all recipient subjects. The consequence is a universal principle, prescribing that every subject respect the equal moral freedom of all others. As may be recognized, this argument takes the form often found in theories of the categorical right and is, in fact, indebted to Karl-Otto Apel. With him, we may say that every subject is required to respect the communicative rights of all subjects and, therefore, to participate in a universal practice constituted by the principle of communicative respect.

In contrast to Apel’s theory, however, the principle is here asserted as the indirect application of a comprehensive purpose, such that the former is an aspect of the latter because both are implied by subjectivity as such, and the purpose cannot prescribe any direct application overriding communicative rights. The principle of communicative respect is deontological—and, indeed, is or implies a principle of inviolable human rights. Moreover, we may confirm that such indirect application coheres with the pursuit of maximal creativity if something like the following argument can be successfully developed: Creativity is socially empowered. Insofar as the comprehensive good directs us to maximize creativity through the community of subjects, activity properly pursues a common world of self-expressions in which the achievement of each is maximally empowering for all. Precisely because the good is constituted by the relativity of subjects to the good of other subjects, in other words, maximizing the good is a common enterprise, and pursuit of the maximal good requires social practices that maximize the empowerment of all. Toward that end, the practice of communicative respect is noncompetitive with all other social
practices; that is, giving and receiving communicative respect increases the empowerment of all,
whatever other social practices may be prescribed or permitted in order to maximize the good.

I will not seek here to articulate how the principle of communicative respects authorizes
other social practices, except in the following respect: The practice constituted by that principle
implies or includes, at least wherever possible, a democratic political community, whereby the
governing order is determined through discussion and debate among the people ruled by it. In
brief, here is the reasoning: A claim for the moral validity of one’s effects on other subjects respects
their moral freedom only if one thereby pledges that, should the claim be contested, it can be
redeemed by argument. Because political discourse concerns the governance of all social relations,
communicative respect implies, wherever possible, constitutive principles of democratic discourse,
and thus the comprehensive good prescribes the social practices defined by valid democratic law.
Democratic politics, in other words, indirectly applies pursuit of maximal creativity in the future as
such.

C. The Liberal Challenge

This return to democracy opens the third challenge to political theory backed by
neoclassical metaphysics. Democratic principles dependent on metaphysics are indicted as self-
refuting because rule through democratic discourse means that “we the people” are sovereign and,
thereby, means at least this: First, every member of the political community is sovereign over her
or his assessment of all proposed activities of the state and thus all political claims, such that the
state may not legitimately stipulate that assessment. Second, the final political authority consists in
the equal importance of every person’s sovereign assessment. Put somewhat more briefly,
democracy means that all members of the political community have a right to make or contest any
political claim, and together as equals they are the final political authority. The political discourse
must be free, in the sense that every citizen is an equal participant, and also full, in the sense that
any belief about the ultimate terms of assessment is legitimate. Accordingly, the state must be
prohibited from teaching for or against any conviction about the ultimate terms of political assessment; that is, the principle of religious freedom—where “religious” has an extended sense, designating any belief defining the grounds for all political evaluation—is essential to democracy. A democratic constitution, the argument concludes, must be independent of any religious (in the usual sense) or philosophical principle, and thus a democratic theory dependent on metaphysics takes sides among that diversity or is inconsistent with religious freedom.

In the end, this reasoning led Rawls to seek principles of justice that are “political and not metaphysical” and, thereby, a contextual theory of the right. For Steven D. Smith, who finds Rawls’s proposal dependent on its own comprehensive doctrine, the problem is finally intractable. Any political constitution, Smith argues, implies some or other set of “basic background beliefs” (Smith: 63), and thus no form of government can consistently legitimate whatever religious or philosophical beliefs citizens freely elect. But readily as we might agree with Smith’s premise, his conclusion does not follow. What a democratic constitution implies is one thing, and what it explicitly asserts is another—and Smith’s analysis depends on ignoring this distinction. Because democracy is rule through full and free political discourse, a properly democratic constitution should provide no more and no less than the necessary conditions of this discourse—of politics by the way of reason. Given neoclassical metaphysics, this constitution implies the comprehensive good, and the activities of a democratic state ought to specify to its community the pursuit of maximal creativity. But it is no business of the constitution to stipulate that purpose or how it should be embodied in statutory law, this being precisely the business of the political discourse, whose task, we might say, is to discern and specify precisely the implications of its own constitution.

