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TOWARD A SOCIAL EPISTEMIC COMPREHENSIVE LIBERALISM

ABSTRACT

For well over a decade, much of liberal political theory has accepted the founding premise of Rawls's political liberalism, according to which the fact of reasonable pluralism renders comprehensive versions of liberalism incoherent. However, the founding premise presumes that all comprehensive doctrines are *moral* doctrines. In this essay, the author builds upon recent work by Allen Buchanan and develops a comprehensive version of liberalism based in a partially comprehensive *social epistemic* doctrine. The author then argues that this version of liberalism is sufficiently accommodating of the fact of reasonable pluralism. The conclusion is that the founding premise of political liberalism admits of a counterexample; there is a version of comprehensive liberalism that is sufficiently pluralistic.

For well over a decade, much of liberal political theory has accepted the founding premise of Rawls's political liberalism, according to which the fact of reasonable pluralism renders comprehensive versions of liberalism incoherent.[1] Political liberalism's founding premise is intuitive: if conflicts at the level of reasonable moral, religious, and philosophical comprehensive doctrines have "absolute depth" (Rawls 1996, xxviii), then the comprehensive liberal project of seeking to justify liberal politics by way of an appeal to moral, religious, or philosophical doctrines must fail. This failure is due to the liberal principle of legitimacy, which holds that political power is legitimate only when exercised in accordance with principles that all reasonable citizens could accept (137). The Rawlsian position is that the fact of reasonable pluralism entails that there is no moral, religious, or philosophical doctrine that could win the assent of all reasonable citizens; all such doctrines may be reasonably rejected, and so widespread agreement on any such doctrine – even a decidedly *liberal* one – can be won only by oppression (37). Thus, justification must draw from other sources. Rawls's political liberalism is an attempt to develop a conception of liberal politics that can satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy while accommodating the fact of reasonable pluralism.

Political liberalism has been criticized on many fronts. Early critics, such as Ronald Dworkin (1988), Jean Hampton (1989), and William Galston (1989)

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rejected the idea that liberal political theorists should eschew substantive normative commitments. According to them, since political liberalism avoids substantive commitments and draws only from the "shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles" (Rawls 1996, 8) in current liberal societies, it merely describes the characteristically liberal commitments, and thus is wholly lacking in normative force (Galston 1989, 724); consequently, the political liberal cannot give anyone a reason to be a liberal (Dworkin 1988, 192), and therefore cannot adequately respond to continuing injustice in existing liberal societies (Hampton 1989, 813).[2] Other critics have challenged the possibility of a coherent political liberalism. According to them, the very idea of a liberal political philosophy that "stays on the surface, philosophically speaking" and aspires to "leave aside philosophical controversies" (Rawls 1985, 395) is incoherent because precisely what it is to propose a conception of justice is to commit to the philosophical claim that the proposed conception is normatively correct (Raz 1990; Scheffler 1994; Wenar 1995; Christiano 2001). Other critics have objected to particular features of political liberalism. Rawls's view of public reason and his corresponding distinction between public and nonpublic have been especially popular targets. In an interesting convergence, feminists, communitarians, radical democrats, and religious philosophers have all objected to political liberalism's conception of public reason on grounds that it renders "unreasonable" too many voices and consigns too many concerns to the "background culture," thereby unfairly privileging the liberal status quo (Benhabib 1989; Okin 1994; Sandel 1994; Habermas 1995; Wolterstorff 1997; George and Wolfe 2000; Reidy 2000; Young 2003; Stout 2004).

Those sympathetic with the Rawlsian enterprise have taken up the project of defending or repairing political liberalism in light of such criticisms (Estlund 1996, 1998; Gaus 1999; Klosko 2000; Dombrowski 2001; Larmore 2003). Although these efforts sometimes involve philosophically significant departures from Rawls's original articulation, all retain the founding premise that comprehensive liberalism is nonviable. Accordingly, these theorists hold that unless some version of political liberalism can be salvaged, liberalism itself is in philosophical jeopardy.

I shall not attempt in this paper to settle the issue of whether these revised and reformulated versions of political liberalism succeed in evading the objections directed at Rawls's version. Instead, I shall target the founding premise of political liberalism. Specifically, I shall argue that the founding premise admits of a counterexample in what I shall call *social epistemic liberalism*, which I maintain is a species of comprehensive liberalism that can fully appreciate the fact of reasonable pluralism. If I am correct, then political liberalism rests on a mistake – its founding premise is false. To be sure, this does not entail that political liberalism *itself* is a mistake; political liberalism may be a viable option in liberal theory, and may prove to be superior to the social epistemic view I shall propose. This is another matter that I shall not attempt to settle here. The intended conclusion is simply that political liberalism is not the only live option for liberal political theory.

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My argument will proceed in four steps. First, I shall present a social epistemic case for liberalism. For reasons that I shall make clear, my exposition will draw upon recent work by Allen Buchanan. Second, I shall argue, *contra* Buchanan, that social epistemic liberalism is a species of comprehensive liberalism. Third, I shall argue that social epistemic liberalism is consistent with a due appreciation of the fact of reasonable pluralism. Since 'liberalism' does not denote simply a set of institutions, but also fixes a particular interpretation of the nature and function of those institutions, the fourth step in my argument will engage the question of whether social epistemic liberalism is perfectionist. This step invites the range of difficulties associated with the debates between neutralists and perfectionists, full examination of which lies beyond the scope of the paper.

I. SOCIAL EPISTEMIC LIBERALISM

The intuitiveness of the founding premise of political liberalism derives from the tendency to think that our most fundamental commitments are essentially *moral* in nature. Once this is conjoined with the uncontroversial observation that sincere and intelligent persons of good faith and integrity typically fail to reach consensus on controversial moral issues, the implication to political liberalism seems inevitable. The possibility to be explored in developing a social epistemic liberalism is that certain normative *epistemic* commitments are prior to or at least as basic as our moral commitments. If this can be made plausible, then it must next be shown that these epistemic commitments are both relatively unobjectionable across a wide variety of moral doctrines and substantive enough to provide a case for liberal institutions.

