Introduction

> How small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws and kings can cause or cure.
>
> —Oliver Goldsmith

> Freedom extends beyond spatial bounds. Liberty presumes an autonomy of self that includes freedom of thought, belief, expression, and certain intimate conduct. The instant case involves liberty of the person both in its spatial and more transcendent dimensions.
>
> —Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy

The liberal political order is under attack. Such a statement would have appeared hyperbolic only a few years ago, but is today not much of a stretch. Populist movements in Europe and America challenge the liberal order both domestically and internationally. These democratic political challenges are mirrored by challenges from scholars and public intellectuals alike. Recent years have seen the publication of titles such as *Why Liberalism Failed*, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, *Against Democracy*, and more.[1] The reasons behind such challenges vary: there is backlash to the uneven distribution of economic globalization, there is a strengthening of identity politics as an alternative to liberalism, and there are calls for a return to the smaller communities that characterized the premodern, preliberal world. Yet, there is a deep and enduring question about liberal political order that underpins these prominent recent challenges. The question is whether the liberal order can provide the spiritual nourishment that human beings require. Few, including critics of liberalism, doubt the material benefits that the modern liberal world has made possible. Despite these benefits,

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however, liberalism ultimately leads to the spiritual impoverishment of citizens, or so the story goes. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn warned us forty years ago, Western liberalism began "the dangerous trend of worshiping man and his material needs. Everything beyond physical well-being and the accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the area of attention of state and social systems, as if human life did not have any higher meaning." Physical security and material wealth are not enough, for the "human soul longs for things higher, warmer, purer."[2]

Solzhenitsyn's warning was echoed by critics of liberalism in the years following his famous address, and those echoes have grown louder in recent years. Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* follows the Solzhenitsynian logic, arguing that the spiritual emptiness we see all around us is the achievement of the liberal promise, a promise that placed the individual's material well-being over all else.[3] The political and economic benefits of the liberal order are no longer enough to produce a society full of steadfast supporters of liberalism. To hear Solzhenitsyn again, "We have placed too much hope in politics and social reforms, only to find out that we are being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life."[4] From communitarians to progressives to recent critics of different stripes, liberalism is under attack for its apparent inability to provide spiritual nourishment and meaning to life. If the broad liberal order that has structured the West for nearly half a millennium is to endure, it must be able to answer the question, Is spiritual fulfillment possible for liberal citizens? Put differently, does liberalism enable, or at least not prevent, the spiritual fulfillment of its citizens?

I attempt to answer these questions, in the affirmative, throughout this book. Liberalism is in need of a *spiritual* defense, and one possible version of such a defense is my goal. Freedom is at the heart of the liberal project, and we need to understand how freedom and spiritual fulfillment might go together. To this end, we will explore what I call spiritual freedom. I suggest that spiritual freedom is a category of liberal freedom, a category that adds to our understanding of what it means to be free in a liberal sense. At the outset, I acknowledge that spiritual freedom eludes precise definition. I do not think there is a determinate answer to what spiritual freedom is, anymore than there is a determinate answer to what justice or moderation are. Nevertheless, political philosophy and the tradition of liberalism can gain from a fuller and richer understanding of spiritual freedom. Moreover, it seems that certain categories of liberty in

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the Western world get more press; the discourse on liberty is dominated by questions surrounding the categories of political/civil and economic liberty. In the West, concerns about liberty in both political philosophy and practical politics—seen through the prism of our political parties—seem to manifest primarily in debates over institutional form. Classical liberal theorists fight with Rawlsian-type liberals about what the moral aims of liberal democracy should be, and about what institutions best reflect those aims. Classical liberals think of citizens as self-owners, or self-authors, while Rawlsians think of liberal citizens as "free and equal persons." Classical liberals emphasize ownership and individual autonomy; Rawlsian liberals emphasize cooperation and equality. The two camps advocate institutional forms that reflect their divergent aims. They each try to set up institutions to answer questions such as the following: How do we protect civil liberties? How much economic liberty should individuals have? How will property rights be set up? How will taxes be structured? What are the essential public goods, and how ought we to provide them? Do we have an obligation to provide economic assistance for those who are the least well off in society, and if so, what means should be used to provide such assistance?

