Fanaticism and liberalism

Chouraqui, F.; Townsend, L.; Tietjen, R.R.; Schmid, H.-B.; Staudigl, M.

15 Fanaticism and Liberalism

Frank Chouraqui

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified,
or may even be pulverized by the demands of life and that one must find,
therefore, one's moral center.

(James Baldwin, 1998, *Notes of a Native Son*)

15.1 Introduction

Over the last 30 years, fanaticism and the rhetoric surrounding it have become a point of concern in the social debates of the liberal world. In this context, there is a current line of questioning which has increasingly come to the fore, mostly as a result of disappointing results in countering fanaticism. It is concerned with the seeming impotence of liberal democracies to respond to, contain, discourage and counter fanaticism (Jackson, 2015; Karakatsanis and Herzog, 2016). Why is liberalism so ineffective in countering fanaticism? Therein lies the motivating question of this paper. I will argue that the relative impotence of liberalism to counter fanaticism lies in a hidden complicity between the two. I argue that liberalism and fanaticism share a commitment to a common form of justification, and that this form of justification tends to de-legitimize the virtue of moderation. This results in liberalism being unable to produce articulate and convincing discourses about moderation in order to oppose fanatical discourses.

It is well known that the premise involved in the way I am posing the question is itself intensely debated: is it true that the liberal ideology is incapable of countering fanaticism (Heyd, 2020)? Certainly, so runs the liberal objection, even if it is the case that societies commonly taken to be dominated by liberalism retain some fanatic tendency, it does not follow that liberalism is complicit with fanaticism. Such a tendency could rather be discounted in terms of some psychological quirks of human nature such as irrationality, or indeed even in terms of a lack of liberalism.

According to this line of thinking, it is possible that those fanatical phenomena do not testify to the inability of liberalism to counter fanaticism, but rather to the fact that we need more liberalism. In other words, perhaps fanaticism is merely an anomaly. Anomalies, of course, are not to be engaged with. They are to be ironed out, ignored, or preserved against. Disciplinary measures such as law enforcement and psychiatry, so goes the argument, should be up to the job. One may note that there are worryingly quietist undertones to such deflationary responses: since they consider fanaticism as an anomaly, to them it is a set of values destined to disappear because it is not borne out of human nature (which is rational) or truth itself (which is liberal); and they very illiberally agitate the specter of repression as a last but very available resort.

This deflationary view begs the question at hand. It requires characterizing fanatics and fanaticism—not on the basis of observation but on the basis of what an unquestioned commitment to rationalism which would predict them to be anomalous - as mad, or animated by passions alone. This sort of view has become less plausible as psychologists and sociologists have developed their accounts of said groups and individuals, leading rationalists to intellectual contortions designed to redefine irrationality to fit what they see in their enemies or redefine rationality in order to deny those enemies any rationality. The result looks much more like apologetics than philosophy. Finally, it seems that the sheer size of the fanatical phenomenon in the current world has made the usual ways we deal with anomalies (enforcement, suppression, and dismissal) less and less credible.

There are empirical reasons to be suspicious of the deflationary view as well. As I noted above, the deflationary view is connected to a kind of quietism: the view that fanaticism is not viable in the long term because it conflicts with human nature, reason, and reality. The recent flurry of analyses concerning the reciprocal dynamics of polarization contradicts this optimism. McCauley and Moskalenko's studies of polarization (2011) show that liberal societies have rigidified in the face of fanatical challenges, indicating that liberalism and fanaticism end up involved in a reciprocal dynamic of polarization (p. 146). More worryingly, studies of "cumulative extremism" (Eatwell, 2006, p. 205) identified a number of permanent tendencies that foster radicalization and make the moderate centre—not fanaticism—less appealing, or less viable. In short, we must resist deflationism and ask ourselves why, in the encounter of liberalism and fanaticism, there is a higher chance to see liberalism drift towards fanaticism than fanaticism drift towards moderation.

A third, more theoretical, lesson from the logic of polarization is that it brings out the double layer that is at work in fanaticism. For every fanatical view, there is, if you will, a semantic layer (made of prescriptions, values, principles, and projects), and a structural one (made of a formal understanding of what values in general are). Because the dynamic of polarization identifies polarization as a reciprocal process,

we see clearly that the structural aspect is shared between fanatics of opposite sides, whereas the semantic one is not (this is why they are from opposite camps) (Hathcoat and Barnes, 2010). The problem of mutual reinforcement suggests that one urgent task for research on fanaticism should take a *formal approach* (Bronner, 2009; Chouraqui, 2019), one that downplays the *content* of given radical ideologies in order to be applicable to a wide range of radicalisms and to become more apt to account for their commonalities and therefore for their mutual reinforcement. The formal approach therefore, formulates the hypothesis that *fanaticism is best understood not as a set of values or beliefs but as a certain understanding of what constitutes values or beliefs*.

