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The Importance of Dystopian Hypotheticals: Towards an Ethical Turn in Liberal Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper argues that liberal philosophy underestimates the importance of political ethics, which I define as the question of how individual citizens should comport themselves politically under largely normal conditions. Using three case studies from popular dystopian science fiction as ‘intuition pumps’, I contend that the behaviour of such individuals, both discretely and collectively speaking, has significant causal potency when it comes to contemporary politics. Upon this basis, I diagnose as pathological the faith that liberal philosophers place in the power of institutional arrangements to curtail human behaviour. I conclude that liberal philosophy should embrace an ‘ethical turn’, in pursuit of which I make some indicative recommendations as to what such a development might comprise.

Keywords: Law and popular culture; political philosophy; liberalism; Hannah Arendt; populism; political ethics.

1. Introduction

Political philosophy and science fiction both require imagination. It is striking, perhaps, how similar in form the objects of imagination are in each. Both philosophers and science fiction authors dedicate considerable energy to the construction of possible worlds, whether those are imagined futures or alternative histories. Admittedly, the primary function of science fiction is to entertain rather than to persuade and inform, as is the case with academic philosophy. Nonetheless, science fiction has the potential to spark philosophical reflection.¹ This paper relies upon one type of popular science fiction:² that concerned with themes of dystopia and downfall.³

My goal is to tease out some themes from this material and use them to critique an argumentative trend within liberal political philosophy. The trend in question is that, when constructing their theories, liberal philosophers typically pivot towards a near-exclusive focus upon constitutions, institutions, and other ‘blueprints’ for society, often to the exclusion of what we might call the ‘human element’. Characteristically absent is any kind of robust political ethics: any account of how private individuals

¹ The arguments, for example, within Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 199–218, employ science fiction themes, such as the teletransportation paradox.

² What makes science fiction ‘popular’ is difficult to define. I use the term “popular” to encompass any franchise that has enjoyed widespread commercial success at an international level within Western anglophone culture. As far as “science fiction” itself, I follow Travis, who defines it in terms of: 1) the industries that produce it; 2) the style it adopts; and 3) the themes it addresses, see Travis, “Making Space,” 242–245. Notably, to quote Travis, “these themes are often, though not always, strongly related to human life. Indeed, it is this familiarity of the human, coupled with the strangeness of the environment or situation, that ... is at the heart of science fiction.” Travis, “Making Space,” 245. This centrality of the human condition is key to my use of science fiction below.

³ Following Gregory Claeys, I use “dystopia” primarily to denote any real or imagined society characterised by endemic fear, within which hope seems either fleeting or lost, see Claeys, *Dystopia*, 4, 9, 58, 93. More broadly, we might understand “dystopias” to denote any societies worse than the one we currently occupy, or perhaps as “utopias gone wrong,” see Gordin, “Utopia and Dystopia,” 1.



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ought to comport themselves, in general and outwith in extremis circumstances,⁴ insofar as they are citizens.⁵ The liberal article of faith seems to be that if we can only provide a complete blueprint for constitutional society, then this human element can be effectively eliminated.

The liberal philosophical use of hypotheticals, such as the ‘state of nature’ thought experiment,⁶ appear to centre upon this ‘dehumanising’ goal. My objection is that this preoccupation with institutions is complacent. No institutional arrangement, no matter how perfectly conceived, can eliminate the human element from politics. We need a robust political ethics if our institutions are to remain healthy. As a result, liberal political philosophers should embrace an ‘ethical turn’.

The role of popular dystopian science fiction within this argument is as follows. Drawing upon three case studies – the fictional universes of Star Wars, Star Trek, and Warhammer 40,000 – I contend that Western self-understandings of dystopia and downfall trade heavily upon the plausible notion that human frailties are powerful causal forces.⁷ Specifically, popular science fiction indicates a widespread belief that no institutional framework, liberal or otherwise, can survive contact with a population that lacks a robust political ethics and who let their negative impulses and emotions undermine social justice and political stability. My premise is not that fictional dystopias *prove* this point, but rather that, in a manner analogous to philosophical thought experiments, they provide useful ‘intuition pumps’ that prompt us to test its plausibility.⁸ The dystopian hypotheticals disclosed by popular science fiction thereby provide a valuable counterpoint to the heuristic devices found within liberal political philosophy. In particular, the liberal institutional preoccupation stands in sharp contrast with the focus, found in dystopian science fiction, upon people and their ethical strengths and weaknesses. Liberalism, I contend, should pay more attention to imaginings of this sort.

The structure of my argument is as follows. In Section 2, I begin my diagnosis of liberalism by examining the writing of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. In particular, I note that these earlier authors took notions of dystopia and downfall seriously; however, we can nonetheless detect an institutional preoccupation within their arguments. In Section 3, I turn to the more contemporary mainstream, with consideration of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Ronald Dworkin. Here, I note that for all their argumentative ingenuity, these philosophers possess a clear institutional preoccupation and also a surprising lack of imagination when it comes to what manner of institutions are fit for purpose. In Section 4, I draw together these observations and, relying upon the insights of Hannah Arendt, argue that the institutional preoccupation found within liberal philosophy stems from a desire to eliminate humanity from politics. Section 5 turns from philosophy to science fiction, drawing upon my three case studies to illustrate the popular conceit that human frailty is a more potent causal force than the stability engendered by any set of institutional arrangements. My aim here is not so much to use dystopian literature to analyse liberal philosophy through critical interpretation but rather to present its central (ethical) concerns as in broad contradistinction with those identified earlier on. Finally, in Section 6, building upon my identification of this contrast, I contend that recent populist movements, within the United States of America and elsewhere, demonstrate the relative fragility of liberalism. I end by concluding that liberal political philosophy should learn from the dystopian hypotheticals that popular science fiction provides and refocus upon individual ethical behaviour, if it wishes to provide an enduring and convincing account of politics.

⁴ Liberal philosophical works often comment upon the permissibility of civil disobedience and rebellion. See, for example: Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 319–346; Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, 249–268. However, the argumentative detail in these passages is conspicuously absent when one turns to more mundane questions, such as how one should vote or in what manner one should exercise one’s rights to freedom of speech.

⁵ My use of “political ethics” to connote the comportment of individual citizens *qua* both citizens and individuals is somewhat idiosyncratic. See, for example: Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Chapter 1. Rawls provides some consideration of such things (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 122, 157, 163, 194–195). However, as I argue below, his contentions are primarily designed to show that his more abstract prescriptions are not likely to be rejected (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 450–506).

⁶ Such devices are “purely hypothetical situation[s] characterized so as to lead to a certain conception of justice,” (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 11) and “expository device[s] which [sum] ... up the meaning of these [generally accepted] conditions and helps us to extract their consequences,” (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 19).

⁷ My focus is peculiarly Western here because the particular problems I am diagnosing arise most clearly within the Western analytical philosophical tradition (see Section 4).

⁸ An “intuition pump” is an imagined hypothetical “designed to focus the reader’s attention on ‘the important’ features, and to deflect the reader from bogging down in hard-to-follow details” (Dennett, *Elbow Room*, 12). They are useful tools, if not sufficient to ground sound arguments.

2. Dystopian Origins: Hobbes, Lock, and Kant

When discussing the use of hypothetical scenarios in liberalism, one must begin with Hobbes. This may strike some readers as peculiar since Hobbes himself was not so much liberal as authoritarian.⁹ Nonetheless, not only is there a great deal of nuance in his writing, such that the intellectual roots of various liberal principles might be located there,¹⁰ but also the ‘state of nature’, which features so prominently within liberal scholarship, owes much to Hobbes’ own use of that heuristic device.¹¹ Moreover, the spectre of dystopia looms large within his work, as evinced by the following passage:

...the state of man can never be without some incommodity or other; and the greatest, that in any form of government can possibly happen to people in general, is scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a civil war; or that dissolute condition of masterless men, without subjection to laws, and a coercive power to tie their hands from rapine and revenge...¹²

I shall return to this central claim – that almost *any* state (in the institutional sense) is better than perpetual war – in just a moment. For now, I want to emphasise the form of Hobbes’ argument because that structure is replicated by many subsequent invocations of the state of nature. Propositionally, it runs as follows:

P1: A condition in which there is no state (or state-like) institution is one that admits considerable injustice.¹³

P2: We have a (typically collective) natural duty to end injustice.¹⁴

P3: Entering into a civil condition (and, thus, creating a state) ends the condition referenced in P1.¹⁵

C: Therefore, we have an obligation to undertake a social contract to that effect.¹⁶

For Hobbes, it was particular human frailties – and what he took to be their inevitable implications – that supplied the truth of P1.¹⁷ For Locke and Kant, it was the need to secure our basic rights, on the one hand, and to avoid allegedly inevitable problems of coordination, on the other, which did this work.¹⁸ Nonetheless, and despite considerable divergence in the detail of their positions, this argumentative form is shared amongst all three. In other work, I contend that a similar argument might justify an obligation on the part of private individuals to support particular kinds of political institution, and to provide reasons for them to engage in politics more broadly.¹⁹

Within the general form of argument outlined above, the state of nature itself, as expressed in P1, takes the form of a dystopian hypothetical.²⁰ This matters because liberal philosophy can, to this extent, be seen as incorporating an institutional response to a particular kind of anticipated danger: namely, anarchy.²¹ This concern is one that early liberals shared with Hobbes, whose

⁹ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 52; cf. Dyzenhaus, “Now the Machine Runs Itself.”