These sorts of questions dominate the intraliberal debate, and also take center stage in practical politics more often than not. Western liberal politics are predicated largely on questions of economic and political liberty. The task of balancing economic and political liberties is of great importance, but I believe that something is lost if liberty is discussed only, or at least overwhelmingly, in terms of economic and political freedoms. Our sense of freedom—we may say our sense of *feeling* free—extends past economic and political dimensions; it extends to our spiritual life. The category of spiritual freedom is necessary to take fuller account of, if not encompass, our understanding of individual, liberal freedom. Moreover, I think liberals would benefit from a more precise conception of what freedom of spirit is, and how we might defend liberal freedom at least partially on this basis.

Yet a precise definition of spiritual freedom is hard to come by. In order to minimize the difficulty inherent in the task of defining spiritual freedom, we will probe spiritual freedom and its relation to political freedom through the analysis of a "free spirit," a person who embodies the spiritual freedom under our microscope. Once we have a figure of a free spirit, we can then examine how this figure relates to politics and political freedom. We will not be left with an apodictic understanding of

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spiritual freedom, but my hope is that we will leave with a clearer view of spiritual freedom and its implications for politics, particularly for the liberal political orders prevalent in the West. By exploring the free spirit, we will see a concern with independence of mind and intellectual freedom, but also a concern for spiritual fulfillment. Spiritual freedom, then, contains intellectual freedom, but extends past it through a concern with spirituality as well. Intellectual freedom, it seems, is good for its own sake, it is intrinsically good. If we are not intellectually free, then our thoughts are somehow not our own or our thoughts are not self-generated—we are prisoner to the thoughts of someone or something else. That we wish to be intellectually free is hardly controversial and the vast majority of people would affirm intellectual freedom as a human good. When I use the term spiritual freedom, I intend to include this sense of intellectual freedom within it.

In addition to intellectual freedom, spiritual freedom includes a concern for spiritual fulfillment. One seeks to be spiritually free in order to achieve something greater, some sort of positive spiritual state. To be spiritually free is not as desirable as being spiritually *full*. Spiritual seekers pursue some sort of contented, or full, spiritual state. I will call this a state of "spiritual fullness." We thus arrive at a preliminary definition of spiritual freedom: intellectual freedom plus a concern for spiritual fullness. Likewise, a "free spirit" will be someone who is both intellectually free and who pursues spiritual fullness on his own terms.[5] The free spirit will embody our concept of spiritual freedom, and we will explore the free spirit's relation to politics and liberalism.

A second major goal of this book is to introduce and contemplate the notion of spiritual fullness, or fulfillment. Spiritual fullness may be of great import for political theory. Here, at the outset, I wish to highlight the importance of spiritual fullness to the case for liberalism. As we will see, many critiques of liberalism are predicated on the idea that liberalism produces spiritually empty citizens. The notion of the isolated/empty liberal individual is a primary point of attack of critics of liberalism, largely because it nullifies or trumps whatever other benefits accrue from a liberal political order. The importance of the conclusion reached in this work—that individuals can achieve spiritual fullness *outside of* the common sources of community, religion, tradition, or politics—is that it refutes claims made by various critics that the liberal individual is ineluctably isolated and spiritually empty. In so doing, the conclusion bolsters the case for liberalism.

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The free spirit, then, is a human type that poses questions for political philosophy in general, and liberal political philosophy in particular. The free spirit is at once both detached from, and beneficial to, a liberal society. And the free spirit achieves spiritual fullness within the liberal framework. The major themes to be explored are as follows: How does a free spirit relate to a liberal political order? What does this relationship tell us about political order itself? What positive goods can free spirits offer society? What can the free spirit teach us about individual autonomy, and about the possibility of individual consent in liberal democracies? How does a free spirit achieve spiritual fullness in liberal societies? These questions will be addressed throughout the book. First, however, the free spirit in question will need to be introduced and explained, a task to which we now turn.