First, a remark about social epistemology is in order. There are several varieties of social epistemology in currency. These vary a great deal in approach and in the ways in which the social epistemic enterprise is said to be related to the concepts and problems of traditional epistemology.[3] Putting these differences aside, we can say generally that social epistemologists maintain that the cognitive individualism associated with the Cartesian tradition is a flawed – or at best incomplete – model for thinking about knowledge. A full analysis of knowledge, they maintain, must involve an examination of the "deeply collaborative and interactive nature of knowledge seeking" (Goldman 1999, 4). Hence social epistemologists are concerned to evaluate the social processes by which information is gathered and transferred, the social institutions responsible for disseminating knowledge, the reliability of accepted experts and epistemically esteemed institutions, the social norms governing dissent, and so on. The aim is not the postmodernist one of reducing knowledge claims to raw exercises of political power, but rather to acknowledge and examine the ways in which social institutions and relations influence, constrain, and enable knowledge-seeking. Social epistemologists aim to evaluate modes of social organization in terms of their propensity to further our epistemic ends. Certain modes of social organization will tend to enable an

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effective division of cognitive labor and will tend to promote true beliefs and inhibit false beliefs. Other styles of social coordination will tend to breed ignorance, superstition, and falsehood.

Accordingly, there are several ways in which to construct a social epistemic liberalism. A familiar and direct route, one that some find in Mill (Goodman 1998, 119ff.), has it that a society governed by liberal institutions is the most efficient in producing true beliefs and correcting false beliefs, at least in the long run. But there are difficulties with the direct approach that render it as controversial as any of the traditional comprehensive liberalisms. The direct view seeks to justify *current* institutions and practices by appealing to some good that is realized in the *long run*. The worry is that the long road to truth will be fraught not only with error and failed experiments in living, but with cruelty, violence, incivility, and injustice. Consequently, the direct view is apparently committed to the view that the good of truth acquisition trumps other goods that may conflict with truth-seeking. Accordingly, the direct view seems too closely tied to a particular substantive conception of the good. But, as Rawls emphasized, in a liberal society, there is a reasonable pluralism of conceptions of the good, a fact that any viable liberal theory must recognize.

An alternative approach does not tie truth-seeking or knowledge-acquisition to any particular view of the good, but rather emphasizes the importance of an effective social epistemic system for proper moral judgment, no matter how individuals may differ in their metaethical and first-order moral commitments. This style of social epistemic liberalism has been most fully developed by Allen Buchanan, and it is this approach that I shall explore and develop.

Buchanan (2004; 2002) argues that a social epistemology of the sort developed by Alvin Goldman (1999) provides a powerful case for "key liberal institutions" (2004, 99).[4] The argument is a social epistemic one insofar as it emphasizes the moral and prudential risks to which we are all subject in virtue of the fact that each of us is "profoundly and unavoidably dependent for true beliefs upon social institutions broadly defined" (102). That is, each of us is individually *epistemically dependent* upon others for many of our factual and normative beliefs. This dependency consists not only in the fact that many of our beliefs ultimately have their source in the testimony, experience, research, and expertise of others, but also in that our *epistemic habits* are socially derived. Our epistemic habits include not only the ways in which we form, revise, and maintain our beliefs, but also how we select those to whom we show *epistemic deference* and the extent of that deference. Insofar as such habits are truth-conducive, they are epistemically virtuous; insofar as they are not, they are epistemically vicious.

Epistemic dependence is unavoidable because every individual has limited cognitive resources. However, this dependence is in itself not a bad thing; great stores of knowledge and information that could not be produced by a single person working alone are available to us precisely because of the division of epistemic labor that epistemic dependence necessitates. Nonetheless, epistemic dependence

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is risky, because one may defer to the wrong persons to the wrong extent and so become vulnerable to developing beliefs and epistemic habits that engender and sustain falsehood. The risks associated with having false beliefs are both prudential and moral: they are prudential insofar as false beliefs frustrate one's deliberations about means; they are moral insofar as they can lead one to adopt immoral ends.

The social epistemic case for liberal institutions can now be stated succinctly. Those social institutions are best which tend to minimize the risks of dependence while maximizing the benefits of the epistemic division of labor. The extent to which a society features the key liberal institutions is roughly the extent to which that society satisfies these desiderata. Liberal societies satisfy these desiderata because they (1) recognize individual liberties of thought, conscience, and association, all of which enable the free exchange of information, (2) feature a meritocratic system of identifying experts that encourages proper epistemic deference, and (3) encourage a broad culture of moral egalitarianism that enables citizens confidently to address, question, and criticize each other and socially-identified purported experts. That is, a liberal society is "better, other things being equal, at reducing the moral and prudential risks of socially inculcated false beliefs" (Buchanan 2004, 102). Hence anyone "who takes seriously the moral and prudential risks of social epistemic dependence ought to support liberal institutions" (100).

In summary, then, the social epistemic argument for liberalism runs as follows: According to any reasonable comprehensive doctrine, the reduction of social epistemic risk will benefit moral judgment. Liberal institutions are the most effective means we have to achieve such reduction. Therefore, any person holding a reasonable comprehensive doctrine ought to support a liberal polity.

II. COMPREHENSIVE NOT POLITICAL

Buchanan contends that social epistemology provides a case for liberal society that does not rely upon "any comprehensive moral conception, secular or religious" (2004, 100). He takes social epistemic liberalism to be a "different kind of political liberalism" (95). Furthermore, Buchanan takes his version of political liberalism to be an *improvement* on Rawls's articulation. Following Thomas Christiano (2001), Buchanan contends that Rawls's political liberalism is open to an "obvious objection," namely, that Rawls assumes that citizens countenance an "overriding commitment to tolerance of not unreasonable views" (127).[5] This commitment generates the requirement "to refrain from imposing rules of public order on those with whom we disagree out of respect for them as persons who hold different but not unreasonable conceptions of justice and the good" (127). However, Buchanan argues, "this overriding commitment to tolerance of not unreasonable views is as controversial as the comprehensive doctrines of the good that the political liberal seeks to avoid." Hence, Rawls's presumption of such a shared commitment "vitiates the political liberal project" (127). Buchanan contends that his social

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epistemic version of political liberalism makes no such presumption; hence his different kind of political liberalism is proposed as a *better* kind.

