

Reinventing Liberalism

Towards a Paradigm beyond the Homo Economicus

Mathieu van Kooten

1. Introduction

The liberal tradition, in its broadest sense, has had a prominent role in shaping Western society as we know it today. Most notably, liberalism has been a central force in the liberation of countries and their citizens from aristocratic feudalism as well as political and religious paternalism. Furthermore, liberalism, especially through its moral foundations, has shaped our perspective on individuals as free, autonomous, and equal beings. The first liberals were those in search of a new order after the chaotic times of early industrial capitalism and three late 18th century political revolutions—the American, Dutch, and French—that had turned society and politics upside down. Central to these developments were principles of freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of thought and speech, the division of governmental powers, and rights of private property and economic freedom (Starr, 2007). The leading figures in the development of these principles were, among others, John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill. Based on the thoughts, principles, and moral convictions of these leading figures, notions like the rule of law and the free market developed, resulting in a metamorphosis of Western society from a deeply religious, feudal, and unequal society, to one with a secular, liberal democracy in which personal rights and liberties are upheld and protected by the state and its institutions.

These rights and liberties that protect individuals from unsolicited interference with their private lives and property created a stable basis for economic progress. This is not to claim, however, that liberal thought has been completely consistent and unambiguous throughout different regions or time periods. Despite the lack of unanimity among liberals, Fawcett (2014) identifies four broad ideas that served as a foundation for liberalism

and reoccurred throughout the history of liberal thought: the acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society, distrust of power, faith in human progress, and unconditional respect for individuals. Thus, even though there is no canonical version of liberalism itself, these four ideas indicate that liberalism in general can be regarded as the search for an “ethically acceptable order of human progress among civic equals without recourse to undue power” (ibid., p. xv). Rooted in moral convictions of equality and freedom, the purpose of liberalism, therefore, is to create the conditions for a society in which each citizen can realise his or her aims without unsolicited interference, and fully develop his or her capacities to the benefit of society.

Throughout recent history, however, critical thinkers like Wendy Brown have come to address the discontents that are paired with the 20th century resurgence of liberalism: neoliberalism. Brown argues that neoliberalism is profoundly destructive to the ideas that lie at the basis of our liberal democracy, since it is a deeply disseminated governing rationality that puts the economy at the centre of society, of its institutions, and of human understanding and action. More specifically, with the dawn of neoliberalism came the extension of market values such as competition into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society. As Foucault described in his lectures at *Collège de France*, through neoliberal governmentality these market values became an integral aspect of understanding, action, and even *being*. This governmentality is a mentality in which people are governed and govern themselves by means of educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations, and beliefs with ‘investment’ and ‘competition’ as its operative terms. In other words, what is taking place is an economisation of heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities. Con-

sequently, neoliberal governmentality has put forth a new anthropology, one that takes the individual as a homo economicus: a purely rational, calculating, and self-interested agent. Therefore, through this hegemonic neoliberal discourse, the wide liberal tradition, despite its rich history in which it was ultimately concerned with notions of good and evil, becomes generally focused on the endorsement of market values, overshadowing the robust moral convictions that shaped the liberal tradition.

These moral convictions of the liberal tradition have been an essential aspect of the aforementioned metamorphosis of Western society into a liberal democracy where the individual is deeply respected, and its rights and liberties are upheld. As the moral aspects of human agency have been of considerable importance in these achievements, it would be somewhat naïve to expect that a society in which the homo economicus finds its natural habitat will be able to thrive once all its domains are fully economised through neoliberal governmentality. It is therefore imperative to reconstruct the identity of the modern Western individual, which became conflated with the notion of the homo economicus. In this paper, this reconstruction involves the exploration of the essentially religious and moral roots through which the modern individual was invented. The invention of the individual and the modern West is often attributed to the victory of reason over religion, of the Enlightenment over Christianity. This historical narrative, however, is in dire need of being revisited, since the individual was not invented through the Enlightenment battle with Christianity, but more so through the morality of the Christian tradition, which emphasised the unconditional value of the individual, the common good and, crucially, self-improvement. The reconstruction of the modern Western individual therefore involves the exploration of the essentially religious roots of (secular) liberalism and the modern individual that is constituted through the moral responsibility of each individual as proclaimed by St. Paul. The contemporary relevance and necessity of a moral outlook on human thought and action can be found in the writings of J. S. Mill and Charles Taylor, who both stress the need for an orientation towards the good.

The historical narrative of liberalism and its Christian moral roots, as described in this paper, could help to understand the increasingly econo-

mised society we live in today, and therefore create an historical awareness that might spark a debate about working towards overcoming the discontents that are paired with neoliberalism. The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to regain understanding of the essentially Christian roots of the modern individual in order to grasp the discontents and limitations of the neoliberal homo economicus. Ultimately, however, the intent of this paper is not to end the debate but to foster a more fruitful discussion about the way in which liberalism could be reinvented to help create and sustain an ethical society.