"Free spirit" is a bit of a hackneyed term in modern culture. It will become clear as we proceed that the free spirit expounded here is quite different than the popular "free spirit" one finds in novels, Hollywood movies, pop culture and the vernacular. Indeed, the latter "free spirit" tends to be portrayed as one who has chosen an alternative lifestyle, an escapist, one who refuses to follow the basic rules of social convention. Moreover, these popularized "free spirits" tend to be portrayed as persons that do not want to face "reality," they are disenfranchised by the "system," they cannot or will not work a "regular" job, and often they display a proclivity towards mysticism. This is not to suggest that the popular version of the "free spirit" is wholly negative, for free spirits are often portrayed as an important and seductive alternative to the overworked and overstressed bourgeois or middle-class working person. What I seek to highlight, however, is the fact that the popularized "free spirit" is generally taken to shun the "real world," to choose to live instead in a world of dreams, illusions, and mystical intuitions.

The free spirit discussed here does not share the worldview of the typical popularized "free spirit." On the contrary, the free spirit at issue here is precisely concerned with ridding himself of dreams and illusions. His spirit is only considered free when he is facing reality head on, without the comforts of religious or mystical beliefs in any form. Our free spirit is not an escapist; rather, he is concerned with avoiding the common pitfalls of escapism. The salient characteristics and the orientation of the free spirit will emerge in detail in the following chapters. Here, however, is a provisional characterization of the free spirit: he is a skeptic[6] who seeks above all to be free of illusions about the world. He is able to face

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reality without falling to despair. This is possible because of his cheerful disposition, and also because of his ability to view a world without rational meaning as a cause for wonder rather than crushing doubt; as an invitation to create meaning rather than as a terrifying abyss.[7] The free spirit affirms life and creates value in it—that is, he achieves what I will call *spiritual fullness*—through an aesthetic perspective, as opposed to traditional moral perspectives such as communal or religious doctrines, or belief in a teleological human progress of some sort. Consequently, a free spirit is likely to be detached, to a large degree, from the traditions, morals, and general ethos of the community in which he lives. In other words, free spirits make great use of the "negative" liberty—that is, *freedom from*—afforded by liberal regimes. They wish to be free from custom and convention, free from community and associations that interrupt their solitude and create harmful attachments, and free from unconditional or dogmatic claims to truth and authority. These are the basic criteria of a free spirit. They can be met to a greater or lesser extent; there are, as I will argue later, degrees of spiritual freedom. To be a free spirit, however, there must be a considerable presence of these characteristics.

This characterization of the free spirit carries the question, Why do free spirits matter for politics at all? Are they not simply apolitical at best, and political pariahs at worst? While there is inevitable tension between free spirits and politics, I argue that free spirits practice a "politics of detachment," a practice in which individuals carve a space for themselves outside of politics while working towards inner freedom. Prima facie, the notion of a politics of detachment appears paradoxical: Is not detaching from politics tantamount to being apolitical? This paradox can be resolved when one sees that free spirits can work towards the improvement of political society by focusing inward. Free spirits are primarily concerned with their own spiritual freedom, but they retain an important political role. Politically detached free spirits provide two major benefits to liberal democracy: first, they facilitate a loosening of ideology and a weakening of fanaticism; second, they *demonstrate*[8] the independence of mind necessary for resisting the dominance of popular opinion. Free spirits act as a check on the prevailing social forces in liberal societies, leading to greater skepticism, and scrutiny, of the authority of public opinion. Political parties, mass media, and mass marketing are all strong liberal democratic forces that, in some sense, seek to capture the spirit. By selling or promoting certain ideologies, beliefs, and lifestyles, these forces ineluctably encroach upon the individual's spiritual freedom. These forces together constitute a

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major threat of majority tyranny, a threat that the existence of free spirits may help to combat. One should not need to look further than the history of mass movements in the twentieth century to realize the importance of keeping these forces in check. The presence of free spirits in society works towards this end.

Nietzsche's free spirit is the inspiration for the one investigated throughout this work. However, I have modified the concept of free spirit, and enumerated the basic criteria of spiritual freedom, to fit a broader description as well. It is important to note that I do not claim to be carrying on the work of Nietzsche, and I do not attempt to enlist Nietzsche as a supporter of liberalism, which he certainly was not. In chapter 2, I will introduce the free spirit and further explain my use of Nietzsche's work. Throughout the text, I will distinguish between Nietzsche's specific picture of the free spirit and a broader conception of free spirit based on the criteria above, which is general and abstract enough to allow for a wide spectrum of eligible individuals. However, when the term free spirit is used without qualification (as is often the case), the context in which it is used is compatible with both Nietzsche's specific understanding and the broader, more general one.