Despite Buchanan's characterization, social epistemic liberalism is not a *political* liberalism at all. To see this, we must examine the Rawlsian concept of "freestandingness." After distinguishing two types of freestandingness that are jointly necessary for political liberalism, I shall argue that Buchanan's social epistemic liberalism is freestanding in only one sense. The success of this argument entails that Buchanan's liberalism is of a theoretical type that is different from that of the later Rawls and his followers.[6] Once this is established, I shall argue that social epistemic liberalism is a *comprehensive* liberalism.

As Rawls proposed it, political liberalism is primarily a view according to which political justification must be "freestanding." Rawls's idea of freestandingness can be understood in terms of four claims to which the political liberal is committed. First, the political liberal holds that the fact of reasonable pluralism is a permanent condition of a free society because reasonable but deep disagreement over religious, moral, and philosophical comprehensive doctrines is the inescapable result of the free exercise of human reason. Second, the political liberal holds that the fact of reasonable pluralism, when conjoined with the liberal principle of legitimacy, entails that no comprehensive doctrine can serve as the public justification for the basic institutions of a free society. Third, the political liberal holds that the justification of the liberal conception must be freestanding in its *content*. A justification for liberalism is freestanding in this way when it implicates or rests on no specific comprehensive doctrine. Hence Rawls appeals only to the "public culture" of liberal democratic societies and employs the "implicitly recognized" political ideas and principles that can be found there (Rawls 1996, 8). Finally, the political liberal holds that the model of an *overlapping consensus* is the only appropriate model of agreement upon a political conception among free and reasonable citizens.

The concept of an overlapping consensus deserves special attention since it is this aspect of political liberalism that introduces the idea of *structurally* freestanding justification. Overlapping consensus can be understood as occupying the middle ground between two other forms of agreement. Where a principle is the focus of a *philosophical consensus*, all parties to the agreement endorse it *for the same reasons*. As I have already mentioned, the fact of reasonable pluralism precludes such a consensus upon a conception of liberalism; in fact, Rawls goes so far as to claim that a philosophical consensus upon a political conception can be sustained only by oppression (1996, 37). Alternatively, where a principle is endorsed as a *modus vivendi*, each party to the agreement accepts it reluctantly, as a less-than-optimal compromise. Rawls argues that a *modus vivendi* agreement on a liberal conception is "political in the wrong way" and inherently unstable (142). A *modus vivendi* agreement is unstable because it cannot provide sufficient motivation for individuals to sustain their allegiance to the liberal conception in cases where the political values it entails conflict with the values associated with individuals' comprehensive doctrines.

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By contrast, where a principle is the focus of an *overlapping consensus* each party endorses it as something more than a compromise, but *not for the same reasons* as those that motivate the others. Where the liberal conception is the focus of an *overlapping consensus*, each citizen endorses it for reasons drawn from her *own* comprehensive doctrine: utilitarian citizens tell a decidedly utilitarian justificatory story about the same political conception that Kantians endorse for Kantian reasons, and so on for every reasonable citizen. Accordingly, even though citizens do not share a common justificatory story for the liberal conception, each endorses it "for its own sake" and "on its own merits" (148).

Political liberalism, then, is committed to a view according to which political justification must be freestanding in both *content* and *structure*. Political justification is freestanding in its content insofar as it eschews premises drawn from any specific comprehensive doctrine; it is freestanding in its structure insofar as it leaves the precise nature of the justificatory path from its premises to the liberal conception unspecified so as to allow each individual to draw upon her comprehensive doctrine in devising her *own* justificatory story for the liberal conception.

According to Rawls, the structural freestandingness of political justification is crucial for political stability. Recall that a comprehensive doctrine specifies for its adherents that which is of ultimate value. Consequently, unless individuals see the political conception as the most appropriate manifestation in the political sphere of their *own* comprehensive doctrines, their endorsement of the political conception will be "political in the wrong way" and unlikely to last. The aim of the politically liberal theorist is to articulate a conception of liberalism that can win the wholehearted support of citizens divided at the level of their comprehensive doctrines. This can be achieved only if the liberal conception is freestanding in both of the ways I have specified: citizens must endorse the conception *on their own terms*, that is, from *within* their own comprehensive doctrines. And they can do this only if the conception itself does not presuppose any comprehensive doctrine in particular.

The dual aspect of freestandingness is captured well by Rawls's image of a "module" (1996, 12). Explaining the idea of a freestanding conception of justice, Rawls writes:

> I assume all citizens to affirm a comprehensive doctrine to which the political conception they accept is in some way related. But a distinguishing feature of a political conception is that it is presented as freestanding and expounded apart from, or without reference to, any such wider background. To use a current phrase, the political conception is a module, an essential constituent part, *that fits into and can be supported by* various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it. (12, my emphasis)

Thus it is not sufficient for a conception to be framed in terms whose content is freestanding. In order to be an instance of political liberalism, the conception must

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not only "fit into" each reasonable doctrine, but also be *supportable by* each doctrine; if it is to be stable and not a matter of "political compromise," this support must be drawn from "reasons specified within the comprehensive doctrines affirmed by each citizen" (171).

Buchanan claims that the social epistemic view is an instance of political liberalism because it provides a case for key liberal institutions that is free of "any comprehensive moral conception, secular or religious" (2004, 100). To employ the distinction I have just drawn, Buchanan holds that social epistemic liberalism is freestanding in content, and he holds that this is sufficient to render his view a species of political liberalism. Yet freestandingness is not simply a matter of content. What is necessary for political liberalism is that the social epistemic view be freestanding in both content and structure.