¹⁰ Dyzenhaus, “Hobbes and the Legitimacy of Law.”

¹¹ Hobbes was not the first to appeal to a hypothetical state of nature. That was Mozi, who lived some 400 years BC. Nonetheless, within the Western tradition, Hobbes was one of the earliest and influential scholars to rely upon it, see Martinich, “Mozi, Hobbes, and Locke on the State of Nature,” 103.

¹² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XVIII, 12.

¹³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIV.

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIV.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XVII.

¹⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapters XIV, XV, and XVII.

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII.

¹⁸ Locke distinguishes the state of nature, which he describes as “[m]en living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them,” and the state of war, which he considers to be one of “force, or a declared design of force, upon the person of another, where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief” (Locke, *Second Treaties of Government*, Chapter III, Section 19). However, he nonetheless avers, “[t]o avoid this state of war ... is one great reason of men’s putting themselves into society, and quitting the state of nature” (Locke, *Second Treaties of Government*, Chapter III, Section 21; see also Chapter IX, Sections 124–127). Kant, in a similar vein, declares that “the state of nature need not, just because it is natural, be a state of *injustice (iniustus)*, of dealing with one another only in terms of the degree of force each has. But it would still be a state *devoid of justice (status iniustia vacuus)*, in which when rights are *in dispute (ius controversum)*, there would be no judge competent to render a verdict having rightful force” [emphasis in original] (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:312).

¹⁹ Green, *Statehood as Political Community*, Chapter 1.

²⁰ There is some ambiguity in Locke, who seemed to care that at least some people have been, or remain within, the state of nature as a matter of historical fact, see Locke, *Second Treaties of Government*, Chapter II, Section 14. However, these passages appear less problematic when the state of nature is interpreted as Simmons suggests: that is, not (or at least not always) as a geographical space or temporal period but as a normative relation between two or more individuals who have not consented to the rule of the same government (see Simmons, *On the Edge of Anarchy*, 11–37).

²¹ For a contemporary example, see Renzo, “State Legitimacy and Self-Defence,” 580, 582–586.

basic insight—that a state of perpetual war is worse than even the most oppressive state—looms large within the early stages of that intellectual tradition. Indeed, Locke’s overriding contribution to liberal philosophy might be his articulation of the dangers posed by authoritarian governments *in addition to* those arising from anarchy.²² Similarly, Kant, although he did not mandate anything like contemporary democratic representation, nonetheless emphasised the importance of separating legislative and executive authority.²³ Early liberal philosophy, as such, positioned itself between a dystopian Scylla and Charybdis: between the snapping heads of despotism, on the one hand, and the vortex of anarchy, on the other.

United as they were by these basic concerns, Locke, Kant, and other early liberals nonetheless diverged on the institutions that should result from the social contract. For instance, Locke contended that power could sensibly be divided, even between different legislative institutions.²⁴ By contrast, Kant averred that, even though legislative and executive power should be separated, the notion that a legislative might *actively* oppose its executive is ‘an absurdity’, in the sense of being a logical impossibility.²⁵ Notwithstanding such differences, all three philosophers converged on a common theme, which is central to the critique adopted in this paper. Whether advocating a Hobbesian leviathan, a Lockean limited government, or a Kantian republic, each placed considerable trust in the power of appropriate institutions to forestall the dangers posed by human frailty. Within these theoretical frameworks, humanity itself – on both an individual and collective basis – is conceived as a problem to be overcome.

3. The Mundanity of the Ideal: Rawls, Nozick, and Dworkin

Within more contemporary liberal philosophy, the argumentative emphasis noted above is reversed. Rather than focusing upon the perceived threat that humans pose to each other and converging upon some version of the (liberal constitutional) state as a solution, contemporary liberal philosophers characteristically begin by enquiring as to the proper arrangement of society and only then, by way of negative argument, consider whether human frailties pose any serious difficulties for social justice, so conceived.²⁶ Their major disagreements have typically concerned distributive matters: how and upon what basis should our wealth, resources, or welfare be apportioned, such that we each get our just share.²⁷ Conspicuously absent from this discourse has been serious divergence over liberal institutional structures, which are characteristically endorsed along traditional lines.²⁸ There is a certain mundanity, then, to contemporary liberal imagination when it comes to institutional matters.

Interestingly, this mundanity is characteristically accompanied by idealisation, which presents itself in two ways. First, philosophers such as Rawls, Nozick, and Dworkin, whose work I canvass here, proceed by constructing idealised accounts of the individual, which, unlike the imaginings of Hobbes, Locke, or Kant, often disclose (or so I shall argue) a sort of imagined utopia. Second, having used these utopian hypotheticals to elicit general principles of justice, they then place considerable faith in the capacity of traditional liberal institutions to promote and secure the idealised social arrangements they prefer, notwithstanding the ‘human element’ that threatens these imagined ideals. Taken together, these two modes of idealisation – one theoretical, the other institutional – produces an ‘apotheosis of the now’ within liberal philosophy, akin to Francis Fukuyama’s (now heavily caveated) claim that Western democracy represents the ‘final form of human government’.²⁹

3.1. Utopian Hypotheticals

These devices are, of course, not a discretely liberal technique, however they are widespread within that tradition. In addition to the three authors I discuss here, aspects of them arise, for example, in the early work of Jürgen Habermas and that of Thomas Scanlon.³⁰ Most obviously, however, utopian hypotheticals appear in Rawls, under the guise of his ‘original position’.³¹ Rawls constructs this heuristic device, together with his famous ‘veil of ignorance’,³² as a means to deduce general principles of justice

²² Locke, *Second Treaties of Government*, Chapter III, Section 21; Chapter XI, Sections 135–138; and, generally, Chapters XII and XIII.

²³ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:217; Kant, “Toward Perpetual Peace,” 8:352–353; 27:1384.

²⁴ Locke, *Second Treaties of Government*, Chapter XII, Section 143.

²⁵ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:319–322.

²⁶ For example, Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 347–350; Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 297–306 (as contrasted with Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 307–320). See also the difference in argumentative style (and substance) within Parts I and II of Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*.

²⁷ Indicative, if now somewhat dated, summaries can be found in Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 13–30, and Cohen, “Equality of What?”

²⁸ Dworkin’s arguments against communitarianism are reasonably indicative, see Dworkin, “Liberal Community.”

²⁹ Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man*, xi; cf. Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, vii.

³⁰ Habermas, “Wahrheitstheorien,” 211–265; Habermas, *Pragmatics of Social Interaction*; Scanlon, *What We Owe Each Other*, 22–25; 84–85.

³¹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 15–19.

³² Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 118–123.

from particular premises about the human condition.³³ It is within these premises, adopted in response to what he calls ‘the circumstances of justice’, that utopia emerges.