In order to understand the anthropology of the homo economicus, the constitution of the Foucauldian concept of governmentality in the context of neoliberalism will first be described and analysed. Secondly, the narrative of the Christian roots of liberalism, as distinct from the Enlightenment narrative that emphasises ancient Greek roots, will be explained, as well as the moral developments that those Christian roots instigated. Thirdly, the relations between liberalism, Christianity, and secularism will be identified to deepen understanding of secularism as a sphere of morality, individual conscience, and free action. Lastly, a discussion will follow in which the discontents of neoliberalism will be discussed in relation to the religious roots of liberalism, in order to work towards a normative understanding of the problem at hand.

2. Neoliberal governmentality and the homo economicus

With the introduction of neoliberalism, a new set of politico-economic practices was instigated, one that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by a focus on individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills “within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, similar to the classical liberal tradition, individual freedom is a key tenet of neoliberalism. This might, however, be one of the few parallels between liberalism and neoliberalism, since the latter mostly focuses on freedom in entrepreneurial terms. Nevertheless, in contemporary society the neoliberal paradigm has a profound influence, since it causes economic values to become increasingly embedded in all aspects of life. Therefore,

neoliberalisation has expressed itself in the economisation of everything, including heretofore non-economic domains (ibid., p. 33). Consequently, what becomes central to society is neoliberal economic rationality, which endorses the view that human as well as institutional action is rational entrepreneurial action “conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality” (Brown, 2005, p. 40). In short, therefore, neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse (Harvey, 2007, p. 3).

Hegemony, a term developed by Gramsci (1978), refers to a specific interplay between coercion at the level of the state and consensus at the level of civil society, which constitutes a dominant worldview as well as a certain power balance in society. This hegemony, however, is not imposed aprioristically, but develops through complex relations between the social, the economic, and the political. In the neoliberal context, this hegemonic mode of discourse refers to the fact that neoliberalisation has pervasive effects on the way individuals think and communicate, since neoliberal thought has become incorporated into the way many individuals understand the world. Most accounts of the discontents with neoliberalism, therefore, address the hegemony that it installed. Neoliberal hegemony causes an erosion of opposing political, moral, or subjective claims that are located outside the realm of neoliberal rationality, yet inside liberal democratic society. Consequently, institutions, venues, and values that are organised by non-market rationalities are eroded (Brown, 2015). Of course, exceptions are to be found and the hegemony might not have been fully established, but what critics address is the increasingly widespread dominance of this neoliberal rationality, due to a constant pressure on individuals, caused by the neoliberal hegemony, to understand the world around them through the neoliberal paradigm.

2.1 Governmentality and the neoliberal subject

A useful concept in furthering the understanding of the political dimension of neoliberalisation is governmentality, a concept that Foucault defines as an apparatus of administrative power “that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (2007, p. 108).

Governmentality is a technique of governing mentalities in such a way that they become internalised in the subjects. In the case of neoliberal governmentality, these mentalities include norms related to political economy, that is, the economy at the level of the entire state. The apparatuses of security that Foucault describes are directed at gaining security and a feeling of well-being for people in order to manage the population. Consequently, the most effective way for neoliberal values and principles to be actively instituted, maintained, and reinserted at all levels of society is through neoliberal governmentality, which educates desires and configures habits, aspirations, and beliefs with market-based values such as ‘investment’ and ‘competition’ as its operative terms (Li, 2007, p. 275; Read, 2009, p. 29). Thus, through neoliberal governmentality social life is regulated from its interior, which is the most effective way in which power can achieve an effective command over a whole population (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 24).

Foucault interprets the neoliberal ideal to be the new regime of truth; it is a manner, or mentality, in which people are governed and govern themselves. Therefore, governmentality should not be interpreted as an evil, top-down implementation of a conspiracy by a supposed neoliberal class. On the contrary, producer and product are both neoliberal subjects, which means that humans produce, and humans are produced at the same time (ibid., p. 136). In other words, neoliberal economisation does not only manifest itself through coercion at the level of the state, but often even more so through consent at the level of civil society. Neoliberal governmentality, therefore, brings together the government of others (subjectification) and the government of one’s self (subjectivation) (Hamann, 2009). As Foucault described, whereas in the disciplinary society the relationship between the individual and power was a top-down, static one, the relationship in a control society is open, and it extends throughout the depths of the consciousness and bodies of individuals, meaning that with this governmentality, freedom of the individual and regulation of the population are subtly intertwined (Deleuze, 1992; Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 24). Thus, neoliberal governmentality is the strategic production of the social conditions conducive to the constitution of the homo economicus, a specific form of neoliberal subjectivity.

2.2 The homo economicus

As was mentioned in the previous paragraph, the subject that is produced by the neoliberal governmentality can be called the homo economicus; an archetypal species created after a specific image of the economy (Brown, 2015, p. 10). This entails that the homo economicus is a free and autonomous ‘atom’ of self-interest, fully responsible for navigating life in society using rational choice and cost-benefit calculation. This atomistic outlook on human agency endorses the view that the homo economicus is a self-reliant and self-interested agent, responsible for realising its own objectives in a rational, calculative, and competitive manner. Within the neoliberal paradigm, social existence, that is, interaction or association between these atoms of self-interest, can therefore only be viable when understood as a contract based on personal utility rather than a manifestation of communitarian ideals. Thus, in the neoliberal paradigm every attempt of this homo economicus to realise its ends—from building relationships, to education, to spending time with friends—can be interpreted economically, according to a specific calculation of costs and benefits (Read, 2009, p. 28).