The social epistemic case for liberalism is not structurally freestanding, and so is not a species of political liberalism. The social epistemic argument is that, regardless of deep differences among citizens at the level of their comprehensive moral doctrines, all nonetheless have a common interest in reducing the moral and prudential risks entailed by the inevitable epistemic dependency to which all are subject. Such a case for liberalism is structurally not freestanding, but *foundationalist*: social epistemology not only gives us all reason to endorse the liberal conception, it gives us all the *same reason*. As Buchanan says, "epistemic risk reduction is valuable for all who take seriously their own well-being and the commitment to acting morally" (2004, 124). Hence, on the social epistemic view, the liberal conception is *not* the focus of an overlapping consensus but rather is endorsed by a philosophical consensus upon the nature and sources of the epistemic risks associated with epistemic dependence and the degree to which it is important to reduce such risks. Accordingly, the social epistemic case for liberalism involves the claim that the task of epistemic risk reduction is presumptively prerequisite for proper moral judgment. To be sure, the social epistemic case does not fix a specific conception of what proper moral judgment consists in. Utilitarians, Kantians, contractualists, and Natural Law theorists can all agree that a well functioning social epistemic system is necessary for proper moral judgment, even though they disagree about what proper moral judgment is. The social epistemic case is in this sense freestanding in content. Nonetheless, the social epistemic case does address itself to us as moral and epistemic agents rather than as citizens, and involves commitments that "extend beyond the political" (Rawls 1996, 175). The social epistemic case thus involves a "partially comprehensive" (epistemic) doctrine (175) that is presumed to be compelling to all and sufficiently robust to motivate all to endorse a liberal political order. Therefore it is not freestanding in structure.

Buchanan denies that his argument commits him to a comprehensive doctrine:

> I have argued that liberal societies are preferable to the extent that they are more likely to achieve an optimal reduction of moral and prudential risk from

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> socially inculcated false belief.... I have deliberately *not* based the case for liberal institutions on the claim that they are more likely to generate true beliefs, and to that extent, knowledge, because my goal is to provide a compelling argument for liberal institutions within the constraints of political liberalism, that is, without relying on any comprehensive conception of the good. Basing the case for liberal institutions on their superior capacity to generate knowledge would violate this constraint by assuming that knowledge is the highest good or at least an important component of the highest good. (2004, 120–1)

Characterizing his case positively, Buchanan claims,

> I have only argued that one will support liberal institutions if one duly appreciates both the value of social institutions in the production of true beliefs and the moral and prudential risks of social epistemic dependency. (121)

But if the case for liberal society is not based in a doctrine about the epistemic good and its relation to proper moral judgment, then upon what is it based? If Buchanan is *not* arguing that epistemic risk management is presumptively the primary normative task, then what are we to make of the term "duly appreciates" in the quotation above? In order to avoid the charge that he has committed to a comprehensive doctrine, Buchanan will have to claim that the question of what it is to "duly appreciate" epistemic risk will have to be decided *from within* each of the comprehensive doctrines operative in contemporary liberal society. However, this kind of reply greatly reduces the force of the social epistemic case for liberalism, because many popular comprehensive doctrines prize loyalty, humility, obedience, and even forms of ignorance over those cognitive virtues associated with truth-seeking and error-avoidance. That is, according to certain comprehensive doctrines the value of epistemic risk reduction is but one value among many, and, in cases of conflict, other values, such as purity of heart or faithfulness, may not only trump those associated with the epistemic enterprise, but *override* them in determining questions of political policy.

Such tendencies are clearly in play in contemporary debates over sex education in public schools, especially with regard to curricula that include discussion of contraception and homosexuality. The standard liberal account has it that there is an obvious difference between *information* and *advocacy* and that such educational programs aim to enable students to make intelligent and informed choices concerning such matters. Many advocates of religious comprehensive doctrines, though, reject this distinction, claiming that to accept the idea that one's sexual behavior is a matter of choice that may be more or less informed is *already* to adopt a contestable moral stance. Other religious doctrines accept the distinction, but oppose the idea that human sexuality should be taught apart from the substantive moral principles that govern human sexual behavior. This is apparently the view of Pope John Paul II, who writes in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*,

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> The Church is firmly opposed to an often widespread form of imparting sex information dissociated from moral principles. That would merely be an introduction to the experience of pleasure and a stimulus leading to the loss of serenity – while still in the years of innocence – by opening the way to vice. (1981, paragraph 37)

For many religious believers, the risks associated with ignorance concerning sexual matters are worth taking for the sake of preserving, for example, serenity or chastity.

Buchanan is likely to respond that adherents of such doctrines do not "duly appreciate" (2004, 121) the severity of the risks associated with our epistemic dependency, and thus do not "take seriously" the "commitment to acting morally" (124) with regard to human sexuality. Concerning the present case, I agree; however, such a response invokes a normative standard for the due appreciation of epistemic risk that is independent of the religious doctrine in question. To adopt such a standard is to commit to a particular view concerning how certain moral goods are to be ranked relative to certain epistemic risks, and it is a mistake to think that such judgments do not invoke the kind of commitments that political liberals must attempt to avoid.

One need not turn to putatively non-liberal views such as Roman Catholicism to find a comprehensive view that rejects the idea that epistemic risk reduction is prior to other normative aims. In a recent book, Philip Kitcher (2001, ch. 8) has developed a *liberal* case for placing moral constraints on social epistemic processes of truth-seeking. Specifically, he contends that scientific inquiry must be constrained by the value of social equality. Kitcher holds that any research program that may be reasonably expected to produce results that could lead to the further harm of historically underprivileged social groups is morally abhorrent and ought not be pursued. Kitcher's view is subtle and cannot be examined here. The point is only that Kitcher has developed a decidedly *liberal* view according to which (1) the task of epistemic risk management may conflict with other normative aims, and (2) those other normative aims – such as promoting social equality – may trump the epistemic ones. Insofar as the social epistemic liberal is committed to the view that epistemic risk management is presumptively prior to other normative goals, she is committed to a doctrine that is partially comprehensive (Rawls 1996, 176).

