

# **Towards a Social Democratic Theory of the State**

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The paper attempts two tasks. The first is to provide a characterization of the social democratic approach which sets it in contrast to liberal democratic theories. This is pursued by contrasting the different interpretations of the ideal of equal respect which are associated with the two approaches. The second task is to establish that the social democratic approach is, if not clearly superior, at least worth considering further. This task is pursued by the attempt to vindicate three assumptions which the social democratic approach must make about the state.

What kind of institution is the state to be; what sort of requirements ought it to satisfy? I wish to sketch one answer to this question, setting it up in contrast to a more established type of response. The answer I sketch constitutes what I shall describe as a social democratic theory of the state; equally well perhaps, it might be cast as a democratic socialist one. The sort of response from which I distinguish it is the liberal democratic approach to the state, an approach which has been rather better articulated in the recent literature.

My definitions of the social democratic and liberal democratic theories, and the further distinctions with which I embroider those definitions, are stipulative rather than historical. I say this to guard against the charge of under-documenting them. But I hope that the definitions are not rootless either. They are designed to regiment and idealize commonly accepted ideas; their rationale is to further a familiar debate, not initiate a foreign one.

The paper is in four sections. First I introduce a distinction between two ways of taking the ideal of equal respect for all; one associated with the liberal democratic approach, the other with the social democratic. In the second section I examine the significance of adopting the liberal construal and in the third the significance of espousing the alternative. Finally, in the fourth section, I try to establish the tenability, if not the actual preferability, of the social democratic viewpoint. Specifically, I provide a sketch defence of three assumptions which it involves: first, that the state can be a reliable agent; secondly, that

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it can be a respectful one; and thirdly, that it is an agent that ought to be given responsibility for the goals espoused by social democrats.

The paper may go some way towards a social democratic theory of the state but it certainly does not constitute one. It does not outline in any detail the agenda for the social democratic state, and it does not try to defend that agenda against standard liberal objections. Those tasks are ones which I hope to take up elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Two Democratic Viewpoints

I shall take it as axiomatic that democratic theories of the state agree on one crucial matter. This is that the social ideal of equal respect for all persons ought to be central to the organization of society. What makes such theories democratic—better perhaps, democentric—is precisely the notion that every citizen enjoys or ought to enjoy equal respect. However far short of being by the people, government is certainly to be for the people. Each to count for one, and none for more than one.<sup>2</sup>

The division between liberal democratic and social democratic theory comes of a difference in how they understand the ideal of equal respect for all. The difference does not bear in the first place on the content of that ideal but rather on the agent perspective from which it is seen. Equal respect for all is a goal designed to guide the organization of social life. How it is understood depends on who is taken to conduct that organization.

There are two salient possibilities. Equal respect may be taken as a goal for the guidance of individuals, because it is individuals who are in principle responsible for social life: after all, nothing is done in society except by the human hand. On this approach, we will take the point of view of all the individuals in the community, given that all play some part in the reproduction of social pattern, and we will ask what such individuals should seek of the institutions they live by, in particular of the state, if they are concerned with the realization of equal respect.

Alternatively, equal respect may be taken as a goal for the guidance of the state, since it is the state which is responsible in practice for the shape of the society. If we adopt this line, then we will view the social world from the vantage point of a potentially beneficent government and we will ask what the state can and ought to do—what changes in the social and political institutions it can and ought to initiate—in order to maximize equal respect for all.

Liberal democratic theory is distinguished, I believe, by the assumption that equal respect for all is an ideal addressed to individuals; social democratic theory by the assumption that it is an ideal addressed to the state. In the one case we ask what individuals ought to require of the social and political institutions they generate, given a concern that they be equally respected. In the other

<sup>1</sup> I have done so to some extent in 'Democratic socialism as a political ideology', in Don Rawson (ed.), *Blast, Budge or Bypass: Towards a Social Democratic Australia* (Canberra, Australian Academy of the Social Sciences, 1986); in Italian translation, *Stato e Mercato*, Vol. 16 (1986).

<sup>2</sup> See for example C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 29; Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1973), Chs 7 and 18; and Ronald Dworkin, 'Liberalism', in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 121, 126, 145.

we ask what the state ought to choose in their name, given a similar concern.

If we ask the liberal democratic question, then we intrude the assumption that as things stand people are equally respect-able individuals. After all, they are taken to be autonomous individuals equally responsible for the moulding of society. If we ask the social democratic question, we leave open the possibility that in view of asymmetries of capacity and power people are not equally respect-able. The difference of assumption has a crucial effect on how the two sorts of theory approach the task of detailing the requirements of their shared ideal.