Spiritual Fullness

I will use the notion of spiritual fullness as a criterion of success, as a standard by which we can judge political philosophies. First, I suggest that one of the principal aims, whether explicitly or implicitly expressed, of many political theorists is that politics must be organized in such a way as to enable—if not to direct—citizens to achieve spiritual fulfillment. Put differently, I suggest that many political theorists are concerned not exclusively with questions of justice, equality, distribution, political legitimacy, and the like; many are also concerned with the spiritual state of individual citizens and the political community as a whole. This suggestion is justified by the language some prominent contemporary political theorists are wont to employ. They speak of the "malaise of modernity," the loss of "narrative unity" or personal stories, and the loss of "identity."[9] These terms do not denote the traditional metrics for judging political regimes—for example, justice, security, fairness, prosperity, and legitimacy. Rather, these terms denote an interest in the spiritual state of the citizens within political regimes, in this case the modern liberal regimes

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that dominate the West. On this basis I believe we are justified in using the notion of spiritual fullness as a standard.

The terms used to approach the idea of spiritual fullness vary. "Spirit" itself is a term with many definitions and connotations. Generally, these various definitions include mention of the distinction between some noncorporeal substance—be it the soul, consciousness, personality, and so on—and the material body. "Spirit" is also often thought of as the animating principle in humans or animals. This "animating principle" may, however, be considered to be a mystical soul, a God-given breath of life, or simply the human intellect or consciousness, which may or may not be an immaterial substance. The term "spiritual" is likewise open to several various definitions. For religious believers of different varieties, spirituality may refer to the connection the believers have with their God (or gods) or with their religious beliefs themselves. More recently, spirituality has focused more on subjective experience. On this view, any sort of meaningful or blissful experience—whether connected to religious belief or not—may be considered spiritual.

The uses of "spirit" and "spiritual" in this work are meant to be inclusive. The various meanings of the two terms should be compatible with the idea of spiritual fullness presented here. Often our understanding of spiritual fullness is separate from that of bodily or physical pleasure. The meaningful or blissful experiences, whether viewed as secular or religious, that constitute spiritual fullness are distinguished from the various forms of physical pleasure. To say that one's spirit is full is something different than to say that one's body is satiated. Experiences that constitute spiritual fullness touch on ideas, beliefs, or feelings that help us to explain who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we relate to the world. Fullness of spirit is something that can endure in a way that the fleeting and ephemeral satisfactions resulting from a pleasure-seeking lifestyle cannot.

Nevertheless, spiritual fullness should not be understood *only* as experience separated from physical pleasure. Many religious, blissful, or meaningful experiences do indeed travel through the physical senses. We can imagine, for example, an experience of awe or wonder brought on by sensing or conceiving the unity, or the mere factualness, of existence or reality. Likewise, we may experience the awe or wonder of the unity of reality, even as we experience the variety or intricacy of reality. One may "sense" the presence of God through the smell in the aroma of a field of flowers. Whatever the particular experience, we should bear in mind

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that many experiences that should count as spiritual are also experiences that are considered physical. Indeed, spirituality and physicality are not mutually exclusive. Spiritual experiences can come in many forms, and spiritual experiences lead to the spiritual fullness we have set up as a criterion for success.

The variety of spiritual experience is necessary to note because where individuals achieve spiritual fullness varies as well. Some theorists speak of the fulfillment that comes from active political life and the pursuit of public honor, others of self-realization through community membership and a strong sense of identity, and others speak more generally of the pursuit of happiness. Political philosophy has something to say about all of these ends, and I think all of these ideas about ends can be understood to have a common goal of enabling spiritual fullness. With that in mind, let us begin to define "spiritual fullness." Most broadly conceived, spiritual fullness is a state an individual has reached when he regards his life to be both desirable and full; a state in which life is not lacking in any significant way, and is therefore subjectively affirmed.[10] One can imagine numerous paths to achievement of such a spiritual state, but the goal remains the same for all.

Political philosopher Charles Taylor describes spiritual fullness accordingly: "We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness."[11] These activities or conditions "help us to situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form."[12] All of us do or should seek out a sense of spiritual fullness, yet how a place of fullness will be described depends largely on the moral and spiritual outlook of the person doing the describing. The religious woman feels the presence of God, the mystic the energy of the universe, the naturalist the power of nature; but in each such state, they feel spiritually full.