The circumstances of justice are, to quote Rawls, ‘the normal conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary’.³⁴ They include relative scarcity of resources, individuals with conflicting plans of life and conceptions of the good, a relative similarity amongst those individuals *vis-à-vis* levels of physical and mental ability, and a consequent need to settle upon some sort of mutually convenient social ordering.³⁵ This is all, I think, relatively plausible, especially since Rawls includes reference to the physical vulnerability of individual humans, and also to their cognitive biases and limitations.³⁶ Utopia nonetheless enters, I believe, when Rawls begins to characterise further the individuals who find themselves under the veil of ignorance in the original position. These individuals are rational in the sense traditionally used within social theory,³⁷ which itself invokes an idealised form of human reasoning (insofar as no *real* humans reason predominantly in this manner).³⁸ Even more starkly, Rawls eliminates the variable of envy and imbues these individuals with an inherent sense of justice, which guarantees their ongoing compliance with the principles generated in the original position.³⁹ We are left with a utopian deliberative community that would not be out of place on Star Trek’s planet Vulcan.⁴⁰

To be clear, I raise no objection to these methodological choices as means for identifying principles of justice *in the abstract*. What concerns me instead is that their utopian elements bleed over into how Rawls conceives of *real* politics.⁴¹ Within his *Political Liberalism*, Rawls conceives of the ‘reasonable citizen’ as willing to propose and comply with mutually acceptable principles, assuming that others will do so. They will also honour these principles, even if it means sacrificing their own immediate or long-term interests.⁴² Admittedly, this conception of the citizen is primarily designed to illuminate a particular conception of legitimacy and is not primarily descriptive.⁴³ Nonetheless, Rawls clearly believes that contemporary citizens can and do embody reasonableness of this kind.⁴⁴ Indeed, he surely *must* believe this, otherwise his entire project would seem unmotivated. Now, although I do not think that we should be pessimistic about human ethical *potential*, even a casual glance at contemporary Western politics makes it difficult to understand Rawls as anything other than utopian in this respect.

This idealisation of the citizen as a quiet invocation of (and so reliance upon) ethical utopia also appears in Dworkin. The participants within Dworkin’s imagined desert island auction already accept ‘the principle that no one is antecedently entitled to any of these resources [that this, those on the desert island], but that they shall instead be divided equally among them.’⁴⁵ Dworkin’s participants are, in other words, already committed egalitarians. Again, this premise is entirely supportable in theoretical terms, given Dworkin’s stated goal of divining the concrete requirements of equality.⁴⁶ It is, however, even further along the road towards a utopian view, both of humanity and of the most fundamental circumstances of political organisation, than the set of assumptions presented by Rawls.

Nozick’s use of utopian hypotheticals may seem to be somewhat different, given that his assumptions about both human reasoning and motivation are apparently more minimal.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, we can detect a similar ‘utopian bleed’ within his writing. In the third part of his most famous work, Nozick advances both a hypothetical model and a theoretical framework designed to demonstrate that a minimal (that is, libertarian) state is ‘inspiring’.⁴⁸ The model, which imagines conditions under which each of us might create our own perfect worlds, is explicitly utopian.⁴⁹ The framework, by contrast, is designed to map the most salient features of the model onto a set of constraints closer to that experienced within our own world.⁵⁰ It is conceived as a practically realisable second-best *vis-à-vis* the model and, institutionally speaking, something approximating a minimal

³³ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 19.

³⁴ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 109.

³⁵ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 109–110.

³⁶ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 109–110.

³⁷ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 123–124.

³⁸ For a critique of similar assumptions as they function within mainstream economic theory, see Fine, “Useless but True,” 8–22.

³⁹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 124–126.

⁴⁰ Sutherland, “Yesteryear.” Rawls himself comes close to acknowledging this at times, see Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 124, 464–465.

⁴¹ See also Waldron, *Law and Disagreement*, 149–162.

⁴² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xlv; 107–108.

⁴³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 108.

⁴⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 194–195, 389–393.

⁴⁵ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 66–67.

⁴⁶ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 73.

⁴⁷ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 309–310.

⁴⁸ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 297.

⁴⁹ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 308.

⁵⁰ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 309–317.

state insofar as it constitutes an enforced peace containing several voluntary communities (and other associations).⁵¹ These communities vie for members by aiming to make themselves more attractive, while each individual, under the protection offered by the framework, is free to pick and choose within what is, in effect, a free market of associations.⁵²

This move – from model to framework – is where Nozick’s utopian assumptions emerge. He assumes that we (that is, contemporary individuals) are capable of acting rationally within a free market to settle upon accurate and stable satisfactions of our own preferences.⁵³ However, this thesis about our supposed rationality (or, more accurately, this conception of rationality itself) is highly questionable.⁵⁴ Indicatively, the only recorded instance of something like Nozickian libertarianism attempted within the continental United States has been plagued by disaster (and, somewhat amusingly, bears).⁵⁵ We see, therefore, analogous utopianism in Nozick as that which I noted within Rawls and Dworkin, betraying an overall trend towards idealising the individual *as an actual and concrete subject of politics*. Crucially, this idealisation plays a discrete role within all three arguments. Rather than constituting a first-order ethical argument about how private individuals *qua* citizens should behave, this theoretical utopianism is inserted to backstop the endorsement of a preferred institutional arrangement or theory of justice. It is designed, in other words, to demonstrate not *desirability* but *plausibility*.

3.2. Mundane Institutional Utopianism

Characteristically, once liberal philosophers have settled upon general principles of justice, they display extraordinary complacency when it comes to liberal constitutional structures. Crucially, this move takes place notwithstanding the fact that, as argued above, the aforementioned general principles are constructed with a utopian, and therefore wholly *counterfactual*, understanding of private individuals as political subjects. Unlike their forebears, such as Hobbes, Locke, or Kant, such philosophers at no point construct *non*-idealised characterisations of humanity. Contemporary liberal institutions, as such, bear a heavy burden in terms of securing justice, so conceived. Nowhere is this institutional complacency more explicit than on the part of Dworkin, who avers:

The economic markets of many countries can be interpreted, even as they stand, as forms of auctions. (So, too, can many forms of democratic political process.) Once we have developed a satisfactory model of an actual auction (to the extent we can) we can use that model to test these institutions, and reform them to bring them closer to the model.⁵⁶

It should go without saying that contemporary democracy is really *nothing* like an auction. Indeed, Dworkin abandons the analogy when claiming that ‘the best form of democracy is whatever form is most likely to produce the substantive decisions and results that treat all members of the community with equal concern’.⁵⁷ That argument instead turns upon his more plausible claim that inequalities of resources are unjust, not only as such, but also because they contribute to unjustifiable inequalities of political influence.⁵⁸ Given this point, it is particularly striking the extent to which Dworkin’s proposed democratic blueprint tracks the liberal constitutional structure of the contemporary United States.⁵⁹ In fact, his idealised democracy seems to be little more than an economically utopian United States, in which dramatic inequalities of resources do not exist.⁶⁰ How, precisely, America is supposed to get to ‘there’ from ‘here’, is left unanswered.⁶¹

A similar lack of institutional imagination can be found in both Rawls and Nozick. Rawls avers that his preferred theory of justice mandates either a property-owning democracy or liberal (democratic) socialism.⁶² He stipulates some reasonably tame conditions upon free and fair elections, such as the provision of public funds, restrictions on campaign contributions, and

⁵¹ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 308–309, 329–334.

⁵² Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 311–317.

⁵³ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 312, 326–331.

⁵⁴ Keen, *Debunking Economics*, 67–73.

⁵⁵ See, generally, Hongoltz-Hetling, *A Libertarian Walks Into a Bear*. (For those desiring the punchline to this particular anecdote, the town in question – Grafton, New Hampshire – became host to so many committed libertarians, each determined to live without public resource management, including public *waste* management, that the local bear population took matters into their own paws. The absence of adequate publicly funded law enforcement or animal control exacerbated this problem, to predictably chaotic results.)

⁵⁶ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 72.

⁵⁷ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 186.

⁵⁸ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 195–197.

⁵⁹ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 200–209.

⁶⁰ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 351, 364.

⁶¹ The closest Dworkin comes to answering is his argument that *Buckley v Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976) and its dependent lines of precedent should be overruled (Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 351–385). In particular, the “[f]amiliar proposals for reform” he considers appear wholly anaemic vis-à-vis the more radical goal of resource equality (Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 355–356).

⁶² Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 137–140.

substantially equal private access to a free media.⁶³ Rawls, it must be admitted, goes further than Dworkin on social matters, requiring, for example, that society be an employer of last resort and that basic healthcare be provided free for all citizens.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, however radical these prescriptions may be *vis-à-vis* contemporary anglophone democracies, Rawls makes it clear that they are 'lexically inferior' to the more traditional liberal principles of equality of opportunity and his (quite typical) list of basic political and civil liberties.⁶⁵ In so doing, he makes it an article of faith that traditional liberal arrangements pose no real threat to his more radical social ideals.