There are two ways in which an agent or agency can take an ideal like that of equal respect. The ideal may be seen as something to be exemplified whatever the consequences, even consequences of there being less respect overall. Alternatively it may be seen as something to be promoted or maximized, even when the promotion requires behaviour that is not itself particularly respectful: this will happen if a local act of disrespect provides a greater amount of respect globally.

The difference in assumption between them means that the liberal democrat requires social institutions to exemplify equal respect, the social democrat requires them to promote it.

The liberal democrat asks what equally respect-able individuals, concerned with the value of equal respect, ought to require of their institutions; in particular what they ought to require of their state, assuming that the institutions amount to a state. If the individuals are equally respect-able, then the answer is clear. All that the ideal can lead them to require is that these institutions should exemplify equal respect all round.

The social democrat does not assume equal respect-ability, since he takes the state as the given agent and asks what the ideal of equal respect requires of it. Since equal respect-ability is often clearly lacking among people, he is naturally led to see the ideal as something that calls for promotion rather than exemplification. He will want the state to exemplify equal respect where that is the way also to maximize it, but not otherwise. The state will be allowed to show the inequality of respect involved in redistribution for example, so long as that promises to increase equal respect-ability and equal respect overall.

These comments serve to introduce the difference between the liberal democratic and social democratic viewpoints. It is now time to examine each in greater detail.

## 2. The Liberal Democratic Point of View

A person or institution *X* respects a person *Y* so far as *X* takes appropriate account of some aspect of *Y*'s attitudes or actions: say, *Y*'s beliefs or desires or commitments. What it is to take appropriate account of that aspect—that *respicendum*, we may say—varies, depending on the sort of factor in question.

The liberal democrat might look for institutions which equally exemplify respect with regard to a mix—perhaps the largest possible mix—of aspects. But in practice each liberal democratic theory tends to select one *respicendum* as primary and to elaborate an account of the sort of institutions, in particular the sort of state, required, if people are to be institutionally respected under that aspect.

The range of liberal democratic theories includes approaches such as the utilitarian, the libertarian, the unanimitarian and the contractarian. Such theories can be, and indeed frequently are, defended on a number of grounds. It is striking, however, and surely not accidental, that they can be readily seen as different interpretations, under the liberal democratic approach, of the ideal of exemplifying equal respect. They can each be represented as identifying a distinctive *respiendum*.<sup>3</sup>

The utilitarian theory of social organization, including the theory of the state, takes that *respiendum* to be people's preferences or, in a now less fashionable version, their hedonistic sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> Each is to count equally, as Bentham insists, but the way in which they are to count is by having their preferences—or at least their relevant preferences—considered equally in the identification of the optimific social pattern: that is, the pattern which maximizes preference-satisfaction overall.<sup>5</sup>

Utilitarianism prescribes different sorts of organization, and different types of state, under different empirical assumptions. Thus, under certain assumptions, it leads to the economic theory of the state. According to this theory, preference-satisfaction is guaranteed of maximization in the free market and the only task for the state is to compensate, where it can, for market failure.<sup>6</sup>

The libertarian theory takes the primary *respiendum* to be, not people's preferences, but rather the choices they make within certain bounds, whether or not those choices promise to maximize preference-satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> This libertarian view is implicit in any approach that stresses natural rights, for such rights serve to define the bounds within which choices are to be respected. It is perhaps the purest form of liberal democratic theory, for even if it acknowledges the need

<sup>3</sup> The egalitarian approach which Ronald Dworkin has been exploring can be seen as the liberal democratic response that is motivated by taking people's life-projects as the primary *respiendum*. See his 'In defence of equality', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 1 (1983). Similarly, the 'consensualist' approaches associated with Jürgen Habermas and David Gauthier can be cast as interpretations of the demands of equal respect. On Habermas see my 'Habermas on truth and justice', in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.), *Marx and Marxisms* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982); for Gauthier's rather different approach see his *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984). My reading of utilitarianism and contractarianism as each serving to interpret the ideal of equal respect is motivated by Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously* (London, Duckworth, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> On the variety of utilitarian doctrines see James Griffin, 'Modern utilitarianism', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 36 (1982).

<sup>5</sup> The identification of relevant preferences is matter for debate. See Griffin, 'Modern utilitarianism' and my *Judging Justice* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), Ch. 13.