Some examples, from distinct thinkers, may further illuminate the idea of spiritual fullness. For a religious perspective we can listen to St. Ignatius of Loyola, to whom Taylor refers when discussing spiritual fullness. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius distinguishes between spiritual "consolation" and spiritual "desolation." Consolation, he writes, is when "the soul is aroused by an interior movement which causes it to be inflamed

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with love of its creator and Lord, and consequently can love no created thing on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all things."[13] Desolation, on the other hand, is "darkness of the soul, turmoil of the mind, inclination to low and earthly things, restlessness resulting from many disturbances and temptations which lead to loss of faith, loss of hope, and loss of love. It is also desolation when a soul finds itself completely apathetic, tepid, sad, and separated as it were, from its Creator and Lord."[14] Thus, fullness of spirit is marked by gratitude and love for life—and, for Ignatius, the Creator of life—while emptiness of spirit is likened to separation from the Creator of life. We may understand this notion of spiritual fullness as requiring a strong attachment and love for our life; and if we are theists, for the Creator of this life.[15]

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has some very similar ideas about the nature of spiritual fullness, albeit coming from a nontheistic perspective. I quote at length from the fifth walk of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, where Rousseau describes "the sentiment of existence," a sentiment that facilitates spiritual fullness as he understands it:

> In our most intense enjoyments, there is hardly an instant when the heart can truly say to us: *I would like this instant to last forever*. . . . But if there is a state in which the soul finds a solid enough base to rest itself on entirely and to gather its whole being into . . . without any other sentiment of deprivation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear, except that alone of our existence, and having this sentiment alone fill it completely; as long as this state lasts, he who finds himself in it can call himself happy, not with an imperfect, poor, and relative happiness such as one finds in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness which leaves in the soul no emptiness it might feel a need to fill. . . . What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves, nothing if not ourselves and our own existence. . . . The sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here-below.[16]

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Despite the fact that Rousseau invokes "existence"—whereas St. Ignatius invokes the "Lord and Creator"—we can see the similarities between what these two thinkers consider spiritual fullness to be. Consequently, we can infer that spiritual fullness is not exclusively a religious, theistic concept or exclusively an atheistic or agnostic concept of spirituality. Believer and unbeliever alike may share in the pursuit and experience of spiritual fullness.

Of the shared ideas between St. Ignatius and Rousseau, there is one I wish to emphasize: what distinguishes consolation and desolation—or spiritual fullness and spiritual emptiness—is a feeling of gratitude and love for life as well as an attachment to something other than sensual or physical, material things. Emptiness of spirit is likened to separation from the Creator for Ignatius, and disconnectedness from one's own "existence" in Rousseau. One may argue that Rousseau does not indicate "attachment to existence" in the passage above. He does, after all, implore, "What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves. . . ." Nevertheless, it is clear in this passage, and elsewhere in Rousseau's works, that the notion of "existence" is a source of meaning that can facilitate peace and contentment, and that one should seek it out. Existence is the place, or thing, that we are able to connect with when we have stripped ourselves of the earthly things that distract us from it. We may peel off the layers of socialization, as it were, to return to our natural state with existence, the state in which we lived before our spirits were corrupted by socialization.

"Creator" or "existence" might be replaced with some other idea that Taylor mentions, be it "the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form." The source of attachment varies. Yet, the descriptions given by Ignatius and Rousseau are meant to enrich our understanding of spiritual fullness, rather than define it. Taylor further describes spiritual fullness as requiring an idea that provides an attachment to something other than oneself, to some source of greater meaning. The implications of where one seeks attachment—that is, how and to where one is oriented spiritually—will be a major theme, and will be discussed later. For now, however, we can say that spiritual fullness is a spiritual state an individual has achieved when he regards his life to be both desirable and full, a state in which life and existence are affirmed, and that achieving this state requires an attachment to some source of meaning.