Nozick, if anything, is more radical still, albeit in the other direction. His conception of the state is, as we have seen, thoroughly libertarian. In this connection, he places considerable trust in the 'invisible hand' of market forces to resolve issues of justice,⁶⁶ taking an extremely hard line, even against moderate non-voluntary economic redistribution.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, despite these marked differences between Nozick and the other two philosophers considered here, his libertarianism and their liberalism converge on the importance of individual rights.⁶⁸

It may strike some readers as low-hanging fruit to emphasise such similarities. After all, a commitment to liberal institutional structures is, definitionally speaking, the *sine qua non* of liberal philosophy. That is, as far as it goes, correct. However, we should not be too swift to dismiss the observation as *unhelpfully* tautologous. Consider that, notwithstanding their considerable divergence on distributive matters, all three philosophers considered here share remarkably similar conceptions of the concrete institutional forms that liberal democracy must take. This in itself evinces the narrow scope of the liberal institutional imagination: a limitation, perhaps, that prevents them (and us) from 'seeing' liberal values in non-traditional institutional structures.⁶⁹

4. From Humanity to Institutions: The Arendtian Diagnosis

The remarkable faith that liberal philosophers place in traditional institutional arrangements, together with their idealisation of private individuals as political agents, requires explanation. In this section, I argue that Arendt's diagnosis of the Western tradition of political thought contains precisely the resources required. In brief, Arendt contends that Western philosophy as such has characteristically sought to eliminate humanity from politics and so, paradoxically, to render politics apolitical.⁷⁰

We can see this, I believe, not only in early liberal attempts to conceptualise the state as an institutional response to the state of nature but also in more contemporary liberal idealism. Both approaches to humanity are homogenising, whether they proceed by reducing us to our frailties, as in Hobbes, or by idealising our rationality and reasonableness, as in Rawls. Treating people, who are necessarily pluralistic, as reducible in nature to any one set of abstractions is to set oneself against the basic observation, 'that men, and not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world'.⁷¹ Moreover, by either emphasising or assuming the transformative power of liberal institutions, such philosophy seeks to provide blueprints for 'an administrative machine, [which] resolves political conflicts bureaucratically'.⁷² As Arendt explains in relation to our contemporary predispositions:

Underlying our prejudices against politics today are hope and fear: the fear that humanity could destroy itself through politics and through the means of force now at its disposal, and, linked with this fear, the hope that humanity will come to its senses and rid the world, not of humankind, but of politics.⁷³

This fear and hope are evident in the arguments of Hobbes, Locke, and Kant, and can also be found, arguably, within Nozick. Moreover, an extreme internalisation of hope *vis-à-vis* the end of politics and the triumph of liberal bureaucratic order can be located within both Rawls and Dworkin. It is striking, perhaps, that the more the liberal tradition develops, the less 'human' it

⁶³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lvii, 356–362.

⁶⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lix; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 307–350. In terms of pure economic justice, the implications of the Rawlsian difference principle (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 65–73, 252–253), and even of the Dworkinian auction, have radical distributive potential. These are, of course, a kind of utopian prescription, albeit one to which I offer no objections.

⁶⁵ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 53–54, 72, 130–131, 265–267.

⁶⁶ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 18–22, 118–119.

⁶⁷ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 149–231.

⁶⁸ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix, 33–35.

⁶⁹ A brief survey of the broader literature supports this. See, for example and in general, Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State*; Beitz, *Political Equality*; Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination*; Christiano, *Constitution of Equality*; Raz, *Morality of Freedom*; Waldron, *Law and Disagreement*.

⁷⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 107.

⁷¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7.

⁷² Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 97.

⁷³ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 97.

becomes. Although the early writers canvassed here invoked state institutions as a solution to the problem posed by human frailty, they at least placed the latter front and centre within their arguments. Conversely, as we have seen, more contemporary writers treat the messy complexity of humanity as more of an afterthought: something to be dealt with through *negative* argumentation, once justice has been ascertained via utopian abstractions.

Arendt herself traces these dispositions within Western philosophy back to Plato.⁷⁴ Moreover, as the following section will show, both hope and fear play an important narrative function within popular dystopian science fiction. Western culture, we might suggest, is caught perpetually in between these two emotions. What distinguishes liberalism, or so I contend, is the apparent totality of its ‘institutional turn’ as a response to this problem. The individual is abstracted, essentialised, and therefore *dehumanised*, while the state becomes ‘the new idol’, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase, within which all hope is invested.⁷⁵ As I shall suggest in what remains of this paper, this liberal leap of faith is not only made in error but is also quite dangerous.

5. Dystopia and Downfall in Popular Science Fiction

Unlike contemporary liberal political philosophy, popular dystopian science fiction emphasises the causal importance of individual people, acting both alone and in concert. In this section, I demonstrate the centrality of human frailty within these fictional accounts of dystopia and downfall, focusing upon three case studies to illustrate my point. As mentioned above, these are: the Star Wars franchise of (amongst other things) movies, books, television shows, and video games; the Star Trek franchise of movies and television shows; and the Warhammer 40,000 franchise of tabletop wargames, video games, books, and television shows. Each fictional universe contains several decades’ worth of narrative and world-building ‘lore’, developed by a wide range of authors. They are also, at least *vis-à-vis* science fiction, very close to the mainstream of Western popular culture. As such, each represents a valuable heuristic device through which the dystopian preoccupations of Western culture can be assessed. Themes of human frailty loom large in each, with particular emphasis placed upon the potency of hatred and fear as causal agents of downfall and dystopia. Moreover, where hope arises within these narratives, it characteristically attaches to collective or individual action, rather than to institutional design.

Two brief points of clarification. First, one can assume that the science fiction authors, directors, and so on, who I cite were motivated by a desire to entertain, rather than to offer accurate political commentary. However, given that successful fiction turns, to some extent at least, upon verisimilitude, it behoves us to take such narratives seriously.⁷⁶ Second, and connectedly, although I present their emphasis upon political ethics as the diametric opposite of the institutional preoccupation within liberal philosophy, I do not seek to adduce the former as any kind of *evidence* for my substantive arguments (for this, see Section 6). Instead, I aim to show that a belief in the causal potency of private individuals lives within our popular imaginary and, to that extent, liberal philosophy is at odds with our collective self-understanding.

5.1. Conflict, Politics and Metaphysics in Star Wars

Let us begin with Star Wars, which commenced with *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.⁷⁷ In that setting, the evil Galactic Empire is opposed by the heroic Rebel Alliance, in what might be most accurately described as a science fantasy alternate history, famously set ‘[a] long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away’.⁷⁸ The Rebels eventually triumph over the Empire in *Star Wars: Episode VI – The Return of the Jedi*, due in large part to the efforts of Luke Skywalker, the eponymous Jedi Knight.⁷⁹ It is through the efforts of Luke, and his reformed father, Darth Vader (once named Anakin Skywalker), that Emperor Sheev Palpatine is defeated.⁸⁰ Although this moment invokes themes germane to my current argument, I shall instead focus on how Palpatine rose to power.

Through his machinations in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, the erstwhile Senator Palpatine was elected Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic, a pre-Empire alliance of planets that operated via constitutional democracy.⁸¹ Throughout *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*,⁸² and *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*,⁸³ Palpatine conspired to create

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 6; Arendt, *Human Condition*, 222.

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, First Part, Chapter 11.

⁷⁶ Travis, “Making Space,” 241, 250–251.

⁷⁷ Lucas, *New Hope*.

⁷⁸ Lucas, *New Hope*.

⁷⁹ Lucas, *Return of the Jedi*.

⁸⁰ Lucas, *Return of the Jedi*.

⁸¹ Lucas, *Phantom Menace*.

⁸² Lucas, *Attack of the Clones*.