<sup>6</sup> The economic theory of the state is usually tied to the assumption that preference-satisfaction is interpersonally incommensurable, and perhaps non-cardinal. It recommends different types of state, depending on different estimates of the relative capacities of market and polity. For a minimalist extreme see Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> John Hospers, *Libertarianism* (Los Angeles, Nash Publishing, 1971) offers a good example of a libertarian attitude, though his arguments often betray utilitarian presuppositions. The outstanding contemporary statement is Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York, Basic Books, 1974). F. A. Hayek puts such a premium on liberties that he ought also to be counted among libertarians but it is worth noticing that he prizes liberty, as utilitarian theorists often do, for what it makes possible, rather than for its own sake. See Anthony de Crespigny, 'F. A. Hayek: freedom for progress', in A. de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue (eds), *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London, Methuen, 1976).

for a state it leaves the state little to do for its citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Unanimitarian theory is one of a family of electoral theories, of which majoritarianism is also a member. It goes beyond preferences and choices to present people's votes as the primary *respiendum*; people are equally respected so far as each has a veto over any institutional arrangement.<sup>9</sup> A vote in this context is the expression of a preference—not yet a choice, since it is not effective—for one sort of social and political arrangement rather than another.<sup>10</sup> The domain of preferences and choices elevated under the other approaches is largely personal and private; the domain of votes includes public and institutional matters.

Unanimitarian theory is in principle open to the adoption of any sort of state, so long as that state secures unanimous support. In practice it will endorse only that type of state of which it can reasonably be held that it would secure unanimous support. Such a state will be as minimal as any favoured by libertarians.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, contractarian theory argues that what ought primarily to be respected in the design of social and political institutions is not preferences or choices or votes, but evaluations. There ought to be such institutions, and only such institutions, as warrant the evaluative assent of the people living under them. The approach is contractarian, because it is assumed that the institutions that warrant assent are those which individuals would contract into, were they free of bias; in particular, were they required to choose a set of institutions in ignorance of their own life-chances.<sup>12</sup>

Contractarianism is like the utilitarian theory, and unlike the libertarian and unanimitarian, in so far as it is liable to select a much more extensive state than the night-watchman variety. Thus the state selected under John Rawls's application of the approach is one which seeks to implement his two principles of justice: the first requires maximum equal liberty; the second allows only such inequality in other regards as improves the position of the worst-off in the society.<sup>13</sup>

This is sufficient to illustrate the range and variety of liberal democratic theories, as I understand the genre. All endorse the ideal of equal respect and all insist on seeing that ideal as something to be exemplified by the state. Each claims to give the appropriate interpretation of the notion of what is owed to individuals, as equal partners in the making of society, by the institutions under which they live.

<sup>8</sup> The problem of whether there should be a state at all is discussed in Hospers, *Libertarianism*, Ch. 11, and is at the centre of Nozick's concerns.

<sup>9</sup> See J. M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consensus* (Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1962). For a discussion see Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), Chs 14 and 15.

<sup>10</sup> On the complications surrounding the idea of a vote see Geoffrey Brennan and James Buchanan, 'Voter choice', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 28 (1984).

<sup>11</sup> But there are difficulties in store. See Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, 'Inefficient unanimity', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 1 (1984).

<sup>12</sup> Evaluations correspond to the notion of ethical preferences in J. C. Harsanyi, 'Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics, and interpersonal comparisons of utility', *Journal of Political Economy*, 63 (1955).

<sup>13</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971).

### 3. The Social Democratic Point of View

The social democratic approach is impatient of the theoretical conceits favoured by liberal democratic philosophies. It is an abstraction to think of all individuals as equal partners in the organization of social and political life and to consider what institutions they might approve, for example, in a hypothetical state of nature. The social democrat rejects this sort of idealization. His starting point is the actual historical condition within which the state is already a potent reality.<sup>14</sup>

Given the difference of starting point, the social democrat adopts quite a different perspective on the shared ideal of a society in which individuals enjoy maximum equal respect. He does not ask what equally respect-able individuals should require of the institutions under which they live, and in particular of the state, if they are to enjoy equal respect. He asks rather what the state should do in the world as it is now in order to promote this ideal.

It is a matter of uncontested fact that individuals do not equally command respect in the actual world. Inequalities of information, influence and the like ensure this. People may be equally respect-able in the higher-order sense that they each have the capacity to perform in a manner, and with an effect, which is as worthy of respect as anyone else's performance. But they are not equally respect-able in the sense of actually performing to that standard or with such an effect.

Once this fact is brought into focus, then the ideal of equal respect takes on a rather different aspect. It calls for a response to the inequalities that spring from the fact of unequal respect-ability. It counsels the exemplification of equal respect only so far as that is compatible with its maximum promotion.