Now that we have begun to hone in on what spiritual fullness means, we may also gain clarity by identifying what it is not. Human flourishing

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conceived in the classical Greek sense, as the individual's achievement of the highest possible human virtue, may be thought by many to be the achievement of spiritual fullness. Yet as we proceed we will see the universal standards of virtue or excellence that Aristotle and other classical thinkers advocate may preclude certain possibilities for the spiritual fulfillment described above. In today's liberal democratic societies, we may find that the ground is particularly infertile for the cultivation of classical virtue, which requires state involvement in the process of inculcating proper virtues. As Charles Larmore points out, Greek and medieval thinkers

> entertained very sanguine prospects about the possibility of reasonable agreement about the good life. For them, it was axiomatic that here, too, reason tends naturally toward single solutions. The result was that, in their different ways, Greek and medieval thinkers usually assigned to the state the task of protecting and fostering the good life.[17]

A defining characteristic of liberal societies, by contrast, is that the state ought to be neutral towards controversial views of the good life. In the classical view, a well-ordered society directs citizens towards virtue and flourishing, which requires widespread agreement about what these are. Such agreement on what counts as virtue and the political will to legislate accordingly is elusive in liberal democracies. It would therefore be very risky, if not futile, to define spiritual fullness as Aristotelian flourishing in a political and historical age that is not suited to its pursuit.

There is a second reason for spiritual fullness to resist definition in terms of Aristotelian flourishing. It is possible that even a great or exemplary man of Aristotelian virtue will not have meaningful attachments nor be in a position to affirm life. For instance, we can imagine a person who dutifully follows the Aristotelian prescriptions for a life of virtue without an attachment to a greater source of meaning, a meaning that is required for our notion of spiritual fullness. Nietzsche repeatedly suggests that free spirits must be free even from their own virtues. A free spirit must know "how to escape from his own virtues occasionally,"[18] in order to gain knowledge and to maintain the strength of his autonomy. Indeed, honing and practicing Aristotelian virtue is not enough, for someone who possesses and practices the virtues deemed necessary for human flourishing may be merely going through the motions of living well.[19] According to the argument here, unless a person has an attachment

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to some source of meaning that leads to life affirmation, he or she will not be spiritually full. Conversely, we can also easily imagine a spiritually full person who is not a paragon of Aristotelian virtue. For example, Rousseau's "noble savage," who lives naturally without concern for the cultivation of virtue, could still be considered spiritually full in the sense we are using, provided he or she possessed an attachment to life. This is not to say, however, that human flourishing and spiritual fullness are mutually exclusive, as there is no reason that they cannot harmoniously coexist. Nonetheless, human flourishing is not a necessary or a sufficient condition for spiritual fulfillment.

The Free Spirit and Liberalism

The question of what spiritual freedom has to do with political philosophy remains. More specifically, how does spiritual freedom affect our understanding of liberalism? The answer, it seems to me, is that it enriches our understanding of individual freedom. Moreover, in the language of liberalism, spiritual freedom enriches our understanding of individual autonomy. Liberalism is a complex idea in itself, with a long history and various permutations. But all versions of liberalism treat the individual as the primary political unit; that is, any version of liberalism takes individual autonomy as its bedrock. The very idea of liberal government requires autonomous individuals, individuals capable of contracting with each other to found a government and, subsequently, to govern themselves. Yet, the concept of an autonomous individual is often attacked, and these attacks come from two angles. From one angle, individual autonomy is alleged to be impossible; from the other, it is alleged to be undesirable. Attacks on the idea of individual autonomy—both on its possibility and desirability—are, by extension, attacks on the political philosophy of liberalism. I believe the discussion of the free spirit throughout this work will provide a basis for a counterargument to some of the charges against individual autonomy. Specifically, the free spirit demonstrates that individual spiritual autonomy is possible and can be desirable. The idea of the free spirit can also lend support to the basic claim of liberalism, the idea that the individual can and ought to be treated as the foundational unit of political theory.

The first challenge to individual autonomy surrounds the question of its possibility. Many political theorists have doubted the notion that the individual is a discrete unit of analysis. In other words, many theorists

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have asserted that the individual is but a part of the social whole, a social whole that is prior to—and therefore irreducible to—individuals. Alternatively, some theorists claim that the social whole is the natural and necessary end of the individual. Indeed, if one canvasses the history of Western political thought, a view that society—or the state—is of greater import than the individual will emerge in various forms. To greatly simplify some well-known examples: society is prior to the individual (Aristotle); the individual reaches his highest potential and fulfillment in the state (Plato); the individual realizes the full expression of the ethical life only as a member of the state (Hegel); and the individual experiences true freedom only when he dissolves his particular will into the general will of the state (Rousseau). Notwithstanding important differences, these various theories assert that, for the purposes of political theory, separating the individual from society is impossible. It is unnecessary to recount the arguments here, but it is important to acknowledge the influence they have had on critiques of liberal politics, both of the recent past and of today.