Consequently, the concept of the worker has been eradicated; it has been converted into human capital (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). In contemporary society, the individual is mostly regarded as a small enterprise (human capital) that has to identify its skills, put them on the market, differentiate them from the skills of others in light of competition, and propose these talents for a certain price. Just as the concept of the worker was eradicated, wages become the revenue that is earned on an initial investment, such as getting an education, which is an investment in one’s skills and abilities. Furthermore, any activity that increases expected revenue, like moving abroad, taking an extra course, creating a resume, or participating in ‘networking events’, is a further investment in this human capital. As this account of the homo economicus demonstrates, governmentality is indeed a very effective means to impose market values in such a way that they become an integral aspect of both understanding and action, and even of being. Finally, the notion that might best describe the homo economicus, taking all its features as described above into account, is the ‘entrepreneur of himself’ (ibid.). For Foucault, the homo economicus is an entrepreneur of himself in the sense of “being for himself his own capital,

being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (ibid., p. 226).

2.3 Liberalism and neoliberalism

The societal consequence of neoliberal governmentality and the subsequent creation of the homo economicus is that exploitation, domination, and inequality are rendered invisible as socio-political phenomena to the extent that the social condition of each individual is simply regarded as the effect of his or her own choices and investments, given that the homo economicus is perceived of as a rational, calculating, and self-reliant entrepreneur of the self (Brown, 2005, p. 43; Read, 2009, p. 43). One might object to this, however, that this has been the case with liberalism long before the dawn of neoliberalism as well, but Brown (2015, p. 33) provides us with three ways in which the contemporary economisation of subjects by neoliberal governmentality is distinct from liberal thought.

Firstly, in contrast with for example classical liberalism, “we are everywhere homo oeconomicus and only homo oeconomicus” (ibid.). Classical liberals were well aware of the distinction between politics and economics, and many of them were wary of economic values having an excessive influence on politics, morality, and ethical life (Sedlacek, 2013, p. 255). Secondly, homo economicus is perceived of as human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive position, rather than as an agent of exchange or interest. The neoliberal homo economicus, then, is rather different from the classical liberal individual that has a “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (Smith, 1776/1999, p. 117). As Foucault (2003, p. 194) explains, classical liberalism holds exchange at the centre of society, since not only relations in the marketplace but also certain freedoms, rights, and liberties can be interpreted in terms of exchange. With neoliberalism, however, the focus on exchange is replaced by a focus on competition. While exchange was considered to be natural, competition is understood by neoliberals to be an artificial relation that must be protected from monopoly and state intervention, and therefore a constant re-establishment of neoliberal values is needed. Consequently, this subjectification of individuals as competitive creatures, through neoliberal governmentality, actively constitutes and reinforces the anthropology of the homo economicus. Lastly, the homo economicus, as human capital,

is extremely concerned with self-investment and self-marketing through likes, followers, and retweets, but also through consumption, leisure, and education, which are all strategic decisions aimed at enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of life (Feher, 2009, p. 30). As Mirowski (2013, p. 92) argues, social networking sites like Facebook are neoliberal technologies *par excellence* since they actively nudge individuals to embrace and invest in their entrepreneurial selves. This strikingly points at the subtleness of neoliberal governmentality that does not only actively constitute the homo economicus through particular policies, but more so through the very mundane practices and technologies that surround us in everyday life.¹

Thus, whereas liberalism portrays the economic man as a man of exchange, neoliberal governmentality sets out to ensure that individuals “assume market-based values in all of their judgments and practices in order to accumulate sufficient qualities of human capital” (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). Ultimately, through this process the subject of the homo economicus is constituted; a ‘free’ and autonomous atom of self-interest.

3. Liberalism: child of modernity?

As was mentioned in the introduction, in order to gain deeper understanding of the discontents with neoliberalism, it is imperative to assess the roots of liberalism itself. Wall (2015, p. 4) states that while there might be some anticipations of liberal ideas in ancient and medieval thought, “liberalism is widely, and correctly, viewed as a modern development”. Among many others, Wall puts forward the thesis that Enlightenment thinkers, in contrast with those in the preceding dark ages, believed in human freedom and progress, and therefore broke with traditional and hierarchical beliefs and institutions—especially the church—that supposedly had always prevented a march towards human freedom. This thesis ultimately denies, or at least heavily relativises, the role of religion and the Judaeo-Christian heritage in shaping the modern West as we know it. Already during the Enlightenment this view was held, and institutions like the church were frequently attacked with strong words, such as Voltaire’s famous “*écraser l’infâme*”, which translates to “crush the infamous one” (1763/2000, p. xv). Furthermore, it is widely argued that the modern secular movement, which was interrupted

by the age of faith in the Middle Ages, is part of a continuum which reaches back to the ancient past. Thus, at the core of this thesis we can find the assumption that the modern West as we know it is a child of modernity, and thereby, through the Enlightenment, a grandchild of ancient Greece. That this narrative is widely held is perhaps best illustrated by the first draft of the European constitution in which “Europe’s debt to ancient Greece and Rome was solemnly acknowledged. So, too, were the achievements of the Enlightenment. About the Christian roots of European civilisation, however, there was nothing” (Holland, 2008).