People command respect from one another in varying degrees because of variations in at least two sorts of factor: (1) the capacity to form preferences and other attitudes in an informed and justifiable manner; and (2) the power to make such attitudes felt. These inequalities are neglected by the liberal democrat for whom respect is already available equally to all.<sup>15</sup>

When it is granted that mutual respect is based on such capacities and powers, and that these vary between individuals, the social democratic response is to require the state, so far as possible, to reduce differences in those capacities and powers. The state will have to concern itself with equalizing personal respect-ability, with promoting equal dignity for all. This is not the place to spell out the demands of that goal but we can identify the broad sorts of requirements it is likely to impose.

In order to redress people's inequality in capacity and power, the social democratic state will have to try to emancipate and empower those who are relatively deprived. The twin goals of emancipation and empowering can be identified in the range of policies which social democrats have been distinctively

<sup>14</sup> It is no accident that the tradition of social democratic thinkers is more political than academic: its protagonists are people like Bernstein, Tawney, the Webbs, G. D. H. Cole, Anthony Crossland, and Barbara Wootton. There are some contemporary statements of course that are of a more academic kind. A good example is Albert Weale, *Political Theory and Social Policy* (London, Macmillan, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> See Lukes, *Individualism*, p. 126, where respect is said to be based on the existence of certain characteristics, rather than on the degree to which they are developed.

prepared to propose and contemplate. A quick check-list will serve to make the point; nothing more detailed is possible here.

In order to equalize capacities, the state must emancipate people from such conditions as penury, ignorance and vulnerability; in particular, vulnerability to sickness and disability. It is no surprise therefore to find that social democrats emphasize the importance of social security, public housing, compulsory education, public health care, and the like. And equally it is not surprising that they have proposed or contemplated, where appropriate, that the state provision of these goods be in kind, be universal, and be monopolistic.

In-kind provision of housing, education, or medical care serves the ideal of equal dignity in a manner that cash support, where the cash was used for other purposes, would not. Universal provision will promote such dignity if it is necessary to guard against social stigma. And monopolistic provision will be necessary for equal dignity if, as is sometimes alleged, the positional aspect of a good like education means that a private sector can give its clients an advantage that damages others.

So much for the emancipatory imperatives of equal dignity, under the social democratic approach. What now of the empowering requirements? Here the major problems are: coercion, exploitation, manipulation, discrimination, marginalization, and the like.<sup>16</sup> The other distinctive aspect of social democratic policies derives from the attempt to combat such melancholy phenomena.

In view of their shared ideal, social democrats join liberals in arguing for such staples as trial by jury, separation of powers and the universal franchise. But with their different reading of the ideal, they naturally go further. They argue too for a level of social security that prevents employer exploitation; for a freedom of information that guards against manipulation; for a system of review to monitor and eliminate discrimination; and for forms of participatory democracy, industrial and communal, designed to stop people being marginalized and alienated.

This check-list may serve to elucidate what the requirements of equal dignity are and to justify the claim that equal dignity is indeed the goal that social democrats distinctively pursue. But it should not be taken as more than an indication of the drift of social democratic thinking. As I see it, social democratic theory is a philosophy for policy-making, not a closed list of political programmes.

The open-endedness of the social democratic perspective means that what is ultimately supported may even be non-statist in character. The fact that we start with the potent state does not mean that we are prohibited from arguing, for example, that the way for the state to maximize equal dignity is for it to restrict or devolve its own power: to efface itself, if not to wither away. The social democratic perspective is distinguished by the broad domain which it assigns to democratic concern, not by any detailed presuppositions about where the concern will lead.

<sup>16</sup> The terms are probably self-explanatory but for the distinction between coercion and exploitation. As I use the terms, coercion occurs when one is forced to do or accept something because one is threatened with worse, exploitation when one is forced to do or accept something because one's initial situation is unacceptably bad and means that the alternative is worse anyhow.

One further remark may be made in conclusion. If my argument is sound, then liberal and social democratic theories, albeit they start out from the common ideal of equal respect, press that ideal in rather different directions. But that claim should not obscure the fact that the sort of state for which social democrats argue may coincide in many important respects with the state supported by, for example, certain utilitarians and contractarians. The difference between liberal democratic and social democratic theory is precisely a difference of theory; it does not always show up as a difference in practical recommendations.

#### **4. The Tenability of the Social Democratic Point of View**

The social democratic point of view is attractive, so far as it does not depend on the historical abstraction which characterizes liberal democratic perspectives. But the final judgement on whether it is tenable must rest on where it is found to lead and whether the commitments that it generates can be assembled in a reflective equilibrium: an internally consistent set that includes all the relevant considered judgements of the theorist.<sup>17</sup> Such an assessment is beyond the scope of this paper.