Contemporary critics of liberalism of different stripes argue against the autonomy of the individual. Throughout the book, I will examine and critique thinkers such as Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Sandel, as well as John Dewey, Charles Merriam, Herbert Croly, and John Burgess. These communitarian and progressive thinkers all argue against the liberal individual in similar ways. Despite their various differences, all challenges to the liberal idea of individual autonomy converge around the claim that the state is a "social organism." The notion of the state as a social organism starts with the premise that individuals cannot be separated from society. John Dewey explains the "social organism" in *The Ethics of Democracy*:

> . . . that theory that men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to men. . . . Society in its unified and structural character is the fact of the case. . . . Society, as a real whole, is the normal order, and the mass as an aggregate of isolated units is the fiction. If this be the case, and if democracy be a form of society, it not only does have, but must have, a common will; for it is this unity of will which makes it an organism. A state represents men so far as they have become organically related to one another, or are possessed of unity of purpose and interest.[20]

In words that echo Hegel and Rousseau, Dewey asserts the idea that men "are men only when in intrinsic relations to men." Hence, the very

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possibility of individual autonomy is attacked by the idea of the state as a social organism. Naturally, humans are born and raised in society and rely on other humans for an assortment of basic needs, but the idea that individuals are an irremovable part of a social organism with a common will is a much bolder claim, a claim that will be challenged here. As we proceed, my hope is that the idea of the free spirit will challenge the idea that individuals have no role outside of the social organism, or are not truly "men," as Dewey and others suggest.

The importance of refuting the idea that individual autonomy is impossible, that individuals are only parts of the social organism, becomes clear when we recall that liberal government requires individual consent for its legitimacy. Only autonomous individuals can enter into something consensual—for example, a social contract. Thus, by rejecting individual autonomy, one also rejects the social contract. Liberal government cannot exist without some form of contract; hence, if the idea of the free spirit demonstrates individual autonomy, it provides a basis for liberal government legitimated by consent as well. This discussion of the free spirit, then, is meant to provide an alternative method by which to legitimate liberalism through a "proof" of individual autonomy.

The second challenge to individual autonomy surrounds the question of whether it is, or can be, desirable. Many of the critics of liberalism discussed will attempt to uncover—explicitly and implicitly—the spiritual emptiness of liberal society. Indeed, many scholars insist that it is liberal political order that disconnects us from the things that might bring us spiritual fullness, things like religion, politics, community, and traditional values. Taylor, MacIntyre, and Sandel argue in different ways that liberalism disconnects individuals from sources of meaning, sources that offer a place for our attachments and provide a sense of identity. The communitarian challenge focuses on the absence of attachments. Recall our definition of spiritual fullness; it requires some sort of attachment. Thus, prima facie, it appears that this challenge may have some merit. If liberalism precludes meaningful attachments, it thereby precludes spiritual fullness. Meaningful attachments, critics of liberalism emphasize, come from engagement with political and communal life. The nature of these attachments will be described in detail later on.

The aforementioned thinkers find the liberal individual in a state of spiritual emptiness. They identify a need to transcend what they see as an "atomized" self through attachment to something greater than the individual, and the choices they give are politics, the broader community, and tradition (which includes religion). These are the very things

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liberalism devalues, at least according to their critique. What follows from this is a rejection of liberalism as a political philosophy.[21] One need not criticize the liberal political regime from a macroscopic perspective if its microscopic and foundational unit, the liberal self, is found to be spiritually damaged.

Whatever the wide-reaching political benefits of a liberal regime might be—increased prosperity, rule of law based on the equality of persons, decreased global conflict especially amongst liberal capitalist democracies, and so on—liberalism as a whole cannot be adequately defended if the individuals that follow its teachings are spiritually empty. The arguments of thinkers like Taylor, MacIntyre, and Sandel call for a return to republicanism or a more communitarian form of democracy, and they are predicated on the belief that these forms of government can cultivate spiritually fulfilled citizens, while a liberal regime cannot. The individual autonomy intrinsic to liberalism is deemed to be something like a spiritual disease. It is alleged that even if it is possible to separate from the "social organism," it is dangerous to do so. Thus, the second challenge to individual autonomy is based on the conclusion that even if it is possible, it is not to be desired.