A few contemporary thinkers, however, have questioned the legitimacy of the claim that liberalism is a child of modernity, by showing that the liberal conception of the free individual did not originate in ancient Greece, but rather gradually developed during the time of early Christianity and the Middle Ages, in which religion played an essential role (Siedentop, 2014, p. 349; Zakaria, 2003, p. 32; Holland, 2008). As Zakaria (2003, p. 31) mentions, the obsession with ancient Greece from the Renaissance onwards is partly based on fantasy. Ancient Greece was indeed an extraordinary culture in which science, philosophy, music, and other arts gloriously developed. However, the perspective that the ancient Greeks had of the self and its relation to society was fundamentally different. In the following paragraphs, the ancient Greek individual will be contrasted with the Christian notion of the individual to show that the modern individual was not invented through the Enlightenment battle with Christianity, but more so through the morality of the Christian tradition that started with St. Paul and culminated in the rise of liberalism.

3.1 Natural inequality in the ancient world

As Siedentop (2014, p. 18) explains, the world of antiquity was divided in a public and a domestic sphere, the latter not being a sphere of individuals, but rather a sphere of the family. This family, however, was not conceived of as an association of related individuals, but rather as a small, independent church. The natural inequality of roles was fundamental to the Greek family and society, since the *pater familias*, the head of the family, was both the magistrate as well as its high priest of this church called the family (ibid., p. 9). The *pater familias* had absolute authority, and was seen as the keeper of the sacred fire and the preserver of the family cult. As Fustel de Coulanges (1864/2001, p. 40) wrote in his book *The Ancient City*, the

ancient family was both the focus and the medium of religious belief, and ultimately an instrument of immortality. Thus, something more powerful than birth, affection, or physical strength united the ancient family, it was “the religion of the sacred fire, and of dead ancestors” (ibid., p. 31).

The centrality of the religious family also had its impact on the gradually developing larger associations, like the *gens*, *phratries*, and, finally, the *polis* (ibid., p. 98).² The Roman and Greek institutions that emerged were similarly shaped by beliefs about sacred ancestors, most clearly indicated by the development of the idea of property rights. Property did not belong to an individual, it belonged to the family, and its importance resided in the fact that family property was integral to the family religion and worship. The Greeks and Romans understood society as an association of families, rather than as an association of individuals. Furthermore, family slaves, strangers, and aliens in both ancient Greece and Rome could not own property, since the holy soil of the city could not simply be appropriated from the ancestors and ‘blasphemously’ be given to strangers (Gorman, 1992, p. 7). Besides property rights, the freedom to rule was also unequally distributed in society and reserved to a relatively small aristocracy: “what effectively distinguishes the citizen proper from all others is his participation in giving judgement and in holding office” (Aristotle, trans. 1992, p. 169). All others, including slaves, women, workers, and foreigners, were not regarded as citizens since they were considered incompetent of giving judgement and holding office (Isin, 2002, p. 30).

Thus, society was seen as an association of families, and later larger associations, and anyone who did not find a place in this hierarchical scheme of relations was regarded as an outcast. In other words, *natural inequality was the mode*. In the aristocratic society of ancient Greece, different levels of social status reflected inherent differences of being (inherent inequality of nature), which meant that logos (reason) was virtually inseparable from the hierarchical ordering of things (Siedentop, 2014, p. 52). Therefore, Siedentop (ibid., p. 15) states that the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers failed to notice that the ancient family, based on the belief in natural inequality, began as a veritable church, which constrained its members to an extent that can scarcely be exaggerated. The individual as we know it had not been invented yet, and therefore we cannot speak of the ancient individual as one that is free in a modern liberal sense.

3.2 St. Paul and individual moral agency

The aforementioned aristocratic model began to crumble around the first century B.C., when the relentless spread of centralised Roman power undermined the widely held views about citizenship and (in)equality. This went hand in hand with new philosophical developments, especially in the Platonic tradition, that headed in a more mystical direction (Siedentop, 2014, p. 53). Consequently, ethical thought was gradually reshaped and moral rules were less and less considered as rational conclusions derived from the nature of things, as was the case in the aristocratic model of natural inequality, but rather as commands from the Absolute. As Siedentop notes, the image of the Absolute, a single God who imposes his laws on his people, strikingly paralleled “the experience of peoples who were being subjugated to the Roman imperium” (ibid.). Spurred by these developments in the first century of the Common Era, a new kind of liberty, and subsequently a novel perception of the self, came to the fore; one that contrasted with the ‘old’ type of liberty that was prevalent in ancient Greek society.