⁸³ Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*.

an existential threat in the shape of the separatist Confederacy of Independent Systems.⁸⁴ Fear of the Confederacy was leveraged by Palpatine to achieve greater executive power.⁸⁵ The eventual rise of the Galactic Empire occurred when this fear, as harnessed by Palpatine, turned inwards. He orchestrated for the Jedi Order, apolitical ‘guardians of peace and justice within the galaxy’,⁸⁶ to be implicated in an alleged plot to assassinate him and seize control of the Republic by force. In response, Palpatine eliminated the Jedi and proposed that, ‘to ensure security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire! For a safe and secure society!’⁸⁷ This move was met, seemingly, with overwhelming public support, resulting in the observation that, ‘this is how liberty dies: with thunderous applause’.⁸⁸

There are several points to observe here. First, although the Galactic Republic possessed many hallmarks of a liberal constitutional order, including a separation of powers, democratic elections, and the rule of law,⁸⁹ those institutions are presented as impotent to prevent the rise of Palpatine.⁹⁰ Second, it is human frailty that causes the Republic to fall.⁹¹ Fear plays a central role in Palpatine’s machinations, as does his personal charisma, and the emotional vulnerability of characters like Anakin Skywalker.⁹² Third, the causal potency of emotion has metaphysical (and therefore powerfully metaphorical) underpinnings within Star Wars.⁹³ Palpatine is an adept manipulator of the mystical ‘energy field created by all living things’,⁹⁴ which grants him considerable physical and magical power. Unlike the Jedi, whose connection to this ‘Force’ comes via inner peace,⁹⁵ Palpatine draws his strength from the emotions of fear, anger, and hatred.⁹⁶ The Emperor, in other words, is *personally* empowered by the same feelings he utilises within politics. This lends a feeling of inevitability to the downfall of both Anakin Skywalker, who Palpatine manipulates, and the Republic itself.

Finally, it is worth noting that the death of Palpatine, and of his Empire, comes through two powerfully Arendtian moments at the end of the sequel trilogy, in *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker*.⁹⁷ At the same time that the Resistance (previously the New Republic and the Rebel Alliance) are being outmatch by the navy of Palpatine’s Final Order, the Jedi Knight Rey Skywalker is similarly outmatched by Palpatine on the planet below.⁹⁸ Ultimately, it is only through spontaneous collective action that the day is won. First, the Resistance navy receive unexpected and overwhelming support from a fleet of civilian star ships, causing one memorable exchange between Final Order officers:

General Pryde. Where did they get all these fighter craft? They have no navy.
Admiral Griss. It’s not a navy sir. It’s just...people.⁹⁹

Second, and moments after this Arendtian depiction of power, in the sense of collective action,¹⁰⁰ triumphing over state violence,¹⁰¹ Rey delivers the killing blow to Palpatine. Notably, it is not her own Force potency that enables this but, as she puts it, the gestalt fact that ‘[she is] all the Jedi’.¹⁰² Within the Star Wars universe, then, on both a political and metaphysical level, it is the willingness of people to act in concert that not only precipitates downfall but also provides hope.¹⁰³ Liberal visions of a static and dehumanised politics are notably absent.

⁸⁴ Lucas, *Attack of the Clones*.

⁸⁵ Lucas, *Attack of the Clones*; Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*.

⁸⁶ Lucas, *New Hope*.

⁸⁷ Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*.

⁸⁸ Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*.

⁸⁹ Lucas, *Phantom Menace*; “Databank: ‘Galactic Republic’”; Luceno, Tarkin.

⁹⁰ Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*. For an analysis of institutional weakness within the Galactic Republic and what this can teach us about contemporary constitutional design, see Casey, “How Liberty Dies.”

⁹¹ Cf. Machaj, *Rise and Fall of the First Galactic Empire*, 38–47.

⁹² Casey, “How Liberty Dies.”

⁹³ Peters, *Theological Jurisprudence of Speculative Cinema*, 77–83.

⁹⁴ Lucas, *New Hope*. For an analysis of “the Force” as a “telling instance” vis-à-vis liberal legal orders, see Peters, “‘The Force’ as Law.”

⁹⁵ Lucas, *Return of the Jedi*; Lucas, *Phantom Menace*.

⁹⁶ Lucas, *Phantom Menace*; Lucas, *Revenge of the Sith*.

⁹⁷ Abrams, *Rise of Skywalker*.

⁹⁸ Abrams, *Rise of Skywalker*.

⁹⁹ Abrams, *Rise of Skywalker*.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*, 53–55. See also Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, I.IV.1; Loughlin, *Idea of Public Law*, 81–83.

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting, perhaps, that the emotional impact comes not from military might of the civilian space craft but from the mere depiction of their presence: from the power (and so, the human potential) that they represent. This is given voice by the character Poe Dameron, who exclaims, merely, “Look at this. Look at *this*.” [emphasis in original] (Abrams, *Rise of Skywalker*). It is a rare moment that requires no exegesis: the sight speaks for itself.

¹⁰² Abrams, *Rise of Skywalker*.

¹⁰³ Peters, *Theological Jurisprudence of Speculative Cinema*, 114–118.

5.2. Personal Principle and Institutional Irrelevance in *Star Trek*

My choice of *Star Trek* for a study of dystopia might seem odd, given that the imagined future of the United Federation of Planets is probably as close to a genuine utopia as one can find within popular science fiction. The Federation itself is difficult to classify in institutional terms, however it exhibits features of liberal constitutionalism, federal democracy, and economic communism. We are told, by Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Starfleet (the Federation's quasi-military and exploratory organisation) that "[t]he acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. We work to better ourselves and the rest of humanity".¹⁰⁴ The Federation possesses at least one constitutional text,¹⁰⁵ several charters of basic rights,¹⁰⁶ a uniform judicial code,¹⁰⁷ and a codified set of civil and criminal laws.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps inevitably, the legal order of the contemporary United States served as inspiration for these institutional features, if not for the Federation's economic framework.¹⁰⁹ Within the narrative chronology up until the 1996 movie *Star Trek: First Contact*, the Federation seems to be faring extremely well in political and constitutional terms, albeit not without some contentious moments *vis-à-vis* individual rights along the way.¹¹⁰

Nonetheless, within the movie *Star Trek: Insurrection*,¹¹¹ and the more recent television show *Star Trek: Picard*, we begin to see strong themes of downfall emerging, which render the Federation, if not quite dystopian, at least perilously close to that condition. In these narrative entries, an increasingly embattled Federation is overcome with xenophobia against, for example, the diasporic remnants of the Romulan Star Empire and, for the most part, virtually all synthetic lifeforms.¹¹² This ethical shift is most evident in relation to the altered social position of Picard himself, who has transformed from a paragon of Starfleet into an embittered outsider. In the series *Picard*, the eponymous Captain has resigned his commission, following Starfleet's failure to provide either relief or asylum to the Romulan diaspora, after the destruction of their home world.¹¹³

In institutional terms, it is difficult to see what (if anything) has changed within the Federation. The darker tone of more recent material within *Star Trek* canon seems precipitated, once again, by the causal potency of human frailty. The citizens of the Federation have become both xenophobic and more aggressive through fear of outside threats, such as the alien superpowers of the Dominion or the Borg,¹¹⁴ and through paranoia about their internal subversion by sophisticated and unpredictable artificial intelligences.¹¹⁵ Neither their technology, nor their entrenched institutional protections, seem capable of forestalling this change. Indeed, the latter are conspicuously absent from the narrative, almost altogether. Picard himself proclaims that his retirement was in fact from an organisation that 'was no longer Starfleet',¹¹⁶ however we are not led to believe that this loss of institutional identity arose from any formal change to Starfleet's basic structure or constitutive norms.

Hope within both *Insurrection* and *Picard* comes wholly from the actions of individuals and small groups of people, who stay true to the basic principles of the Federation, notwithstanding the abandonment of those ideals by others.¹¹⁷ Ethics, in other words, and not (liberal) constitutional design, sits at the centre of the narrative. Interestingly, however, the dramatic shift in tone that *Star Trek* has recently undergone is not wholly unprecipitated. Characters prepared to compromise their principles, including several in high office, are present throughout even the relatively utopian *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, such individuals were characteristically portrayed as a minority, with humanity as a whole being beyond such things. Indeed, the possibility of our collective ethical evolution is arguably the central theme of that series, taken as a whole.¹¹⁹ Not so in *Star Trek: Picard*. The situation there is almost completely reversed, which underlines once more the importance, not

¹⁰⁴ Frakes, *First Contact*.

¹⁰⁵ Frakes, "Drumhead"; Scheerer "Outcast"; Kroeker, "Zero Hour"; Kroeker, "These are the Voyages"

¹⁰⁶ Daniels, "Court Martial"; Conway, "The 37s."

¹⁰⁷ Livingston, "Marquis, Part I"; Allen "Marquis, Part II."

¹⁰⁸ Bruno, "Tinker Tenor Doctor Spy."

¹⁰⁹ Joseph, "Law of the Federation."

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Scheerer "Measure of a Man." For a classic analysis of the relationship between the legal and the social in *Star Trek* and what this can teach us about contemporary law, see Joseph, "Law of the Federation."

¹¹¹ Frakes, *Insurrection*.

¹¹² Culpepper, "Remembrance."

