

Michael Luntley's
The Meaning of Socialism
(La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989)

Aeon James Skoble
Temple University

The central idea of Luntley's defense of socialism is his conception of The Good Life. Unfortunately, this is a worrisome notion, and the source of many problems. The first problem one runs into concerns whether or not there is any such thing as The Good Life which is the same for every man, woman, and child. The fact of the matter is that people have different interests and pursuits, so a multiplicity of good lives should be possible. Luntley tells the reader that his conception of the good life is prescriptive (the way "society ought to be, regardless of the way it actually is" (p. 3)). This means that some group of unrepresentative elites must determine the one Good Life for all and, presumably, enforce it. Although the previous sentence sounds like I am frantically accusatory, Luntley embraces exactly this over the next several pages. He is not shy about recognizing that this means that in many cases people should not be allowed to make choices or determine their best interests because these private pursuits might conflict with The Good Life. This idea is taken to have motivating force because, as he puts it: "There is more to the achievement of the good life than the satisfaction of individuals' actual preferences" (p. 11).

Although I have phrased my objection to this in the previous three sentences as if it were self-evidently bad to be anti-choice and anti-individual, Luntley obviously anticipates this objection. Presumably this is why he underlies his assertion that the socialist conception is the only way to solve social problems by placing the roots of those

problems on precisely the sort of political morality which values individuals and their choices.

It is somewhat presumptuous for Luntley to suggest that he knows where my best interests lie better than I do, but besides that, I find it logically suspect to claim (he makes no argument for this) that there is more to the good life than human happiness. Although one must concede that people do not always know how best to achieve happiness, no useful conception of the good life can fail to take into account human happiness. (The brute fact that fallible humans do not always know what's best is not by itself an argument for socialism unless the rulers are not fallible humans.)

Luntley relies on a familiar straw-man conception of liberalism to support his claim that liberalism cannot promote The Good Life. He charges: "Liberals [won't tell] another person what is for their good". Liberals are "tolerant to a fault." Liberals are morally agnostic. Liberals manifest something called "economism about values." Any liberal with an intellectual grasp of the tradition will recognize this as nonsense; or at any rate not at all representative of 9/10 of the liberal tradition. As Stephen Holmes has pointed out, this type of straw-man attack has long been a favorite of anti-liberals; the fascists were quite fond of it. Although there is a strain of liberal thought that embraces moral relativism (there is also a leftist strain of moral relativism), most liberals think there is such a thing as right and wrong; for example, Locke's idea that people have natural rights to their own persons. The caricature of the argument goes like this: we need institutions of freedom because, after all, who is to say what is right and what is wrong? But any liberal theorist with an argument about natural rights or human self-development obviously does have an opinion about right and wrong. Hayek, to use an example Luntley uses, is certainly not theorizing in a "moral vacuum." Luntley has a good point when he claims that a "value-free" defense of liberal political institutions is empty. Economists not influenced by Hayek sometimes attempt this sort of defense on the grounds of efficiency. But that is a criticism of a certain strategy for defending those institutions, not of the institutions. Some economists do not seek a value-free stance, and, more to the point, philosophers almost never do. Philosophers who have an interest in defending liberal institutions typically rely on moral grounds to do so. A survey of the history of the field from Locke and Mill to Rawls and Nozick will quickly demonstrate this.

Classical liberalism (nor even radical libertarianism) does not imply moral relativism or nihilism. Emphasis on the individual does not imply a moral "disconnectedness" or nastiness. Quite the opposite, in fact, individualism fosters respect for others as individuals, rather

than as faceless members of ascriptive groups. The liberal tradition broadly construed tends to emphasize respect for persons, autonomy and responsibility, and yes, a concern for how we live together and what values are manifested in the society. But the liberal tradition in general (and libertarians in particular) eschews the use of coercion to accomplish these and other ends, and declines to establish unrepresentative elites as arbiters of The Good Life. I can (and do) have theories of what values are "proper for man" while not forcing them on others through the political process. Contrast, for example, Simone De Beauvoir's now notorious claim that women should not have the choice to raise families because that is precisely what many of them would choose to do. To think De Beauvoir is quite wrong about this is not to have "no view" about right and wrong, but rather to consider it wrong to deprive women of choices.