The democratic constitution so understood consistently stipulates religious freedom because allegiance to argumentative adjudication is the one commitment that does not explicitly take sides in any political conflict. Indeed, politics by way of reason is explicitly neutral even to
disagreement about whether this is the best way to determine activities of the state, that is, about whether democracy or something else is the proper form of government, since this disagreement also defines something about which we can argue. Moreover, common adherence to the democratic way does not depend on common inculcation of its implied metaphysical beliefs, because all citizens commit themselves to democratic discourse in making any political claim at all. Just as the act of promising commits one to the rule that promises should be kept, whatever might be the content promised, so anyone who claims validity for a political assessment thereby pledges that it can be redeemed by argument and thus commits herself or himself to politics by way of full and free discourse. Principles of a democratic constitution, in other words, are implied by the principle of communicative respect.

I will not pursue arguments for specific constitutional principles, but they include, on my accounting, equal rights to certain private and public liberties and the provision for institutions and offices of decision making through which discussion and debate among “we the people” determine activities of the state. I call a constitution so understood formative in character and the rights it stipulates formative rights—and thereby distinguish constitutional principles from substantive political principles, norms, and proposals, including claims for religious and philosophical beliefs. To be sure, this account of democracy presupposes that differing beliefs about the ultimate terms of political assessment can be argumentatively assessed or, to rephrase the point, that differing convictions about our comprehensive purpose answer a rational question. But political theory backed by neoclassical metaphysics shares and seeks to redeem precisely that presupposition—and saying this is one way to express why such metaphysics is an alternative to both the nonmetaphysical consensus in post-Kantian political theory and the classical metaphysics Kant’s critique so was so influential in discrediting.

IV. Justice as General Empowerment
If the comprehensive good explicated in neoclassical metaphysics authorizes a formative constitution, then this metaphysics also backs the most inclusive substantive principles by which participants in democratic discourse ought to be convinced. The proper task of democratic politics is, then, to specify in governmental laws and policies pursuit of maximal creativity. Here, again, I will simply assert programmatically a substantive principle of justice derived from that purpose. Further, I will here assume that, with respect to politics, pursuit of maximal good calls for maximizing in the long run a common world of self-expressions, in which diversity maximally empowers the creativity of all humans, and I will call this common world our maximal common humanity. For some process philosophers, I recognize, this assumption fails adequately to represent the intrinsic goodness of our natural habitat and thus our responsibility to it. Given that conclusion, pursuit of our maximal common humanity is constrained by duties to nonhuman existence, and the principle of justice formulated below will require similar qualification.

Because each person must decide what to make of the opportunity she or he is given, the telos of our maximal common humanity may be reformulated in terms of conditions by which individuals are empowered. The business of justice, I propose, concerns the most general conditions of empowerment, those important or potentially important to any individual in the political community—and I have in mind conditions such as physical and psychological well-being; economic provision and opportunity; educational attainment and opportunity; a rich cultural context; beauty and integrity in the nonhuman world, both natural and artificial; and implicated in all of the above as well as for its own sake, a favorable pattern of associations, including freedom of association. Transparently, much further explication is needed; but this line of thought, I judge, can lead to a substantive principle of justice something like the following: Maximize the measure of general conditions of empowerment to which there is equal access. I call this the principle of justice as general empowerment, and I take the principles of a democratic constitution to be an aspect
thereof. Constitutional principles, we may say, define government “by the people,” and justice as general empowerment defines government “for the people.”

On my accounting, justice as general empowerment not only articulates a theoretical alternative to all types within the dominant consensus but also provides a third alternative to the views of liberals and moral conservatives that have so dominated American politics during recent decades. If this is so, process philosophers have a distinctive contribution to make, not only to political theory but also to public discourse.
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