¹¹³ Culpepper, "Remembrance."

¹¹⁴ Frakes, *Insurrection*.

¹¹⁵ Culpepper, "Remembrance."

¹¹⁶ Culpepper, "Remembrance"; Vrvilo, "Broken Pieces."

¹¹⁷ On the theme of hope in *Picard*, and in particular on its darker side, see, generally, Tranter, "Legalities of the Present." Cognately, the theme song of *Star Trek: Enterprise* ("Where My Heart Will Take Me" [2002], written by Diane Warren and performed by Russell Watson), employs ethically charged language, such as "faith of the heart" and "strength of the soul." The technological evolution of humankind and its will to knowledge, depicted in the title sequence, is thereby attached to their ethical resilience.

¹¹⁸ Consider, for example, Admiral Cartwright in Meyer, *Undiscovered Country*.

¹¹⁹ Allen, "Encounter at Far Point"; Kolbe, "All Good Things."

just of ethics, but of *political* ethics, in the sense of widespread and deeply embedded convictions within an entire (national, global, or galactic) population.

5.3. *The Grim Darkness of Warhammer 40,000*

Dystopia is perhaps nowhere so uncompromisingly depicted as within Games Workshop's fictional Imperium of Man. Spanning the entire galaxy, the Imperium takes the form of a massive ecclesiastical bureaucracy, complete with its own Inquisition and an all but invisible aristocratic class that rules from Earth (or 'Ancient Terra').¹²⁰ At the nominal head of the Imperium is the God Emperor of Mankind, who is little more than a withered corpse, plugged into a life support machine called the Golden Throne.¹²¹ In addition to being authoritarian to the point of caricature, the Imperium is also embattled upon all fronts, fighting for survival against innumerable alien species from both within the Milky Way and beyond.¹²² It is characterised by the absolute expendability of individual human life,¹²³ the religious extremism of the Imperial Cult, and a hyper-xenophobia that reviles not only all alien life but also any human mutations.¹²⁴

This bleak vision of our future is interestingly complicated in two ways. First, the Emperor of Mankind, although worshipped by his subjects as a living god, was instrumental in his own downfall. Without going too deeply into Warhammer 40,000's very complex fictional history, the Emperor was originally close to being a physically perfect human: immensely intelligent, superhumanly strong, and functionally immortal.¹²⁵ He created a number of genetically engineered children in his own image to safeguard mankind, one of whom betrayed him and caused the injuries that left him imprisoned within the Golden Throne.¹²⁶ Within this tale, we can detect an intense fear of humanity itself: that even the most perfect of us might cause our own destruction, in this case, through hubris.

Second, this picture is underlined by the fact that within the Warhammer 40,000 universe, the most intractable foes of humanity are beings of our own collective creation. These extra-dimensional aliens (or 'daemons') are creatures birthed from the collective psychic energy of both mankind and of the galaxy's non-human species.¹²⁷ They form within a parallel dimension called 'the Warp', which, paradoxically, is indispensable for the survival of mankind, since it alone facilitates faster-than-light travel.¹²⁸ Importantly, these daemonic 'Forces of Chaos', when manifested within our universe, take on the guise of our greatest collective sins, such as our desire for war, violence and conquest, our obsessive fear of death and decay, or our unrestricted pursuit of transient pleasures.¹²⁹ There are strong religious overtones here, of course, as well as political satire. Nonetheless, the strongest theme is that humanity – or, more specifically, human frailty – is, causally speaking, the most potent dystopian agent.¹³⁰ Moreover, the Imperium is doomed to eternal war because, on the account of humanity provided within Warhammer 40,000, mankind is simply built that way.¹³¹

6. From Institutions to Humanity: Towards an Ethical Turn

The themes just canvassed—the causal potency of human frailty, the relative impotence of our institutional arrangements, and the resulting importance of political ethics—are ones to which contemporary liberal political philosophy should pay greater attention. Political ethics, as I stated in the Introduction, is defined here as the matter of how individual citizens should comport themselves politically, not just in extreme situations but in general. This has been sadly neglected within the liberal tradition

¹²⁰ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 16–23, 27–28, 31–34.

¹²¹ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 24–26.

¹²² Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 35–39.

¹²³ Abnett, Ravenor.

¹²⁴ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book; see also, Abnett, Xenos; Abnett, Malleus; Abnett, Hereticus.

¹²⁵ Dembski-Bowden, Master of Mankind.

¹²⁶ Dembski-Bowden, Master of Mankind; Warhammer 40,000, 24–26.

¹²⁷ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 36–39, 60–63.

¹²⁸ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 19.

¹²⁹ Warhammer 40,000 Core Book, 36–39, 60–63.

¹³⁰ Humanity's greatest hope within this fictional universe, the genetically augmented Adeptus Astartes, are not only explicitly *transhuman* but also introduced (by the Emperor) in the following terms: "They are my bulwark against *the Terror*. They are the Defenders of Humanity. They are my Space Marines and *they shall know no fear* [emphasis added]." (Cox, "And They Shall Know No Fear"; Relic Entertainment, Dawn of War). Also note the invocation of superhuman incorruptibility by Brother Proteus of the Ultramarines: "Everything has a purpose. The Emperor ordains it so. *You may corrupt the souls of men, but I am steel*. I am doom. I march for Macragge, and *I know no fear!* [emphasis added]" (Pick, Ultramarines). These are, of course, dehumanising themes. Nonetheless, they emphasise the importance of ethics: in this case, the virtue of courage. This is illuminating because courage is not only an archetypal martial virtue but also a political one, see Plato, "Laches," 191d.

¹³¹ Abnett, Ravenor; cf. Moser, "Hope as the Main Driving Force of Humanity in the Grimdark Universe of Warhammer 40,000."

even though, as the previous section suggests, it features prominently within the Western popular imaginary. Early liberal philosophers, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Kant, acknowledged at least the importance of human frailty, however they placed too much emphasis upon institutional solutions. More contemporary philosophers, such as Rawls, Nozick, and Dworkin, have gone even further down this road, idealising liberal constitutional orders as constitutive of social justice, to the almost total exclusion of prescriptive political ethics.

In this section, I argue the themes I identified within popular dystopian science fiction mirror the recent rise of populist political movements within the West. Populism thrives, at least in large part, due to the weaponisation of emotions such as fear, anger, and hate. Moreover, populism is resilient to the liberal institutional frameworks intended to constrain such human frailty. Finally, it trades upon a deeply problematic political ethics, for which liberalism in its examined iterations has no answer. We must, I conclude, look outwith liberalism for philosophical resources that can empower us to reimagine political ethics within the liberal tradition. Many of these resources are beginning to gain traction within liberal philosophical discourse. Nonetheless, I argue that more must be done to invoke them, as a matter of urgency.

6.1. *Populism and Human Frailty*

During the 2019 Carnevale di Viareggio in Tuscany, a 65-foot-high carnival float of the then United States president Donald Trump, styled in the golden armour of Warhammer 40,000's Emperor of Mankind, was paraded before a crowd of some 600,000 onlookers.¹³² In that grand satirical spectacle, Trump and the Emperor were presented as an amalgamated personification of populism, which, following Nicola Lacey, I define in the following terms:

... a highly moralized approach to politics that pitches the homogenous "we the people", often conceived in ethnic or national terms, embodied in a leader who speaks for and expresses the will of that undifferentiated collectivity against a presumptively "corrupt" – hence the tendency to conspiracy theories in this genre of political discourse – "elite" (as well as against "outsider" minorities of various kinds).¹³³

Lacey notes that populism, so conceived, is 'monistic rather than pluralistic, monarchic rather than diarchic, exclusive rather than inclusive, and with a vertical rather than a horizontal vision of power'.¹³⁴ It presents, therefore, as an existential threat, which 'exploits the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium between majority rule and minority rights'.¹³⁵

Indeed, populism is so antithetical to liberalism, that it might be understood to offer a distinctly liberal vision of our potential downfall towards dystopia.¹³⁶ The Carnevale di Viareggio depiction of Trump was poignant because it located, within a Western head of state, a dystopian potential that had been hitherto confined to the realm of fiction (at least since the end of the Second World War). Like the Emperor, Trump functioned as both saviour and demagogue for his supporters, unifying them as an 'undifferentiated collectivity' set against both the 'corrupt...elite' (analogous, perhaps, to 'the mutant' and 'the heretic' in Warhammer) and the foreign 'outsider' or 'alien'.¹³⁷

Appearing in this guise, populism can be understood as causally downstream from human frailty in a manner that would be all too familiar to traditional liberalism. As Jo Shaw notes, it is occasioned, amongst other things, by the 'scapegoating of those outside the ring of favoured members, importing higher levels of insecurity and new precarities' and the 're-creating of structural inequalities and hierarchies more commonly associated with colonialism'.¹³⁸ In Trump's America, these general trends coalesced as 'a vision of a return to an age of selective citizenship, when citizenship meant being white'.¹³⁹

As Iris Marion Young argues, such normative scaling of others, whether due to their racialised bodies or otherwise, trades upon socially constructed and subconscious aversions.¹⁴⁰ In this way, populism trades upon those emotions that are the least worthy

¹³² Law, "Massive Emperor Trump Float."