In lieu of a final vindication, however, we can see whether the social democratic viewpoint possesses the prior virtue of offering at least a plausible perspective on questions of institutional design. There are three assumptions involved in the social democratic approach which can be, and have been, challenged. What I propose to do by way of fulfilling this interim task is to see if these can be justified. I shall not be able to argue in detail for the defensibility of these assumptions but I can at least indicate how I think that the defence should go.

The first assumption is that the state envisaged by social democrats is a potentially reliable agent: an agent capable of systematically furthering an institutional goal like equal dignity. The second assumption is that the state can coherently seek to promote that particular goal, being capable of dealing respectfully with the persons for whom it wishes to procure respect. And the third is that the state is an agent—indeed the agent—which ought to be assigned responsibility for the maximization of equal dignity.

##### *The Reliability Assumption*

Two counsels of despair challenge the assumption of reliability. One, from the left, holds that classes are the dominant social forces and that in a class-divided society the state will be just a pawn of the ruling class. The other, from the right, holds that individuals are the motor agents of social life and that the state is merely an arena within which such individuals will pursue their own goals, not an agent with a life of its own.

The leftist challenge is familiar from a more or less vulgar tradition of Marxist theory. Within this tradition it is axiomatic that the capitalist class in contemporary western society acts in its class interest so that, given its power, it

<sup>17</sup> The notion of reflective equilibrium comes from Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. It is discussed in my *Judging Justice*, Ch. 4.



will pre-empt any genuine state reform. Given such an assumption, there is room only for despair about the prospects for a state committed, ostensibly, to social democratic ideals; even indeed about the prospects for a state dedicated to liberal democratic ends.<sup>18</sup>

The axiom on which this challenge rests, however, is decidedly shaky. The individuals and corporations who constitute the capitalist class are admitted on all sides to be agents concerned only with their private gains. We can expect them to act as a collective agent, therefore, only where contingent circumstances or some sort of organization ensure that it is in their private interest to do so. But in the actual world both of these conditions are often lacking.

The constituent members of the capitalist class find themselves in a collective action predicament in which each stands to benefit most by defecting on any potential class action, leaving it to others to carry the burden, and where the organization necessary to ensure compliance is often lacking. They might all benefit by a price-fixing or wage-fixing or state-pressurizing campaign, but none is automatically motivated to do his bit for the cause.<sup>19</sup>

Once this is recognized, the leftist counsel of despair loses its paralysing force. There emerges some ground for hope that even in a society where capitalist forces are dominant, the state can achieve goals, like the promotion of equal dignity, which are not in the capitalist interest. I say some ground for hope, because the fact remains that the state will certainly be subject to a variety of capitalist pressures, applied through a variety of political means. Recognition of such problems however need not induce paralysis; on the contrary, it ought rather to motivate reflection on how the problems may be circumvented in a social democratic régime.<sup>20</sup>

The rightist counsel of despair derives from a dogma with roots as deep as the dogma of class agency. This is the belief that individuals are the only agents on the social scene; and this not just in the sense that even corporate agents act via individuals. The thesis is, rather more strongly, that individuals are the only centres for the systematic formation and production of goals.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis springs from two more basic assumptions, each associated with economics: first, that every individual is a rational utility-maximizing animal; and secondly, that utilities are bound up with more or less egocentric and competitive goals like wealth and status and power.<sup>22</sup> 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.' And, similarly, the idea is that you can't make an

<sup>18</sup> See Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1982), for a survey.

<sup>19</sup> On the free rider problem see my 'The Prisoner's Dilemma and social theory', *Politics*, 20 (1985) and 'Free riding and foul dealing', *Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986). See also Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), Ch. 6.2. Elster (Ch. 7) offers a further reason for resisting the leftist counsel of despair: that, as Elster thinks that Marx claims, it may be in the ultimate capitalist interest to leave the state alone.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1984) for a survey of less state-despairing Marxist views. See also Jessop, *The Capitalist State*.

<sup>21</sup> See James Buchanan, *What Should Economists Do?* (Indianapolis, Liberty Press, 1979), p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> The first comes of standard axioms governing preferences; the second, less obviously, from the assumption that preferences are either exogenous or are explained by exogenous preferences: see Geoffrey Brennan and James Buchanan, 'The normative purpose of economic "science"', *International Review of Law and Economics*, 1 (1981), pp. 159–60.

agent which can be relied upon to further corporate goals, independently of how those goals relate to personal priorities, out of beings whose only motivation is the promotion of self-interest.