The social epistemic case for liberalism, then, fails to be freestanding in structure. Consequently, it is of a theoretical kind different from Rawlsian political liberalism. Perhaps Buchanan will respond by invoking his claim to have been deliberately pursuing a "different kind" of political liberalism; he could claim that his liberalism is admittedly not Rawlsian but nevertheless *political*. But if Buchanan's case for key liberal institutions rests upon an appeal to their ability to realize a goal, value, or objective that we all presumably share regardless of the ways in which we are otherwise deeply divided, then it is not clear that Buchanan's "different kind" of political liberalism is different from familiar forms of *comprehensive* liberalism.

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Recall that standard comprehensive theories of liberalism attempt to make a public case for liberal political commitments based in some commitments that are claimed to be so fundamental as to compel the assent of all rational persons. To be sure, traditional forms of comprehensive liberalism proposed a decidedly *moral* ground for liberal politics whereas the social epistemic view proposes a decidedly *epistemic* ground. To this extent, social epistemic liberalism is distinct from traditional comprehensive liberalisms. However, as I emphasized above, the social epistemic doctrine is not entirely insulated from other normative commitments; the social epistemic case for liberalism includes reference to "nonpolitical values and virtues" (Rawls 1996, 175). The extent to which social epistemology implicates nonpolitical values will determine what Rawls calls the "scope" (13) of social epistemic doctrine; however, the question of the scope of social epistemology as a comprehensive doctrine is distinct from the question of the nature of the social epistemic case for liberalism. That is, regardless of the scope of social epistemology as a comprehensive doctrine, the social epistemic case for liberal politics is an instance of comprehensive liberalism.

III. SOCIAL EPISTEMIC LIBERALISM AND REASONABLE PLURALISM

Those who accept the Rawlsian premise that comprehensive liberalism is incompatible with a proper recognition of reasonable pluralism will hold that the success of my argument entails that social epistemic liberalism is a failure. I should like to recommend a different conclusion, namely that the social epistemic case for liberal politics serves as a counterexample to the abovementioned Rawlsian premise. That is, I contend that social epistemic liberalism is an instance of a comprehensive liberalism that can duly appreciate the fact of reasonable pluralism.

To begin, we must give an account of what makes the fact of reasonable pluralism *worth* accommodating in our political theorizing. Rawls himself points in the right direction. Rawls acknowledged that it is not the "fact of pluralism as such" that is worth accommodating, but the fact that there is a plurality of distinct and conflicting doctrines that are *reasonable* (1996, 36).[7] Rawls explains this plurality of reasonable doctrines by appealing to a catalogue of the "many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment" (56), which he collectively refers to as "the burdens of judgment" (54). Paraphrasing a cumbersome passage in Rawls, Mulhall and Swift summarize the burdens of judgment:

> [With regard to any particular moral judgment,] the evidence bearing on the case is complex and conflicting; the weight to be attached to any given piece of evidence is contestable; our concepts are vague and subject to hard cases; and our judgments are imponderably but decisively influenced by the whole course of our moral experience. (Mulhall and Swift 1996, 177)

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These burdens account for the fact that although reasonable persons "share a common human reason" and have "similar powers of thought and judgment" (Rawls 1996, 55), they may nonetheless come to hold conflicting and irreconcilable moral views. Yet the burdens of judgment not only explain why otherwise intelligent and rational person disagree with us; there is also a self-reflexive component to the recognition of these burdens. By appealing to the burdens of judgment as an explanation for why others disagree with us, we come to see that we too are subject to those same burdens. It is important to note that to admit that the burdens of judgment apply in one's own case is *not* to succumb to skepticism or relativism. The burdens of judgment entail only that we recognize that getting moral matters right is a complex and difficult business – a Herculean, but not necessarily impossible, task that requires a considerable degree of exactness and sophistication. Accordingly, recognition of the burdens of judgment compels each of us to acknowledge that there is a plurality of *philosophically respectable* positions in moral theory, an abundance of *live options*[8] for reasonable persons at the level of comprehensive doctrines. Thus one can recognize that the utilitarian's position is *reasonable* even if one denies its *truth*; similarly, one can hold that the utilitarian is *mistaken* without judging that she is *vicious*, *stupid,* or *confused*. More generally, we see that competing reasonable doctrines are structured in an intellectually respectable way – we come to understand the set of premises from which they begin and the moral intuitions they most wish to accommodate – and so we can describe the ways in which competing views differ from our own in a way that proponents of those competing views can accept.

When our moral differences are laid out in this way, we discover that reasonable comprehensive doctrines involve a distinction between moral and non-moral considerations as well as a conception of how these different kinds of consideration are related. With regard to disagreements over specific cases, there will be some difference among the contending parties in their non-moral judgments that will make a moral difference; that is, there will be some disagreement over the non-moral data that will in part account for the disagreement over what ought to be done. In other cases, disagreement over non-moral factors will not exhaust the disagreement, but will provide a way for moral argument to advance, as when an interlocutor identifies the empirical consequences that follow from a stated moral position. With regard to any such case, it is in the moral interest of all to have access to reliable processes of discovering and assessing the non-moral data.

To be sure, as I mentioned above, there will be cases in which proponents of certain comprehensive doctrines will hold that the moral costs of executing the epistemic task outweigh the moral risk of ignorance. Such cases will, of course, need to be confronted, but even in these cases, those who would forego the epistemic task in order to preserve or realize another normative goal are committed to *some* position regarding the moral cost of executing the epistemic task relative to the competing normative goal, and the justification of this view rests upon a particular understanding of the non-moral considerations that bear upon the

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case. Accordingly, it is important even in these cases that a well-functioning social epistemic system is in place. That is, to return to the case of sex education in public schools, the Pope is committed to the *causal* claim that "imparting sex information dissociated from moral principles" leads to "the loss of serenity" and the opening of the "way to vice." Hence the Pope's moral opposition to familiar forms of sex education is in part justified by an appeal to an empirical claim that presumably can be verified by an analysis of the empirical data. Consequently, the Pope's argument in part rests upon what he takes to be reliable data. And so the Pope, even in making his case against the priority of the epistemic task to other normative goals in the particular case of sex education in public schools, must rely upon the epistemic division of labor. It is thus to his moral advantage to have access to the kind of social epistemic system that is best realized in a liberal society.[9]

Of course, the foregoing observation does not entail that there will never be hard cases for the social epistemic view. With regard to certain issues, proponents of some comprehensive doctrines will adamantly oppose the core of the social epistemic doctrine, namely that a sound system of social epistemology is an aid to proper moral judgment. However, it is difficult to imagine a reasonable comprehensive doctrine that denies that effective epistemic risk reduction *in most cases* is an aid, or at least *not a hindrance*, to proper moral judgment. And there is no reason to insist that the social epistemic case for liberalism must *begin* with the hard cases.