¹³³ Lacey, "Populism and the Rule of Law" (2019), 88.

¹³⁴ Lacey, "Populism and the Rule of Law" (2021), 463.

¹³⁵ Mudde, *Populism*, 82.

¹³⁶ This particular fear is best expressed within Mill, "On Liberty," Chapter I, paragraphs 1–5.

¹³⁷ On these themes in Warhammer, see Abnett, Xenos; Abnett, Malleus; Abnett, Hereticus.

¹³⁸ Shaw, *People in Question*, 191.

¹³⁹ Shaw, *People in Question*, 197. For an examination of populism outwith the United States but along similar lines, see Shaw, *People in Question*, 193–196, 199–221; Wróbel, "Populism as an Implementation of National Biopolitics"; Dück, "The Enemy in My House."

¹⁴⁰ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 122–135, 141–147.

within us,¹⁴¹ such as vengeful anger, xenophobic fear, or homophobic and transphobic disgust.¹⁴² This emotional weaponisation, therefore, not only mirrors dystopian fiction but also trades upon the same set of frailties that preoccupied traditional liberals: the irrational, aggressive, and antisocial feelings within us.

6.2. *Liberal Institutional and Ethical Impotence*

In view of the Western resurgence of populism, we should, I contend, now question the faith that many philosophers seem to place in liberal institutional structures. The Rawlsian assertion, for instance, that political liberalism can produce ‘stability for the right reasons’, rings somewhat hollow when faced with the 2021 United States Capitol attack.¹⁴³ Indeed, given everything we know about the social and political roots of populism, liberal institutional arrangements seem particularly ill-suited to dealing with that phenomenon.

In light of this, the liberal reduction of politics to bureaucratic institutionalism speaks, I would argue, to a particular sort of ethical pathology within the state. This pathology, which Arendt identifies first in relation to the political decline of the Ancient Greeks, is expressed by her in the following terms:

Because the commonness of the political world was constituted only by the walls of the city and the boundaries of its laws, it was not seen or experienced in the relationships between the citizens, not in the world which lay *between* them, common to them all, even though opening up differently to each man. [emphasis in original]¹⁴⁴

Arendt describes the resulting ‘agonal spirit’ as poisoning ‘the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred’.¹⁴⁵ Although the position of contemporary Western states is radically different, the comparison is enlightening. They cannot remain stable insofar as they are liberal political communities through nothing more than the constitutional frameworks and legal orders that demarcate them as such. That is not to imply that such things lack value: simply that they are more precarious than they first appear. As Julian Scholtes avers, ‘[c]onstitutionalists must defend public law in political discourse in order to help secure the prerequisites that constitutional democracy needs to survive, but cannot guarantee by its own force. Public law, in this era of political populism, is a discourse. It is not defended in court, it is defended in the streets’.¹⁴⁶

The tragic pathology here is that, as canvassed above, populism *qua* existential threat arises, at least in part, due to xenophobic and other frustrations with liberal legal and political attempts to accommodate plurality. This entails that any liberal *institutional* pushback against such movements is akin to pouring fuel on the fire, being a confirmation of precisely that which was feared. Politics, in the sense of ‘produc[ing] equality by organisation’,¹⁴⁷ is thereby replaced, both within and in relation to the populist movement itself, by the Schmittian ‘political distinction...between friend and enemy’.¹⁴⁸

This transformation discloses a malevolent conception of political ethics, which scarcely deserves to be dignified with that name. The populist not only prioritises those within their preferred (ethnic or national) unit but, crucially, also seeks to exclude all perceived ‘others’ on the basis of the existential threat they supposedly present.¹⁴⁹ In the abstract, the prioritisation of particular groups *might* be justified for a number of reasons.¹⁵⁰ However, when combined with the racist, xenophobic, and other objectionable social hierarchies that characterise populism, no such justifications can meaningfully be posed.¹⁵¹ Moreover, there is virulence to populist politics, as evidenced by the willingness of its proponents both to deny the legitimacy of extant liberal institutional arrangements and to act violently when faced with opposition.¹⁵²

Faced with the malevolence of populism, the limited ethics of liberalism, often recommended by its most famous advocates in passing, appear shockingly anaemic. Rawls, for example, advocates toleration, reasonableness, mutual respect, a sense of

¹⁴¹ On unworthy political emotions, see Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 148–155; Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 71–123, 320–350.

¹⁴² In support of this empirical claim, see Betz, “Emotional Mobilization”; Nguyen, “From Specific Worries to Generalized Anger”; Kinnvall, “Exploring the Populist ‘Mind’ ”; Mayer, “Angry Reactionary Narcissists?”; Rico, “Emotional Underpinnings of Populism.”

¹⁴³ For an instructive non-academic account, see Schiff, *Midnight in Washington*.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ Scholtes, “The Complacency of Legality.” In making this point, Scholtes is drawing substantially upon Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, see Böckenförde, “Die Entstehung Des Staates Als Vorgang Der Säkularisation.”

¹⁴⁷ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301.

¹⁴⁸ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 26.

¹⁴⁹ Loader, “Fall of the ‘Platonic Guardians’,” 578–581.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Ypi, “Associative Duties, Global Justice, and the Colonies”; Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*.

¹⁵¹ Green, “Ad Hominem Criminalisation.”

¹⁵² Hirschmann, “Populism and Protest”; Berlet, “Violence of Right-Wing Populism.”

fairness, and a spirit of compromise.¹⁵³ This is an extraordinarily limited list, admitting little more than the character traits that are causally conducive to maintaining Rawlsian political liberalism itself. Indeed, not only does Rawls himself admit this fact, but also his own brief discussion of ethics implies that these virtues are to be inculcated by the state through social engineering.¹⁵⁴ The liberal institutional preoccupation persists, it seems, all the way down.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the overwhelming *passivity* of virtues such as tolerance and compromise seems wholly insufficient, at least when set against the highly combative nature of populism.¹⁵⁶

6.3. Rejuvenating Liberal Political Ethics

Liberal philosophy, it seems, needs to hire some ethical muscle. Fortunately, there is plenty to be found: here follows two indicative suggestions. First, Arendt herself suggests the virtue of forgiveness, which she sees as fundamental to ongoing political action.¹⁵⁷ Unlike tolerance, which is necessarily passive because it mandates non-interference,¹⁵⁸ forgiveness requires a conscious investment in, and communication with, others.¹⁵⁹ As such, forgiveness is quintessentially social, while tolerance, in one important sense, is *antisocial*. This matters, politically speaking, because without those willing to forgive us our wrongdoing, ‘our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover’.¹⁶⁰ Tolerance maintains divisions and forestalls social recovery from perceived slights because, when we tolerate others, ‘we *let something be* that we judge to be undesirable, false or at least inferior; our toleration expresses the conviction that, despite its badness, *the object of toleration should be left alone*’ [emphasis added].¹⁶¹ Conversely, the power to forgive,¹⁶² as an exercise of the virtue of forgiveness,¹⁶³ has a socially restorative effect.¹⁶⁴

A second indicative suggestion can be found in the ‘love ethic’ of bell hooks.¹⁶⁵ This is a complex notion, being described by hooks as ‘mak[ing] choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public’.¹⁶⁶ Although hooks never puts the point in these terms, a love ethic may be seen to invoke several classical virtues associated with political action, such as courage, friendship, and practical wisdom.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, although not entirely altruistic (‘I know of no one who has embraced a love ethic whose life has not become joyous’),¹⁶⁸ there is an undeniable appeal to other-regarding reasons and the universal value of human life within her work.¹⁶⁹ This has led to the suggestion that ‘love finds expression when individuals and communities devote themselves to realizing good...on behalf of others in personal or political contexts’.¹⁷⁰

Love, so conceived, would bolster liberal political institutions via a substantive commitment to the value of our common humanity, were it widespread as a matter of political ethics. As hooks herself argues, ‘[a]ll the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic...[w]ere a love ethic informing all public policy in cities and towns, individuals would come together and map out programs that would affect the good of everyone’.¹⁷¹ True, it might be

¹⁵³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 194.