The problem is to find reliable corporate policy-makers for those corporations where policy is meant to be guided by criteria which are unconnected with, or even cut across, the self-interest of those individuals. There is no problem with an agent like a firm, since the self-interest of the directors is tied up with the criterion of profit-maximization. There is a problem, however, with the social democratic state, or so it is alleged, since the self-interest of top ministers and civil servants is often going to suggest a different line from that dictated by the goal of equal dignity for all.<sup>23</sup>

As a counsel of principled despair, the rightist thesis is no more compelling than its leftist counterpart. The literature with which it is associated may be a useful source of warnings on how politicians may be bought off, but those warnings can be heeded in the design of political institutions. They do not constitute grounds for total despair.

The rightist thesis falls foul, in my view, of considerations like the following.

1. The point about egocentric concerns is unpersuasive, except in this weak form: that agents may not generally be relied upon to promote any goals whose fulfilment is, at some level, inimical to their income or status or power; self-interest serves as a constraint, not a maximand.
2. In this weaker form, the point is consistent with the possibility, substantiated in everyday experience, that individuals internalize the goals of corporate agents like the social democratic state, promoting them as if the ends were their own; individuals have a tendency to identify loyally with the agencies they serve.<sup>24</sup>
3. Even in its stronger form, the point is consistent with a slightly less dramatic possibility: that individuals, under pressure of appropriate sanctions—and it is important that these be constantly reviewed—find it optimal to pursue the ends corporately assigned to them, without constant reference to their self-interest. Such a line may save them time, provide them with a simple decision procedure, ensure the public legitimacy of what they decide, and promise better career prospects than unrelentingly self-interested calculation.<sup>25</sup>
4. These possibilities are supported by the observation that the politicians and public servants who run a state are in a different position from the agents

<sup>23</sup> This is the so-called public choice critique of the state. For an overview see Dennis Mueller, *Public Choice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979). The public choice point of view often passes unremarked into contemporary textbooks. See for example Norman P. Barry, *An Introduction to Modern Political Theory* (London, Macmillan, 1981), p. 53: 'The acts of the state, however, are always the acts of officials authorised by the rules of the state and the ends of the state are always the ends of the individuals and groups that use its machinery'.

<sup>24</sup> This is to say that people's operative preferences are not always generated instrumentally by what they exogenously prefer. See note 22 above.

<sup>25</sup> Their egoism, to pick up a phrase I have used elsewhere, would have to be restrictive; it might serve as an evaluation criterion but not as a basis for selecting actions. See Philip Pettit and Geoffrey Brennan, 'Restrictive consequentialism', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1986). This point explains why I am not persuaded by the claim that the worst scenario of rational economic agents ought to drive us towards a liberal democratic approach. See Brennan and Buchanan, 'The normative purpose of economic "science"' for a defence of that claim.

who constitute, for example, the capitalist class; they are not typically involved in a collective action problem, for there is not an inverse relationship between the pursuit of the corporate goal and the satisfaction of their personal interests.<sup>26</sup>

Before leaving the issue of the reliability of a corporate agent like the social democratic state, it may be useful to add a philosophical gloss. I distinguish two doctrines that I describe, respectively, as atomism and collectivism. Atomism goes quite naturally with the rightist counsel of despair, collectivism with the leftist. Contrary to common opinion, the doctrines are not mutually contradictory, and I reject both.<sup>27</sup>

Atomism is the doctrine that the states in virtue of which people act do not consist in, or necessarily presuppose, relations to outside objects: in particular, relations to aspects of social context. The beliefs, desires and other intentional states that drive people to action are essentially individualistic; without a causal effect, no change of context on its own would mean any change in them. Such an atomistic image would go naturally with the rightist despair, for if people act under pre-social pressures, than it is easy to imagine that they may not be capable of constituting certain sorts of stable corporations.

Collectivism is the theory that the intentional states which seem to prompt behaviour are not really its effective sources: they come and go, by whatever institutional magic, so that what the agent does in their name will always serve to promote the ends of some larger group. Given this view, the individual drops away as the relevant explanatory unit; his place is taken by the collectivity, with its causally potent ends. Such a collectivistic picture would serve nicely to support the leftist despair, since if classes can be treated as effective collectivities, then class agency will not be any matter for surprise.

I hold to a middle position between these two extremes, maintaining that intentional states are the sources of action but denying that they are essentially unrelational. This position allows that among the beliefs and desires which motivate individuals are some states that intrinsically involve reference to social and other objects: judgements built around particular people and groups and practices, affections involving this or that specific particular, and the like. If we adopt this context-bound image of individual agents, then we will find it natural that people are capable of the loyalty and commitment necessary for the formation of a stable corporation like the social democratic state.