From a formal perspective and for the reasons outlined above, it seems that the deflationary view is a non-starter. It is missing something important about the mechanics that enable fanaticism to flourish. It ignores that fanaticism is a serious matter that is not to be discounted as a mere quirk of human nature. In a sense this is an argument that hardly needs elaboration: after all, this is a volume of philosophy about fanaticism, and if you are reading this, you too, most likely, are entertaining the intuition that it is a problem urgent enough to require treatment and that this treatment needs to be a philosophical one. I take this to imply that you are not committed to the quietist view. Rather, you believe that fanaticism is not going anywhere until we deal with it, and you believe that dealing with it takes philosophy, not just law enforcement. It is on this basis that this paper proposes the following answer to the question of the resilience of fanaticism: The liberal ideology is so powerless in the face of fanaticism because it subscribes to the same basic mechanism as fanaticism.

The remainder of the paper has three sections. In Section 15.2, I argue that fanaticism should be defined as the opposite of moderation, that moderation should be defined as a modifier, and that as such, it is valuable even though its normative relevance cannot be justified by transcendental means. In Section 15.3, I argue that liberalism has transcendental commitments that make it unable to accommodate the claim of moderation and that this inability constitutes the basic mechanism of fanaticism, which liberalism shares with it. Section 15.4 provides some conclusive remarks about the ways in which liberalism can be reformed to meet the demands of moderation.

15.2 Moderation and Empiricism

Let us return to our everyday intuitions about fanaticism. It seems to me that any competent speaker using the lampoon "fanatic" about a specific phenomenon or person (say, when reading the news), will be making at least two implicit claims: first, that the person or phenomenon at hand is *extreme,* and second, that it reflects an inappropriate kind of intransigeance or *stubbornness*. It is notable that these two determinations push in

opposite directions, for the reference to extremism aims at the *contents* of fanatical acts or beliefs, and the reference to stubbornness aims at the *form* of the fanatic's commitment or to their *way* of acting upon them: stubbornness or intransigeance is not built into the nature of the ideas we are stubborn about (one can be stubborn or intransigent about just about anything). As indicated earlier, I argue that the latter formal criterion is sufficient to define fanaticism, and that investing too much into the content criterion of extremism is misleading.

15.2.1 A Working Definition of Fanaticism

15.2.1.1 Fanaticism Cannot Be Defined in Terms of Content

Although it is intuitive, defining fanaticism as extremism encounters a number of serious problems. The first is to do with the "positional" fallacy (Breton and Dalmazzone, 2002, p. 1–14; Cassam, 2019, p. 11). This is a fallacy that plagues any talk of "extremes." In a nutshell, it is the fallacy that measures extremism with reference to its distance from the centre, and yet defines the centre as the point equidistant from the extremes. This suggests that any talk of extremism involves a circle. Those who formulate it as the "fallacy as symmetry" (Newey, 2011, p. 223, Jones 1997) emphasize another aspect of the same fallacy, namely that the extremity of any position is reversible: my judging that you are holding extreme views is exactly commensurate to your judging that I am holding extreme views. What this definition of fanaticism as extremism leaves us with, therefore, is a certain kind of hypocrisy: a fanatic is simply someone we disagree with *a lot*. Most likely, this is also someone who thinks of us—or is bound to think of us—as a fanatic. You might as well say that a fanatic is someone who thinks that you are a fanatic yourself. So, any definition of fanaticism that involves a reference to "extremes" will have to contend with the charge of positional fallacy and with the charge of hypocrisy. Yet, a reference to extremism seems indispensable for any content-based definition of fanaticism. Therefore I take the charge of hypocrisy, the "positional fallacy," and the "fallacy of symmetry" to stand as objections to any content-based definition of fanaticism.

There may be a possible alternative, however, which would involve claiming that that which makes a view extreme is that it violates views that are commonly viewed as basic (Nozick, 1997, p. 296). As we will see later, this is the basic idea behind theories of public reason and the Rawlsian distinction between the rational and the reasonable among others (Rawls 1999, p. 140). For example, one may state that the rejection of violence is a view commonly-held to be basic. By this token, fanaticism would be more compatible with violence than non-fanaticism. It looks like this might allow us to get away with the objections laid out above. In order for this avenue to keep clear of the positional fallacy and the