A new figure emerged on stage, named Jesus of Nazareth, who preached that he was the son of God and that those individuals who would repent of their sins could enter the kingdom of heaven. For the first time in history, the *individual* replaced the family as the focus of immortality (ibid., p. 58). The teachings of Jesus were revolutionary in the sense that they provided a new way of looking at the world: through individual moral agency. The earliest surviving writings about Jesus and his teachings can be found in the work of St. Paul, for whom faith in Jesus Christ is an act through which human agency can become the medium for God’s love. All individuals are invited to embrace this new rationality and change their mindset: “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).³

Paul thus overturns the theretofore widely held view of natural inequality by creating an inner connection between divine will and human agency. The leap of faith of changing one’s mind through becoming one with God through Christ is an invitation to seek a deeper self. This act of faith consists in an inner crucifixion (i.e. leaving the sinful nature behind), exemplified by the crucifixion of Jesus himself. Through this ‘Christomorphosis’, human beings experience moral renewal since they are invited

to respond by becoming virtuous and thus share in the divine nature, to become like God himself (van Kooten, 2014, p. 403). Therefore, individuals can, through this personal transaction based on love, be transformed in another, better self: *human identity is reconstructed*. Because all humans are inherently equal through their personal relation to God, the most important law in Christianity has always been: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Galatians 5:14). This message thus provides a novel ontological foundation for the individual. As van Kooten (2014, p. 403) explains, Paul’s essentially original and coherent anthropology contains a strong sense of solidarity and unity of human beings and God, and this human-divine correspondence presupposes and results in moral like-mindedness. This new anthropology provides human beings with an opening for moral improvement, through the encounter with God’s moral excellence.

3.3 The impact of the pauline anthropology

What are the social, cultural, and political consequences of the writings of Paul, which Siedentop (2014, p. 58) describes as a moral earthquake? The implication of Paul’s message is that the individual is more than whatever social position or affiliation he happens to occupy. In other words, a gap opens between individuals and their role in society (ibid., p. 62). As Paul states: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The crucial point to of this bible verse, that is directed not only to Jews but to everyone, is that the relation with the Absolute, the source of all being, constitutes a primary identity that is not based on social standing, as was the case in the ancient Greek society where natural inequality was the mode, but on individual moral agency. All other social roles, whether father, daughter, official, or slave, become secondary to this primary role.

As Neutel (2013) notes, this message of Paul is a utopian and cosmopolitan ideal of community, it is an exercise in imagining alternatives to society as it is. Ethnic, gender, sexual, economic, or social differences are not relevant anymore; every human being is created after God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and therefore equal. Consequently, all existing social relations are open to scrutiny, and Siedentop sees this principle developing in European history, undermining the moral foundations first of slavery and

then of serfdom. It should be emphasised that this was not a linear process that started with Christianity and completed with contemporary notions of equality: the process was slow, painful, and incomplete. Nevertheless, Christianity, starting with St. Paul, endowed the West with “a kind of constitution, a sense of the limits of the legitimate use of public power, [and] limits established by moral rights” (Siedentop, 2001, pp. 196-7). Thus, the rise of the Christian Church is the first important source of individual liberty in the West, and our modern understanding of human agency, and therefore of individual liberty, has its roots in the moral intuitions of Christianity (Zakaria, 2003, p. 31).

4. Liberalism, christianity, and secularism

The modern understanding of the individual can thus be traced back to the beginning of Christianity, with St. Paul’s message of the morally responsible individual at its core. As the writings of multiple classical liberals demonstrate, liberalism can be seen as a political culmination of this emphasis on moral agency, since 19th century liberalism was optimistic and imbued with strongly held moral convictions (Fawcett, 2014, p. 74). One of the writers that signifies this connection between liberalism and its moral roots is John Stuart Mill, who describes the importance of religion in addressing the good life. Furthermore, in this section the connection between secularism and Christianity, as well as the contemporary relevance of morality as explained by Charles Taylor, will be highlighted, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the connection between liberalism, Christianity, and secularism.

4.1 Mill and the *summum bonum*

The writings of John Stuart Mill on religion are an often-neglected topic in secondary literature, mostly because they challenge the long-standing view that liberalism and conceptions of the best life, the *summum bonum*, are inherently opposed (Devigne, 2006, p. 15). Mill argues that “with the decline of polytheism came Greek philosophy; with the decline of Catholicism, the modern [philosophy]” (Mill, 1985a, p. 577). In other words, when religions are incapable of explaining the meaning of life to ordinary humans, a vacuum develops which causes new philosophical and scien-

tific explanations to come forward. This vacuum was also present in the 18th century, the time of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment, when compromise had to be made: Christianity became less legitimate with the declining authority of the church, and the individual became liberated from bondage to superstition and ecclesiastical authority (Devigne, 2006, p. 17). Even though Mill praises this liberation of the individual from ecclesiastical authority, he argues that this religious compromise with the Enlightenment also created unforeseen costs, since the new paradigm that was set into place did not teach anything else than an enlightened rational obedience to liberal rules of justice, overlooking the need to address the need of an idea of the good life.

As Mill (1985b, p. 421) argues in *Utility of Religion*, religion, like art, should establish something more than merely the devotion to practical aims, it should create a strong image of what human perfection is, and how it can be attained. Mill explains that this essential feature of Christianity has been lost in modern times, through the aforementioned compromise with enlightenment thought. Consequently, most English liberals tend to ignore the fact that the modern justice system only compels general obedience to the law, and cannot substitute morality in general in formulating the good life. Thus, if liberalism is to generate a comprehensive morality for the future, according to Mill, Christianity will have to develop dialectically so that it creates a culture, adapted to civil society, that makes human flourishing possible: the sublation of thesis and antithesis “into the synthesis of a comprehensive morality of the future, is the liberal philosophers’ highest goal” (Devigne, 2006, p. 25).