The point I have been making is that proper recognition of the fact of reasonable pluralism requires that we come to see those with whom we deeply disagree as reasonable and sincere participants in the common moral task of trying to do the right thing despite the many hazards and obstacles this task involves. That is, a proper recognition of the fact of reasonable pluralism not only respects the plurality of live options in moral theory among reasonable persons, it also seeks to maintain conditions under which moral disagreements can be reasonably engaged. I have argued that a well-functioning social epistemic system of the sort that is possible only within a roughly liberal political order is necessary if we are duly to recognize the fact of reasonable pluralism. Thus social epistemology provides a case for liberalism that is comprehensive, but nonetheless compatible with a due appreciation of the fact of reasonable pluralism.

This will strike the political liberal as a surprising conclusion. To repeat, the founding premise of political liberalism has it that comprehensive liberalism is incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism. But the premise holds only if we think of comprehensive doctrines as *essentially* moral. However, there is a partially comprehensive *epistemic* doctrine that can serve as the basis for liberal justification. Although, as I have argued above, the social epistemic justification employs a partially comprehensive doctrine, it nonetheless does not run afoul of pluralism; the social epistemic doctrine is consistent with a wide range of reasonable comprehensive moral doctrines, perhaps the full range.

The social epistemic liberal's claim is that a society featuring the key liberal institutions is best, all things considered, at managing epistemic risk. Proponents

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of various moral doctrines may, of course, object to this claim; they may propose that some kind of non-liberal order is in fact *better* at managing epistemic risk than a liberal order. But this kind of objection to liberalism is empirical and not moral. That is, the objection does not derive from the claim that social epistemic liberalism is insufficiently pluralistic and thus oppressive; rather, the objection *affirms* the social epistemic doctrine and asserts that there is a kind of political order that is *better* than liberalism at executing the social epistemic task.

The point is that the partially comprehensive social epistemic doctrine can be endorsed across a wide variety of otherwise opposed moral, religious, and philosophical comprehensive doctrines. Furthermore, it seems plausible that any comprehensive doctrine that rejects the social epistemic doctrine wholesale is unreasonable and thus unworthy of accommodation. Most importantly, social epistemic liberalism both affords a compelling philosophical justification for a liberal political order and leaves open the dialectical space for substantive moral disagreement about the precise contours of liberal justice. In short, the social epistemic argument for liberalism accommodates the Rawlsian concerns about the need to recognize the fact of reasonable pluralism, but it does not abandon the project of comprehensive liberalism. If this is correct, social epistemic liberalism is a counterexample to the founding premise of political liberalism.

IV. IS SOCIAL EPISTEMIC LIBERALISM PERFECTIONIST?

I have argued along Buchananian lines that social epistemology provides a compelling case for key liberal institutions. Against Buchanan, I have argued that the social epistemic case for these institutions is comprehensive and not political. Additionally, I have argued that social epistemic liberalism is a comprehensive liberalism that can accommodate the fact of reasonable pluralism. Thus far I have been using the term "liberalism" and its grammatical relatives in a loose sense. It is time to make explicit the kind of liberalism that social epistemology warrants.

I follow Buchanan in identifying the key liberal institutions as "effective institutional arrangements for freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and association," including "democracy as the institutionalized opportunity for all to participate as equals … in the creation of the more important rules of public order" (2004, 99). But note that these institutions are not sufficient to produce the social epistemic benefits of a liberal society: those same institutions that protect and instantiate the core liberal freedoms also enable extremism, fanaticism, and insularity. That is, the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, and association do not in themselves guarantee an effective social epistemic system because they create a social space for illiberal fringe groups to operate and flourish.

Consider the findings canvassed in recent work by Cass Sunstein (2001a; 2003) and Carol Swain (2002) about extremist groups. Both Sunstein and Swain find that the Internet, arguably an ideal institution from the point of view of liberal freedom,

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is among the most successful recruiting tools for white nationalist and similar organizations (Swain 2002, 7). This is because, insofar as it provides a practically unregulated forum for the exchange of ideas, points of view, information, and perspectives, the Internet also makes it possible for persons to epistemically insulate themselves from perspectives and ideas foreign to their own. Hence Sunstein emphasizes the danger of the ability the Internet provides to citizens to "filter what they see" (2001a, 8) and thus to "live in echo chambers of their own devising" (2003, 106), avoiding exposure to political views that are unfamiliar and possibly contrary to their own. This epistemic "self-insulation" (2001a, 192) leads to the phenomenon of "group polarization," which is the statistical regularity that says that like-minded persons deliberating together each come to adopt a more extreme version of what they believed before they began to deliberate (2003, 111ff.). For example, persons who are moderately pro-choice will come to adopt an increasingly more extreme version of the pro-choice view if they discuss abortion only with others who are pro-choice. The same goes for racists, libertarians, feminists, labor activists, environmentalists, and so on. The lesson is that doxastically homogenous deliberative groups are doxastically unstable, and their instability moves in the direction of extremism.