<sup>26</sup> This perspective is often lost in the pluralist view of the state. For some background see the references in Brian Galligan, 'The state in Australian political thought', *Politics*, 18 (1983).

<sup>27</sup> On collectivism see the characterization and critique in Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), Ch. 3; also my 'In defence of "A New Methodological Individualism"', *Ratio*, 26 (1984) and 'The varieties of collectivism', in O. Neumaier (ed.), *Mind, Language and Society* (Vienna, 1984). On atomism see my 'Social holism and moral theory', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 86 (1985–86) and, by way of background: 'A priori principles and action-explanation', *Analysis*, 45 (1986) and 'Broad-minded explanation and psychology', in John McDowell and Philip Pettit (eds), *Subject, Thought and Context* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986). I work out my own position most fully in 'Social holism without collectivism', in Edna Margalit (ed.), *1986 Israel Colloquium in Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Reidel, forthcoming).

*The Respectfulness Assumption*

So much for the assumption about reliability that is involved in the social democratic viewpoint. The next task is to vindicate the further assumption that the social democratic state is not only generally reliable, it is also capable, in particular, of promoting a goal like equal dignity. Here the challenge is to show that there is nothing self-defeating about the enterprise. The claim is that there are certain things which no agent, corporate or personal, can do for another and that the promotion of an individual's dignity is one of them.

There are indeed certain benefits which no one can set out, with the full knowledge of the beneficiary, to confer on another. These are benefits which the person enjoys so far as the agent, far from setting out to confer them, finds himself more or less compelled to treat the person in a certain way. Let the compulsion be that associated with admiration and the beneficiary enjoys esteem; let it be that associated with love and he enjoys affection; and so on. Such benefits cannot be bestowed out of good will; they are essentially by-products of a more or less involuntary response.<sup>28</sup>

Dignity, like esteem and affection, is an essential by-product in this sense. You enjoy dignity, because others find themselves compelled to take you into account, according respect to your wishes, opinions, actions, or whatever. You do not enjoy dignity, however, if others behave in this way merely because they want you to have the benefit. In that case you are at their mercy and in their debt: you are a pawn in their beneficent enterprises. Far from having the dignity that goes with knowing that they have no choice but to honour you, what you enjoy is the good fortune of having kindly masters and fellows. This is the stuff of servility, not respect.

The challenge is clear. The social democratic state sets out to promote equal respect overall by trying at once to ensure equal personal respect-ability and to accord equal institutional respect. The question is whether the state can confer benefits on those whose respect-ability it wishes to raise without turning them into debtors and depriving them of the very dignity it wishes to promote. The considerations brought forward suggest that it cannot do so, because dignity comes of treatment that is in some way compelled, not of *ex gratia* beneficence.

I have spent some time getting the challenge clear, for once it is clear, then so is the response. Suppose that you are in a position in which you want to confer dignity on someone: say your teenage daughter. You will not do that if you retain discretion in how you treat her, even though your treatment is designed, as you think, to promote dignity. Yet you need not despair for, as common lore has it, there is an alternative strategy. You can commit yourself, even bind yourself by means of sanction, to exercising no control over certain aspects of your daughter's behaviour. Do that and there is no doubt but that she will gain immediately in dignity.

The lesson for the social democratic state is immediately obvious. If the state is to confer certain material benefits on people, and is yet to preserve their dignity, then it must commit itself to making those benefits available under

<sup>28</sup> The notion of essential by-products is introduced in Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), Ch. 3. I elaborate it in 'Satisficing consequentialism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 56 (1984), and in Pettit and Brennan, 'Restrictive consequentialism'.

appropriate conditions, and not just at state discretion. The individuals who benefit must be given suitable claims; they must not be left to linger in the rôle of passive beneficiaries.

The claims which are accorded will have to exhibit two features. They will have to be personalized, in the sense that each can make a claim that is not contingent on how the balance of overall claims is best satisfied; otherwise no one enjoys the dignity of being able personally to activate a response. And secondly the claims will have to be privileged, in the sense that they cannot readily be overridden by competing social goals; otherwise no one can be sure of being able to exercise the control associated with the claim.

Personalized and privileged claims constitute rights; or so a number of standard accounts go.<sup>29</sup> The upshot then is that the social democratic state is capable of promoting a goal like equal dignity, so long as the beneficence which it exercises is made available under a strict dispensation of rights. The welfare which it dispenses must not be distributed at any functionary's discretion; it must be removed from the realm of will.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Responsibility Assumption*

The third assumption associated with the social democratic viewpoint is that the state is not just a reliable and respectful agent but the agent which ought to be assigned responsibility for the promotion of equal dignity. I shall try to indicate what needs to be done to vindicate this assumption though, as in the other cases, the argument will be sketched rather than elaborated.