4.2 Christianity and secular liberalism

One might discard a call to morality and acknowledgement of Christian roots based on its seeming opposition to the secular state. The roots of this seeming opposition may be found in the tendency of contemporary society to promote a hostile secularism, which teaches that religion is irrational and potentially dangerous, and it should therefore be quarantined in the private sphere (Ahdar, 2013, p. 418). But, even though secular liberalism is often presented as such, it is far from an objective, neutral, and value-free paradigm (ibid., p. 404). Rather, secular liberalism emphasises the importance of the conditions in which (religious) beliefs can be equally and freely

formed and defended. More specifically, at the core of secularism we can find a belief in underlying moral equality of humans, which in turn implies that there is a sphere in which each should be entirely free to make his or her own decisions, especially regarding such fundamental aspects of life as religion. Therefore, Christianity itself, especially through its emphasis on the (moral) equality of humans, played an important role in shaping the discourse that gave rise to modern liberalism and secularism (Siedentop, 2014, p. 359). Siedentop even goes as far as saying that “secularism is Christianity’s greatest gift to the world” (ibid., p. 360).

However, by promoting the view that secularism is synonymous to non-belief, indifference, and materialism, a great deal of the narrative of the roots of liberalism, as well as the connection with the moral intuitions that shaped Western thought, is lost. As Murray (2016, p. 262) argues, how can one expect that the notion of individuals as free and equal beings “is sustainable without reference to the belief that gave birth to it? Just because you are part of a tradition does not mean you will believe what those who originated that tradition believed even if you like and admire its results”. Secularism, properly understood, is fundamentally based on the moral equality of humans as inspired by the Christian tradition, which implies that it creates a sphere in which each individual should be able and free to make his or her own decisions, a sphere of individual conscience and free action, and ultimately a sphere that is concerned with moral questions (Siedentop, 2014, p. 361). Therefore, if secularism is portrayed as inherently opposed to religion, instead of the outcome of the moral intuitions that shaped western thought, we are telling ourselves a very one-sided narrative. Even worse, we also undermine the moral intuitions that have been central to the narrative of liberalism.

4.3 Modern identity and morality

A thinker that might help to contextualise these thoughts and translate them to contemporary society is Charles Taylor, who describes the development of our modern understanding of what it means to be an individual (1989, p. 393). The current modern identity that developed out of several important historical transformations, including neoliberalism, has a problem regarding the search for meaning (ibid., p. 17). In contemporary Western society, God is dead for many and the existential predicament of fear for ‘meaninglessness’

might be what defines our times (ibid., p. 18). This fear of meaninglessness out of the existential predicament is linked to the contemporary understanding of the self as a neutral and clean slate, as an individual that is not in need of any conception of the good life in order to make sense of life.

This view of the self, in turn, is linked to what Taylor describes as the ‘projective view’ of morality. This projective view is the Enlightenment-inspired assertion that qualities and values are epiphenomenal subjective illusions that we impose upon a value-neutral, mechanistic universe (Frisina, 2002, p. 16). The objection that Taylor has towards this supposedly ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ view of human agency is that for human agents to make sense of our lives and the world around us they need an orientation to the *summum bonum*, a qualitative discrimination of the incomparably higher (Taylor, 1989, p. 47). To know who you are, is to be oriented in moral space, a space of meaningfulness, a space of what is good or bad. Consequently, a view of the self from a perspective stripped of this moral side cuts out a central part of our humanity, which is valuing the capacity to decide, in a meaningful dialogue with others, what truly matters to us, what makes life worthy and meaningful.

5. Discussion: a comprehensive morality for the future

In order to arrive at a normative analysis of neoliberalism, its roots and its potential future, let us recapitulate what has been established throughout the previous sections. The neoliberal paradigm became hegemonic in the sense that it deployed a governmentality that caused (and still causes) a widespread economisation of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects. Consequently, the neoliberal subject was created: the homo economicus. This subject, also described by the notion ‘entrepreneur of the self’, is a fully rational, self-interested, and economised agent that is mainly concerned with self-investment and self-promotion to advance his or her competitive position in society. As many individuals will recognise, in contemporary society social networking sites are neoliberal technologies *par excellence*, illustrating the refined and subtle governmental techniques that make individuals embrace their entrepreneurial selves. This neoliberal paradigm that proposes that man is a free and autonomous atom of self-

interest, however, overshadows the moral aspects of the individual since it mostly teaches rational obedience to the neoliberal ‘rules of the game’. Since the neoliberal hegemony primarily ‘forces’ individuals to be free as a homo economicus, anything else related to the *summum bonum* is rendered irrelevant in the large scheme of competition and entrepreneurial action.

Thus, it seems that neoliberalism, as a resurgence of liberalism, has lost the 19th century morally-imbued optimism that liberals like Mill promoted. The writings of Mill, especially his *On Liberty*, therefore, are of great contemporary relevance. Mill already described the moral vacuum that came about through the religious compromise with Enlightenment thought, which did not teach anything else than an enlightened rational obedience to liberal rules of justice. Similarly, then, it can be argued that this compromise on the side of religion, or morality in general, has been taken even further with the rise of neoliberalism, which established a governmentalised hegemony of neoliberal rationality and, consequently, constituted the contemporary anthropology of the homo economicus. Thus, it can be argued that a new moral vacuum has been installed, since the homo economicus, as was argued in this paper, is becoming increasingly concerned with self-investment, self-marketing, and competition. As Geuss notes, we cannot expect to rid ourselves completely of our discontent with neoliberalism, but this thought itself is an assertion of the “strand [of liberalism] that is action-oriented but reflexively anti-utopian and asserts that no system either of action or thought is perfect” (2002, p. 336). Thus, the discontents with neoliberalism that have been described in this paper, most importantly the moral vacuum of the homo economicus, might therefore not necessarily be objections, but rather signs of the continuing vitality of the liberal tradition.