The trouble with extremism is not simply the *content* of such views, which, to be sure, is typically morally abhorrent.[10] There is a problem also in that extreme views require extreme means for their preservation, what Russell Hardin (2002) fittingly calls a "crippled epistemology." That is, regardless of the content of their views, extremists lose the ability to rationally engage with those with whom they disagree; they come to see all opposing views as not simply mistaken, but as wicked, benighted, and stupid. Relatedly, the crippled epistemology of extremism requires that all moral terms and data be remade in the image of the extremist view. Hence, as interviews conducted by Carol Swain and Russ Nieli with leaders of white nationalist organizations reveal, racial extremists see themselves as fighting for "civil rights" (Swain and Nieli 2003, 167), encouraging "pride" (126), and promoting "awareness" (258). Consequently, extremists are unable to *revise* their beliefs because their views involve a set of epistemic commitments that preclude the recognition of counter arguments and evidence.[11]

The lesson to draw from this is that liberal institutional arrangements must be supplemented by certain cultural conditions that counteract the phenomena identified above. Hence Buchanan includes in his description of liberal society "a comparatively large role for merit in the social identification of reliable sources of belief" and "a broad culture of basic moral egalitarianism" (2004, 99). Indeed, these additional features of liberal society serve to discourage epistemic insularity and thus to block extremism. But note that these features have more to do with individuals' epistemic attitudes and intellectual habits than with legal systems and political institutions. A system based on "merit in the social identification of reliable sources of belief" requires that citizens develop certain skills so they can make proper assessments of epistemic merit. Accordingly, a social epistemic liberal

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regime must take steps to cultivate and maintain the epistemic capabilities that are necessary for accurate assessments of epistemic merit.

The cultivation of the appropriate epistemic capabilities among citizens undoubtedly requires at the very least that an efficient and effective system of free public education be in place. But it may require more than this – for even well-educated citizens are vulnerable to group polarization and the related epistemic hazards discussed above. As Cass Sunstein has argued, a well-functioning social epistemic system requires "a *culture* of free speech" that "encourages independence of mind," imparts "a willingness to challenge prevailing opinion through both words and deeds," and engenders "a certain set of attitudes in listeners, one that gives a respectful hearing to those who do not embrace the conventional wisdom" (2003, 110). On Sunstein's view, these attitudes and traits are to be promoted by means of certain institutional arrangements that guarantee their *exercise*. Hence Sunstein calls for a series of free speech interventions designed to ensure sound epistemic practice. Such interventions require a "New Deal" for free speech (1996, 17ff.) and a "two-tiered" first amendment (1996, 124ff.). Among his most well known policy suggestions is that politically partisan websites should be required by law to carry links to sites espousing opposing viewpoints (2001a, 169f.). More recently, he has proposed that society should take special care to protect, and perhaps even *reward* dissent (2003, 93). Such measures are intended to promote proper epistemic practice by increasing "society's total stock of argument pools" (157).

Indeed, the idea that society should actively promote certain epistemic ends informs Sunstein's entire line of constitutional interpretation. He holds that

> The American constitutional system is emphatically not designed to protect private interests and private rights. Private interests and private rights are of course protected; but this is not the entire point of the system.... Instead, a large point of the system is to ensure discussion and debate among people who are genuinely different in their perspectives and position, in the interest of creating a process through which reflection will encourage the emergence of general truths. (1996, 241)

The social epistemic liberal must join Sunstein in seeing our constitution as not simply a fair procedure for resolving conflicts, but rather a system designed to "protect the process of reason-giving, ensuring something like a 'republic of reasons'" (2001b, 239). It follows that social epistemic liberals are bound to endorse policies and institutions that can be reasonably expected to further those epistemic goals.

Thus we see that social epistemology does not simply provide a justification of liberal society, it involves a particular *interpretation* of the nature and purposes of liberal institutions. To repeat, a regime of social epistemic liberalism must commit itself to the cultivation of certain epistemic traits among its citizens.

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This commitment may involve institutional measures designed to preempt or discourage corrupt epistemic practices.

Talk of state involvement in the formation of its citizens will raise suspicions among adherents to the dominant strain in contemporary liberal theory, which has as its core the principle of neutrality. According to this principle, "the state should not favor, promote, or act on any particular conception of the good" (Sher 1997, 1).[12] The precise meaning of the principle of neutrality is something about which liberals disagree; however, it is frequently understood as a principle of political justification, "a constraint on what factors can be invoked to justify a political decision" (Larmore 1987, 44).[13] This constraint has it that the *justification* for a political policy, institution, or decision must not rely upon any particular conception of the good. Of course, this is not to say that political decision and policy must not *in fact* favor some visions of the good over others – "neutrality of effect" (Rawls 1996, 194) is impossible. Rather it is to say that the state must avoid instituting policy *for the sake of* some such conception; that is, the liberal state must be neutral in *aim* (193).

It would seem that social epistemic liberalism is not neutral in this way. A social epistemic liberal regime institutes policy and acts *for the sake of* cultivating the requisite attitudes and habits. It interprets its key institutions as *means* by which certain epistemic values may be realized. In this way, it seems that social epistemic liberalism is committed to what antiliberal thinkers have called the "formative project" (Sandel 1996, 321) of politics, what is widely known as perfectionism.[14]

The question of whether the social epistemic view is indeed perfectionist is thorny, and a full analysis cannot be attempted here. However, note that the kind of "formative project" implied by social epistemic liberalism is different from familiar varieties of perfectionism. Perfectionism in its most popular forms holds that "the state should promote excellence and/or assist its citizens in their efforts to lead worthwhile lives, even if doing so requires it to undertake political action that is reasonably controversial" (Wall and Klosko 2003, 13). By contrast, the social epistemic liberal state does not *directly* promote or attempt to codify a vision of the moral good. Rather, it seeks to promote habits and capabilities that enable citizens to engage fruitfully in moral deliberation. To repeat, the social epistemic liberal holds that, for any reasonable comprehensive doctrine, a proper social epistemic system is *necessary* to proper moral judgment. The maintenance of a proper social epistemic system involves the promotion of certain epistemic practices among citizens. Hence, the social epistemic liberal state must promote those practices *for the sake of* enabling proper moral judgment. In this way, the "formative project" implied by social epistemic liberalism is an *epistemic* project rather than a *moral* one.