¹⁵⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 108, 195.

¹⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis along these lines, see Kabari, *Rawls, Political Liberalism, and Moral Virtues*, 195–238.

¹⁵⁶ This mirrors, in some ways, Schmitt’s critique of Hans Kelsen’s democratic theory, which, “[i]n its final ... form ... arms its enemies,” see Scheuerman, “Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism,” 303–304.

¹⁵⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

¹⁵⁸ Königs, “Simplicity of Toleration,” 5–6.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, “Tolerance & Forgiveness: Virtues or Vices?,” 36–40.

¹⁶⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

¹⁶¹ Gray, “Toleration,” 28. It is indicative of tolerance’s normative poverty that Dworkin, when intervening in the substance of American politics, abandons the notion in favour of attempting to secure common ground. See Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here?*, 1–23.

¹⁶² My use of “power” here (in the Hohfeldian sense) is deliberate. Although we might speak cogently of a *purely* moral (or ethical) duty to forgive, such a duty neither could, nor should, ever be enforceable (Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation*, 15; Murphy, *Conceptual Foundations of Transitional Justice*, 23–24).

¹⁶³ Following Rosalind Hursthouse, I understand a virtue as “something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right” (*On Virtue Ethics*, 13). Crucially, these character traits involve an emotional component, in that virtuous action is *felt* and not simply *performed* (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 108–119).

¹⁶⁴ hooks, *All About Love*, 138–140.

¹⁶⁵ hooks, *All About Love*, 87–101.

¹⁶⁶ hooks, *All About Love*, 88.

¹⁶⁷ hooks, *All About Love*, 92, 94, 101. For her own part, hooks lists “the dimensions of love” as including “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (hooks, *All About Love*, 94).

¹⁶⁸ hooks, *All About Love*, 88.

¹⁶⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, 91–92, 98–99.

¹⁷⁰ Glass, “Love Matters,” 168.

¹⁷¹ hooks, *All About Love*, 98–99.

objected that this substitutes one unattainable utopia for another, so great an ethical demand does it place upon private individuals *qua* citizens. However, not only did hooks herself accept the demanding nature of a love ethic,¹⁷² but she also emphasised our collective need to mature ethically in order to attain the relevant capacities.¹⁷³ In this respect, her suggestions are no more radical than those of Aristotle, who maintained that virtue must be developed and maintained through either instruction or habit.¹⁷⁴ Liberal philosophers, I argue, should embrace suggestions of this kind and place the need for an ethically mature citizenry more centrally within their work. How to develop such a citizenry should, for those of us who value liberalism, be at the forefront of our arguments and not reserved to be used negatively nor as an afterthought.

Some readers might worry that my suggested augmentation of liberal ethics calls, in effect, for the elimination of liberalism itself. Arendtian forgiveness and hooks' love ethic seem so deeply relational (and even supererogatory) that they leave liberalism, with its insistence upon individual autonomy and a framework of rights and duties, far behind. This is a reasonable concern, albeit one I believe to be misplaced. For all of its problems, liberal political philosophy is motivated by fundamentally humane concerns.¹⁷⁵ In addition to autonomy, liberals also champion the basic dignity of every person,¹⁷⁶ the equal status of all people,¹⁷⁷ and the value of authentic personal choices.¹⁷⁸ These underlying values are scarcely at odds with those of either Arendt or hooks, nor with those of other progressive thinkers.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, as recent scholarship has begun to demonstrate, even liberal institutional prescriptions can incorporate deeply relational considerations without abandoning their liberalism.¹⁸⁰ What I propose here is more modest: that philosophers committed to liberal institutional frameworks accept and account for the dependence of those frameworks upon a robust political ethics that supererogates the core tenants of liberalism itself. Seen in this light, what I suggest does not entail anything approaching political perfectionism; merely an acceptance that apt institutional design is only ever *part* of securing justice.

7. Conclusion

Dystopian hypotheticals are important, at bottom, because they nudge us towards the conviction that, within politics, what matters most are the cumulative and sustained 'everyday deeds of ordinary folk...[s]mall acts of kindness and love'.¹⁸¹ Attention to narratives of human frailty and collective political potential within dystopian science fiction is just one means through which liberalism might be forced to reckon with this. Such narratives present powerful counterpoints to the utopian hypotheticals developed within contemporary liberal philosophy, if only because they express beliefs and intuitions firmly rooted within the Western cultural imaginary. In this paper, I used three such narratives to 'nudge' us towards the view that, on a cumulative basis, individual acts really do matter, sometimes far more than the institutional contexts within which they take place.

Such acts, whether ethically commendable or otherwise, create what I have elsewhere called the 'ethos' of a political community, which is important because, '[f]or every Martin Luther King Jr. there are multitudes who contribute in less visible ways, without which power and influence would be impossible'.¹⁸² Politics, to quote Lenin, 'begins where the masses are',¹⁸³ and so political philosophy, in my view, must both address itself to, and focus upon, those same people. The liberal institutional preoccupation is symptomatic of a broader Western philosophical pathology: namely, that of engaging in closed conversations amongst technocrats, all the while viewing private individuals as 'problems' to be 'managed'. The ethical turn I have called for moves beyond this. It sees individual behaviour as a potent causal force within all political communities: individuals *qua* citizens cannot be organised into irrelevance, no matter how ideal our constitutional blueprint might be. Liberalism, if it hopes to endure, must embrace this. Citizens are not a problem to be managed but a resource to be deployed. But that resource is contingent upon an appropriate political ethics, which liberalism at present almost entirely lacks. We must work, or so I contend, to change this.

¹⁷² hooks, *All About Love*, 89–90.

¹⁷³ hooks, *All About Love*, 94, 115–118, 155–158.

¹⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2:1. Some empirical studies suggest that ethically positive dispositions, such as compassion, can in fact be inculcated through particular types of training. See Jazaieri, "Randomized Controlled Trial of Compassion Cultivation Training."

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Fineman, *Autonomy Myth*.

¹⁷⁶ Raz, *Authority of Law*, 221.

¹⁷⁷ Waldron, *One Another's Equals*.

¹⁷⁸ Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Chapter 9.

¹⁷⁹ For instance, hooks, *All About Love*, 90–91.

¹⁸⁰ Schemmel, *Justice and Egalitarian Relations*, 127–160; Cordelli, "Justice as Fairness and Relational Resources."

¹⁸¹ Jackson, *Unexpected Journey*.

¹⁸² Green, *Statehood as Political Community*, Chapter 1.

¹⁸³ Lenin, *Lenin, Selected Works*, 295.

Perhaps the time has passed when political philosophers could act as Socratic ‘gadflies’, roaming the *agora* and provoking individual citizens towards the examination of their convictions.¹⁸⁴ But the same is manifestly untrue in relation to fiction, including dystopian science fiction, which can reach millions who need not even leave their front rooms to receive the message. Perhaps liberal philosophers, having accepted the need for an ethical turn, might strive to influence that message (or at least how it is received). They might, for example, undertake engaged literary criticism,¹⁸⁵ inter- and multidisciplinary teaching, both within the university and beyond, and direct engagement with content creators. That is likely a utopian dream, at least outwith rather niche joint degree programmes and individual specialisms, especially given the rarefied nature of academic philosophical argument.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, even if pursued self-consciously and *en masse*, such behaviour is unlikely to ‘change the world’ (and we should not expect it to). Nonetheless, pursuing *this* dream strikes me as a worthy cause. After all, what task should philosophy serve if not to inspire and provoke us into challenging not only how we *think* but also how we *act*?¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Plato, “Apology,” 30e.

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Sunstein, *World According to Star Wars*.

¹⁸⁶ But see, for example, the impressive list of volumes within the Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture series, edited by William Irwin. Titles with dystopian science fiction themes include: Decker, *Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy*; Cuddy, *Bioshock and Philosophy*; Eberl, *Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy*; Dunn, *Avatar and Philosophy*; Decker, *Ender’s Game and Philosophy*; Dunn, *Hunger Games and Philosophy*; Robichaud, *Walking Dead and Philosophy*.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 11.

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