A new moral vacuum thus came about because neoliberal governmentality set out to ensure that individuals assume neoliberal, market-based values in all their judgments and practices in order to enhance their human capital. The robust moral convictions of the past and the concern for the *summum bonum* have been overshadowed in contemporary society, and as Taylor writes, this contributes to an existential predicament of fear for meaninglessness. As he adds, individuals need a moral orientation to the

good in order to make sense of life and attach worth and meaning to it, they *need* a moral orientation to the good in order to be human. Therefore, if the neoliberal hegemony and its anthropology keep governing human understanding and action, imperative aspects of humanity such as meaning, identity, and morality are becoming increasingly overshadowed by the rational obedience to the market-based, neoliberal rationality. One might object, however, that neoliberalism is an evolved kind of liberalism that similarly takes freedom as its core, with its own ethics that are more suited to the demands of the 21st century. Even though this claim is not completely invalid, one should still be critical and wonder whether freedom centred around entrepreneurial terms is the rich kind of freedom that allowed for the institutions and practices that gave rise to the liberal state and will be able to shape our future directed by identity and purpose. As Dilts strikingly states: “What are the ethics of a regime of knowing the self that treats oneself never as an end in itself, but always as a means toward an end, as a machine for the production of an income?” (2011, p. 145). Thus, the homo economicus, increasingly assuming market-based values in all of its judgments and practices, will have trouble to establish, in a meaningful dialogue with others, what truly matters, for the individual as well as for the greater good. The existential predicament of fear for ‘meaninglessness’ that Taylor describes can therefore only be addressed if the homo economicus becomes balanced with the moral roots of the individual, with an orientation towards the good that is not solely concerned with, and directed by, economic intentions and outcomes.

Why, then, is it imperative to stress the narrative of the Christian roots of liberalism and the West? As the narrative of liberalism in this paper describes, the roots of liberalism, and consequently the roots of our society, can be found in the invention of the individual out of an individual moral responsibility proclaimed by St. Paul, who overturned the rigid and widespread view of natural inequality by creating an inner relation between divine will and human agency. Consequently, there is a moral equality on which the primary identity of all humans is based. This narrative shows, in contrast with the narrative of liberalism as merely being a child of modernity, that the individual was not just invented through the battle between Enlightenment and religion, but through the morality of the Christian tradition which emphasised the unconditional value of the individual, the

common good and, crucially, self-improvement. The Enlightenment was indeed a break from what had gone before, but it cannot count as a total rupture. As Holland (2008) states: “Just as the philosophes and their heirs could not help but draw on the ethical capital of faith they so insistently rejected, so, too, were the parameters of the evolving liberal state shaped by presumptions that were ultimately centuries old”. Therefore, Christianity, through the freedom of conscience and the morally responsible individual, can be seen as the first important source of individual liberty in the West, as well as an undeniably integral part of the narrative and identity of Western history. The fact that this narrative is not generally acknowledged contributes to the fact that we have lost touch with the moral traditions that greatly shaped the course of Western history, creating the conditions for the homo economicus to exist.

It is imperative to stress that the development of this essential feature of Christianity was slow, painful, and incomplete. This paper is not an attempt to deny the profound impact that the Enlightenment had on the modern West, especially regarding the liberation of individuals from ecclesiastical authority and moral decadence. However, as Mill argued, the compromise on the side of religion in its broadest sense was, and is, too big, which in the end allowed for the hegemonic creation of the increasingly morally void habitat of the homo economicus. This secular habitat, however, should not be conceived of as an amoral one, since it is a sphere in which each individual should be able and free to make his or her own decisions, a sphere of individual conscience and free action. Keeping this in mind, a way opens up to start a serious and meaningful dialogue about the way in which liberalism can help create and sustain a comprehensive morality and ethical society in the future.

In order to work towards overcoming the discontents, there is a need for a reinvention of liberalism focused on formulating a comprehensive morality for the future and creating the conditions in which this comprehensive morality can develop itself. If neoliberal hegemony and the homo economicus remain at the centre of human understanding and action, the erosion of the institutions, values, and morality organised by non-market rationalities will persevere. The democratic values and institutions as we know them are increasingly becoming overshadowed by a cost-benefit and

efficiency rationale, weakening the strong moral foundations that they are built on. Therefore, a reinvention of liberalism is necessary. Not a reinvention in the sense of a reinstatement of the Christian religion or a reversal of neoliberalisation, but a historical and cultural reinvention with on the one hand the acknowledgement and understanding of the religious and moral intuitions that shaped Western history, and on the other hand a future perspective that takes into account the necessity of an orientation towards the good. In this way, the connection with the moral traditions beneath the surface of Western culture will be regained, opening up a new perspective for formulating a comprehensive morality for the future. The result of this reinvention, therefore, would be an understanding of history and human agency that will endow the West and its peoples with a stronger sense of identity and purpose.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Christian van der Veeke, not only for inspiring me to pursue my interest in philosophy, but also for supervising my bachelor thesis with great enthusiasm. Furthermore, I would like to thank the editors and all others connected to ESJP, who encouraged me to look critically at my own writing and thereby allowed me to gain valuable insight and experience.