One of the things that is often thought by liberals to be "wrong" is forcing people to live life according to someone else's standards. Luntley explicitly says that this is what should be done. Socialists like Luntley, and "communitarians" in general, avoid certain unpleasant moral dilemmas that this entails. If you say that, for example, college education is a universal good that may not be denied to anyone, that means that its provision to some will be coercively obtained. If "need" becomes the sole criterion for why one is entitled to a thing, why is the needer's good automatically prioritized over the provider's good? Do needs create rights? This is an important question for a political theorist to face. Luntley simply stipulates that the answer is yes, and never gets around to considering the violence entailed by such a view (except with a few dismissive references to "greed").

Does Luntley's ethic of subordinating individual interest to the community's interest in *The Good Life* mean that religious dissidents can be forced to conform? Or that homosexuality can be banned? It is too easy to valorize "the common good" if you don't address the question of how to reconcile such a goal with individual rights. In any case, collective goals and community solidarity are not *prima facie* goods - Nazism and apartheid are clear examples of *social* aims, not "atomistic individualism" or "economism about values." Claiming that liberals are morally agnostic and unconcerned with society is not only a distortion, but, more importantly, a diversion from the moral questions about coercion that socialists do not want to answer (or have to answer in ways that a liberal with left sympathies doesn't want to hear).

(Notice also how Luntley approaches the subject in terms of "the Right" and "the Left" - as if the only alternatives to socialism were a moral-majority regime or the English National Front. Neither of these

movements is known for its commitment to "rootless individualism.")

But let's say for the sake of argument that there is one Good Life, and its attainment is worth the subordinating of individual rights. How would one know what it is? Who would be in charge of figuring it out? Who makes sure they are right? I am not the only one who has an epistemological problem with the idea of The Good Life - Luntley himself says (pp. 12-3) that this may be difficult to determine. All that matters is that we recognize that it could be done, and that will create the possibility that *someone* will be able to do this. (Although no one from Hammurabi to Hitler has been able to do it.) Is this really the most sensible approach? Given epistemological difficulties, why not permit experimentation with ways to live a life? But this can only be done in an atmosphere of political freedom. If we take political freedom to entail economic freedom, we can see what Luntley's next objection will be.

Luntley asserts that capitalism is bad because "it systematically obstructs the possibility for living the good life" (p. 16). If we take capitalism to be the system of exchange in which people seek their own best interests through voluntary exchange, then it is clear how Luntley is begging the question in this critique. However, if we take capitalism to be bad because of the history of industrialization in Europe (Luntley also makes this point), we will also be begging the question. Another fallacy is the idea that since capitalism has been historically accompanied by (anti-liberal) features such as mercantilism, corporatism, and even feudalism (which exist only as creatures of the state and which really *do* rely on state coercion to accomplish any exploitation), capitalism is bad because of those things, as though those features were necessary conditions of capitalism, not flaws that impede it. However, the classical liberal case for capitalism is against feudalism and mercantilist policies, as well as other forms of state coercion. If a liberal argues against state coercion, it is hardly a criticism to mention historical examples of that coercion as if it would be an embarrassment. Some neo-Marxists define capitalism as mercantilism or corporatism. But that reduces the argument to a semantics game. Luntley at times seems to veer in this direction, but if he really embraces this, his critique of political liberalism will be logically suspect.

A contemporary socialist might next suggest that maybe some political freedom is good, even though the socialist state must provide economic goods. This way we can use the state to improve the worst off in society. Luntley is not interested these "mixed economy" half-measures. Notice the scorn he heaps on mere "travel brochure" socialists (p. 16). How awful that these types should want to help people realize happier lives, because as stated, people deriving more satisfaction from their lives is not a desideratum. Instead, Luntley argues,

socialists should expend their energies ushering in a brave new world.

Contrary to Luntley's assertion, most liberal political philosophers do not grant individuals "unfettered freedom" with regard to values. Personal liberty *is* a value. Before Luntley and his gang of elites assume this awesome responsibility of telling us how to live our lives, he is going to have to argue more persuasively that we all have an interest in devoting our lives to the service of the state. It is false to say that liberal theorists have no vision of personal development and good societies, just as it is false to charge that capitalists "don't care about the poor." Many liberals conceive of personal (and social!) development arising from the freedom that Luntley mocks.