To be sure, the most extreme versions of liberal neutrality – versions that might be characterized as libertarian – reject the idea that the state should act for the sake of *anything* other than the protection of individuals' rights. Libertarians will accordingly reject social epistemic liberalism for being perfectionist. However, many prominent strands of liberalism – including those associated with political

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liberalism – endorse a more moderate version of liberal neutrality. Moderate versions of neutralism hold that "governments should not base their actions on grounds that can be reasonably rejected" (Klosko 2003, 168), and hence justify neutralism by way of a "norm of rational dialogue" (Larmore 1987, 53). In this small respect, then, non-libertarian liberal neutralists are committed to a politics in which the "public realm" functions as a "forum in which we try to convince others of the worth of our views so that they can become part of the shared allegiances the state should promote" (Larmore 1996, 135). Such a forum is important because "a liberal polity benefits greatly from people coming to know the full extent of their reasonable disagreements"; such recognition is "necessary for exercising the equal respect we owe one another" (136). The claim of the social epistemic liberal – which enjoys the empirical support of the findings discussed above – is that the epistemic capabilities requisite to acknowledging reasonable disagreements and engaging in rational dialogue cannot be taken as given, but must be cultivated and maintained. This cultivation and maintenance is achieved by political institutions and state policy designed for that purpose. Thus, if the mode of epistemically formative politics called for by social epistemic liberalism is indeed a kind of perfectionism, it should be unobjectionable from the point of view of any liberalism that draws upon the concept of reasonable rejectability as a criterion of unjustifiable state coercion. Indeed, it would seem that this brand of "epistemic perfectionism" is essential to liberal neutrality.

To conclude: according to the founding premise of political liberalism, comprehensive justifications for liberal politics must violate the fact of reasonable pluralism, and thus fail to satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy. Hence it appears that liberal theorists confront a dilemma. They must either abandon comprehensive liberalism or deny the fact of reasonable pluralism. Those who take the second horn assert that there is some moral principle or ideal so compelling as to be rationally nonnegotiable. Taking this path, Ronald Dworkin claims that "liberalism is continuous with the best personal ethics, with the right philosophical view of the good life" (1988, 193); similarly, Brian Barry holds that "there is nothing straightforwardly absurd about the idea that there is a single best way for human beings to live" (2001, 262). The political liberal is correct, I think, to follow Rawls in claiming that such anti-pluralist approaches are "unrealistic" (1996, xix).

However, political liberalism's founding premise presumes that all comprehensive liberalisms must be rooted in essentially *moral* comprehensive doctrines. But if we allow that there could be a comprehensive liberalism based in a partially comprehensive *epistemic* doctrine, we see that the abovementioned dilemma is false, and consequently that the plausibility of political liberalism's founding premise is diminished. I have argued here that social epistemology provides a compelling justification of liberalism that is comprehensive in nature and sufficiently pluralistic. I do not pretend to have laid out fully the details of this liberalism; there are, of course, many issues outstanding and many difficulties to be confronted.

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The important point is that if the above arguments are sound, the social epistemic approach constitutes a promising alternative to political liberalism.[15]

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NOTES

1 Hence Rawls, "[the] reasonable plurality of conflicting and incommensurable doctrines is seen as the characteristic work of practical reason over time under enduring free institutions. So the question the dominant tradition has tried to answer has no answer: no comprehensive doctrine is appropriate as a political conception for a constitutional

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regime" (1996, 135). And also, "it is the fact of reasonable pluralism that leads … to the idea of political liberalism" (1996, xlvii).

2 Compare similar objections in Okin (1993), Holmes (1993), Ackerman (1994), and Barry (1995b).

3 See Goldman (2001) for a review of these issues.

4 Buchanan counts among the key liberal institutions "effective institutional arrangements for freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and association," including "democracy as the institutionalized opportunity for all to participate as equals … in the creation of the more important rules of public order" (2004, 99). In addition, he cites certain cultural features common in liberal societies among liberalism's key institutions, such as "a comparative large role for merit in the social identification of reliable sources of belief" and "a broad culture of basic moral egalitarianism" (99). This characterization will be discussed in the final section of this essay.

5 Although Buchanan cites only Christiano, this type of objection has been pursued by others that I have mentioned above, including Hampton (1989), Raz (1990), and Scheffler (1994).

6 Although I refer exclusively to Rawls's articulation of political liberalism, there are several other theorists who follow Rawls on these matters whose work will not be discussed in detail. Among these I include Ackerman (1989), Audi (2000), Cohen (1993), D'Agostino (1996), Holmes (1988), Larmore (1996), Macedo (2000), and Nagel (1987).

7 Thus the requirement of recognizing the fact of reasonable pluralism is not an instance of a more general imperative to recognize the liberty or autonomy of *persons* more generally. On Rawls's view, some persons (i.e., the unreasonable ones) may be legitimately coerced, and some doctrines (i.e., the unreasonable ones) may be legitimately suppressed (1996, xvi; 1996, 64 n. 19).

8 I here appropriate a term introduced by another great Harvard philosopher, William James, in his essay, "The Will to Believe" (1977, 717). James used the term in a *subjective* sense: the liveness of a proposition has to do with the subjective feeling that it could be true. I here use the term to denote what I think of as an *objective* sense: the liveness of a proposition need not involve one's own feeling that it could be true, but only that it is understandable how another rational person doing his epistemic best may believe it.

9 The same argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Kitcher's view concerning egalitarian constraints on scientific inquiry. For a criticism of Kitcher along these lines, see Talisse and Aikin 2007.

10 Extremist views need not be morally abhorrent. One could imagine, for example, a liberal egalitarian extremist. The point about to be made is that extremism even in the name of justice is problematic because it is epistemically corrupt.

11 This is why extremist views often involve elaborate conspiracy theories: the conspiracy accounts for (and defeats) all countervailing considerations.

12 Although Sher rejects neutralism, his is a standard articulation of the neutralist thesis. Compare similar articulations in Dworkin (1985, 191), Nozick (1974, 33), and Barry (1995a, 160).

13 For influential discussions, see Nagel (1987), Ackerman (1989), and Waldron (1993). See Gaus (2003) and Arneson (2003) for more recent treatments.

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14 Not all perfectionisms are explicitly antiliberal, as Sandel's (1996) and Hurka's (1993) are. For liberal perfectionism, see Raz (1986), Sher (1997), and Wall (1998). See also the essays collected in Wall and Klosko (2003).

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