The idea of the free spirit will challenge the claim that liberal citizens are ineluctably spiritually desolate. Indeed, taking seriously the premise that liberal political order allows for, perhaps even encourages, individualism and detachment from politics and community, there are still possibilities for spiritual fulfillment. I will show a type of individual we find in liberal societies, the free spirit, and show that he is—as these thinkers lament—largely detached from political life and the broader community. Despite this detachment, however, we will see that free spirits achieve spiritual fullness. We will also see that liberalism does not hinder this spiritual pursuit. Liberalism, instead, provides the individual with the freedom to seek spiritual fullness on one's own terms. This means, ipso facto, that liberalism allows for affective attachment[22] to something, as affective attachment is required by our definition of spiritual fullness. Liberalism does not, however, assume that politics, community, and tradition are the only, or even the central, locations where such attachment may be found.

The free spirit does not seek attachment in these locations, but creates an affective attachment to existence and life through taking an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, liberalism does not, as a communitarian democracy does, place obligations on individuals that may in fact preclude or hinder a free spirit's pursuit of spiritual fullness, obligations that may preclude

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the freedom of thought necessary to achieve an aesthetic perspective. I will defend, then, both a weaker and a stronger thesis: the weaker is that progressivism and communitarianism are not capacious enough to include the free spirit; the stronger is that such theories place obligations on individual free spirits that threaten their pursuit of spiritual fullness. The demonstration of these theses will urge us to consider that the state should not attempt to facilitate spiritual fullness, but rather should avoid coercive demands that restrict the possibility of free spirits to behave as such. Indeed, we should think more about what the state should not do than what it should do.

The free spirit is an autonomous individual who is at the same time capable of achieving spiritual fullness. This argument mitigates the criticisms levied at the individual autonomy and the social contract that are central to the liberal political order. At the same time, it presents a possibility for affective attachment and spiritual fulfillment in liberal societies that resides outside of both the spheres of politics and of the broader notion of community: a life of aesthetic appreciation. Once this possibility is presented, we will see that a liberal political order also provides possibilities for the individual to pursue spiritual fullness apart from politics and community. In short, the free spirit will show that individual autonomy is possible and that it can be desirable as well.

Plan for the Book

The examination of spiritual freedom throughout the book leaves us with three principal conclusions. First, spiritual freedom is a desirable category of liberal freedom that should be understood and protected. Free spirits seek detachment from politics in order to pursue more spiritual goals, and they should be allowed to do so without fear of persecution. Second, despite the apparently apolitical nature of free spirits, their political detachment is good for society in several ways, notably for loosening the knot of ideology and weakening fanaticism, and for *demonstrating* independence of mind. Fanaticism of any stripe is a danger to the moderation and sobriety through which a liberal society functions at its best. Third, and finally, spiritual freedom bolsters the case of liberalism in two ways: it shows that liberalism is superior to other forms of political order in its ability to accommodate outsiders, that is, to accommodate free spirits; and spiritual freedom provides us with a different way of thinking about,

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and a "proof" of, the individual autonomy and individual consent that is required by liberal democracy.

The book proceeds as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the free spirit and lays out the basic criteria for a spiritually free person. Chapter 2 considers the free spirit's proper relationship to politics. Chapter 3 looks to the example of "real life" or empirical free spirits to investigate how they balance the pursuit of spiritual freedom and the demands of public life. Chapter 4 questions whether the free spirit has lessons for liberal political society, and how liberal society benefits free spirits. Chapter 5 discusses the possibility of individual autonomy, its importance to the justification of liberal government, and the progressive critique of autonomy. Chapter 6 contemplates the desirability of autonomy, exploring the relationship between autonomy and spiritual fullness and addressing the criticisms by communitarians regarding the spiritual state of liberal societies. Taken together, the arguments in these chapters will illuminate the question of what it means to be spiritually free and how this knowledge may affect the way we look at politics and political philosophy.

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