The assumption will be challenged on two fronts: first, by those who think that moral duty does not encompass the promotion of a goal like equal dignity; and secondly, by those who agree that it does but who are unwilling to allow that the state ought to be given special responsibility for the task.

To defend the assumption on the first front, it is necessary to establish the case for a distinctively consequentialist thesis. This is that if there is a certain sort of good that can be promoted, such that the world is the better for its promotion, then someone or other has the duty of furthering that good. Duty is a function of the good and if equal dignity is a good that can be furthered then someone ought to pursue that enterprise.

Short of a wholesale defence of consequentialism, there is little that can be said in support of the thesis.<sup>31</sup> It will have to be sufficient to record that, on the face of it, the thesis is more plausible than the rival deontological claim that the basis of duty is distinct from reference to the good. What can be so compelling about duty, one wants to ask, if the discharge of duty does not produce the goods?

<sup>29</sup> For example, the accounts of rights offered by Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* and Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*. See my 'Rights, constraints, and trumps', *Analysis*, 46 (1987).

<sup>30</sup> See my 'Can the welfare state take rights seriously?', in Denis Galligan and Charles Sampford (eds), *Law, Rights and the Welfare State* (London, Croom Helm, 1986), and 'The consequentialist can recognise rights', *Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> A full defence would seek to establish that consequentialist theories do not resist reflective equilibrium. One strand in the defence is offered by Pettit and Brennan, 'Restrictive consequentialism'.

But our assumption also needs to be defended on a second front. It will be challenged, not just by deontologists, but also by consequentialists who argue that the state should not be given special responsibility for the promotion of equal dignity. Their case is that equal dignity will be better promoted if responsibility for it is not pre-empted by the state but is left in the hands of the community at large.

The defence on this front will have to be mounted on considerations like the following.<sup>32</sup>

1. The promotion of equal dignity is a good such that if different agents try to further it, they are liable to cut across, or undercut, one another's efforts.
2. With such goods, it must be for the best (overall) to have a scheme of coordination assigning special responsibility for their promotion.
3. Responsibility should be assigned in each case to the agent which occupies such a position, or enjoys such power, that he can best promote the good in question.
4. In the case of promoting equal dignity, the state is the obvious agent to assume responsibility: *pouvoir oblige*.

This completes our sketch vindication of the three assumptions that go with the social democratic point of view. I hope that the argument is sufficient to establish that the social democratic point of view deserves a fuller consideration than it has often received in the past. Democratic theories of the state are not the preserve of liberals and it is time that the academic literature began to reflect the fact.

### Conclusion

It may be useful in conclusion to try to draw together the main points that we have argued:

1. Liberal democratic theories ask the abstract question of what equally respect-able individuals ought to require of the institutions by which they live, including the state, if their ideal is equal respect. Social democratic theory asks the historically more concrete question of what the state ought to do in the actual world where people are not equally respect-able, if it is given charge of this ideal.
2. The liberal democratic question leads to the view that the state ought to exemplify equal respect, the social democratic question to the view that the state ought to promote it.
3. Liberal democratic theories diverge from one another, so far as they provide different interpretations of what it is for the state to exemplify equal respect. Utilitarian, libertarian, unanimitarian and contractarian theories can be cast as different interpretations of this exemplifying ideal.
4. Social democratic theory is distinguished by a concern for working out the requirements of equal respect-ability. It is not a body of doctrine so much as

<sup>32</sup> The approach mentioned here is more fully elaborated in Philip Pettit and Robert Goodin, 'The possibility of special duties', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986). See also Goodin's, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1985).

a policy-making programme and it has been associated with political rather than academic figures.

5. The social democratic approach—like some of the less minimal liberal democratic approaches—makes certain assumptions about the state and these need to be vindicated if it is to have any plausibility.
6. A first assumption is that the sort of powerful state sought by social democrats can be an agent reliable for the pursuit of its assigned ends. This can be vindicated only under psychological assumptions that challenge vulgar Marxists on one side, public-choice enthusiasts on the other.
7. A second assumption is that the state can simultaneously enhance the respect-ability of citizens and be respectful of them. It can, if it institutes a régime under which the services it provides can be claimed as rights.
8. A third and last assumption is that the state is the proper agent to be made responsible for the promotion of equal respect-ability. It is, under the principle for allocating responsibility which we sum up in the phrase: *pouvoir oblige*.