Mathieu van Kooten (1996) grew up in the Netherlands, and graduated cum laude from Erasmus University College (EUC) in 2017, with a major in Philosophy, Politics, & Economics. After three years at EUC, he proceeded with a Master degree in Philosophy at Erasmus University, where he is currently enrolled. Besides pursuing his academic interests, Mathieu plays piano and trumpet, and is interested in music, politics, and philosophy.

Notes

1. In hegemonic terms particular policies are based on coercion, whereas mundane practices and technologies point at consent.
2. Whereas the gens was a family of individuals with descent from a common ancestor, the phratries, a larger form of association, refers to the social division within Greek tribes. Lastly, the polis, an even larger form of association, refers to the cities in ancient Greece.

3. To repent in Greek is μετανοῖα, which translates as changing one's mind or purpose (Boda & Smith, 2006, p. 90).

Bibliography

- Ahdar, R. (2013). *Is Secularism Neutral?* Ratio Juris, 26(3), 404-29.
- Aristotle. (1992). *The Politics*. (T. J. Saunders, Ed., & T. A. Sinclair, Trans.) London: Penguin Books.
- Boda, M. J., & Smith, G. T. (Red.). (2006). *Repentance in Christian Theology*. Liturgical Press.
- Brown, W. (2005). *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Constant, B. (1819). *The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns*. *Liberty Fund*. Retrieved January 26, 2017, from oll.libertyfund.org/titles/constant-the-liberty-of-ancients-compared-with-that-of-moderns-1819
- Deleuze, G. (1992). *Postscript on the Societies of Control*. October, 3-7.
- Devigne, R. (2006). *Reforming Reformed Religion: J. S. Mill's Critique of the Enlightenment's Natural Religion*. *American Political Science Review*, 100(1), 15-27.
- Dilts, A. (2011). *From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics*. *Foucault Studies*, 0(12), 130-146. doi:10.22439/fs.v0i12.3338
- Fawcett, E. (2014). *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Feher, M. (2009). *Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital*. *Public Culture*, 21(1), 21-41. doi:10.1215/08992363-2008-019
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.) New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. (D. Macey, Trans.) New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de*

- France, 1977-1978.* (A. I. Davidson, Ed., & G. Burchell, Trans.) New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79.* (M. Senellart, Ed., & G. Burchell, Trans.) New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Frisina, W. G. (2002). *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Towards a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge.* New York: State University of New York Press.
- Fustel de Coulanges, N. D. (2001). *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome.* (W. Small, Trans.) Kitchener: Batoche Books. (Original work published 1864)
- Geuss, R. (2002). *Liberalism and Its Discontents.* Political Theory, 30(3), 320-338.
- Gorman, R. F. (1992). *Citizenship, Obligation, and Exile in the Greek and Roman Experience.* Public Affairs Quarterly, 6(1), 5-22.
- Gramsci, A. (1978). *Selections from political writings (1921-1926).* (Q. Hoare, Ed.) London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hamann, T. H. (2009). *Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics.* Foucault Studies(6), 37-59.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire.* London: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.*
- Holland, T. (2008, October 9). *Europe's first revolution.* NewStatesman. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2008/10/europe-christian-essay-less>
- Isin, E. (2002). *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kooten, G. van (2014). *Human Being.* In R. O. Brawley (Ed.), The Oxford Encyclopedia of The Bible and Ethics (Vol. 1, pp. 394-405). Oxford University Press.
- Li, T. M. (2007). *Governmentality.* Anthropologica, 49(2), 275-281.
- Mill, J. S. (1985a). *Auguste Comte and Positivism.* In J. M. Robson (Ed.), The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society (Vol. X, pp. 303-4). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc.
- Mill, J. S. (1985b). *Utility of Religion.* In J. M. Robson (Ed.), The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society (Vol. X). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc.
- Mill, J. S. (2003). *On Liberty.* (D. Bromwich, & G. Kateb, Eds.) New Haven: Yale University Press. (Originally published 1859)
- Mirowski, P. (2013). *Never let a serious crisis go to waste: How neoliberalism survived the financial meltdown.* New York, Verso.
- Murray, D. (2016). *The Strange Death of Europe.* London: Bloomsbury.
- Neutel, K. B. (2013). *A cosmopolitan ideal: Paul's declaration 'neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female' in the context of first-century thought.* Groningen.
- Read, J. (2009). *A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity.* Foucault Studies(6), 25-36.
- Sedlacek, T. (2013). *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Siedentop, L. (2001). *Democracy in Europe.* London: Penguin.
- Siedentop, L. (2014). *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism.* London: Penguin Books.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wall, S. (Red.). (2015). *The Cambridge Companion to Liberalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zakaria, F. (2003). *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