charge of hypocrisy however, one would have to add that the imperative of avoiding violence is somehow not fanatical *because it is commonly held*. In other words, "extremism" no longer qualifies the *content* of an act or a view, but its *form*: how many people support it. This leaves us with only one last alternative: that the views that the fanatics violate are not held by the non-fanatics only, but by the fanatics themselves. In other words, a reference to extreme views might remain useful if extremity is measured in terms of internal conflict. In this scenario, a fanatic is someone who holds views that conflict strongly with other views that they themselves strongly hold. Again, this sort of strategy is a mainstay of Rawls' later work among others (1993, 1999). A religious fanatic for example, would have a fetish for life (say, in their views about abortion) and at the same time a great commitment to violence (say, in their view that gay people must be stoned to death). As the example shows, this is an argument quite commonly heard although it might be difficult to cash it out in the way required to sustain the content-based approach. Firstly, it may be that the two prima facie opposing views are in fact not so opposed after all. In the example at hand, it may be that the values at work behind these two attitudes are not the value of life and the commitment to punishment, but in both cases a commitment to scripture (regardless of the quality of the scriptural interpretation at work of course). Secondly, in the example cited above, the conflict between the two attitudes—if it really exists—simply internalizes the symmetry which had worried us above. It remains in any case impossible to determine which of the two opposing views is the fanatic one, sending us back to look for an external criterion. Thirdly, one could easily imagine that the fanatics themselves are uncomfortable with such contradictions, and that although we, liberals, undergo a scandalized experience before their seemingly callous embrace of contradiction, it may be that it is most of the time not so callous (although possibly just as misguided). Rather, fanatics may have a story that preserves the impression of consistency. Upon second analysis, our being scandalized at their embrace of contradiction can most likely be cashed out in terms of our being scandalized by the poor quality of the rationalizations appealed to in order to maintain consistency (this is probably most often the case). Finally and consequently, it seems that such a solution after all relies not on content, but on a formal criterion: the criterion of consistency. In short, "consistency" becomes the final tool used to salvage the content-based view. But "consistency" is a formal criterion. What we are left with is an affirmation of our natural commitment to non-contradiction, i.e.: a formal criterion. As a result, it seems to me that the content-based alternative is hopeless.

15.2.1.2 Fanaticism Must Be Defined Formally

This takes us to the formal alternative, which picks up on the intuitive correlation between fanaticism and stubbornness. Although I have tried

to establish it elsewhere (Chouraqui, 2019), let me briefly present the view here. The formal definition of fanaticism stays out of debates about contents. Rather, it proposes that fanaticism can be recognized in terms of its formal features. One key such feature is a commitment to consistency. This may be made most apparent by returning to the notion of stubbornness. The stubbornness of the fanatic, it seems, lies in their refusal to allow contingent matters to interfere with their normative commitments or their acting upon them. To be stubborn is to refuse to allow circumstances to distract us, discourage us, or water-down our commitments (things like pity, doubt, compromise etc. are thereby excluded). What is specifically fanatical, therefore, is the *form* of these commitments, namely their stubborn commitment to consistently enacting one's principles.

But of course, this does not mean that any stubborn commitment to consistency is *ipso facto* fanatical. In fact, most of us would wish to avoid this conclusion since consistency is closely associated with epistemic and moral virtues, and fanaticism not so much. The best way to test whether this commitment to consistency is a sufficient or merely a necessary condition for fanaticism would be to hypothetically take the most benign normative commitment (say one's commitment to the welfare of their children) and observe how it behaves when combined with a stubborn commitment to consistency. Admittedly, thought experiments are easily misleading when it comes to matters of details, but my point does not require any such subtleties. Anyone can come up with scores of more or less far-fetched scenarios in which a stubborn commitment to consistently enacting one's commitment to the welfare of their children would quite plausibly yield perverse—and fanatical in their own order—results, spanning the way some parents obsessively seek to control the food or TV intake of their children when visiting other parents or when at school, to the contradictions involved with buying one's child out of an army draft for another to take their place. When plunged into the fog of war that enclouds every living room and kitchen—let alone battlefields—principles tend to behave in strange ways. This is all well-known but it allows us to work out the notion of fanaticism as stubborn consistency in more technically appropriate terms. Under the formal proposal, fanaticism should be defined in the following manner: *Fanaticism is (a) the dismissal of moderating factors on the basis of (b) the view that contingent interference is normatively illegitimate.* This two-tier definition is necessary if we are to distinguish the pure form of fanaticism from the empirical instances of fanaticism which we encounter in the real world, and which imply more than a simple way of thinking but also, a certain set of behaviours. The way of thinking corresponding to (b), I shall call the "basic mechanism" of fanaticism. After all, for the fanatic, contingent circumstances are not normatively appropriate reasons to change our commitments to a certain set of values or to affect their implementation. Rather, for the fanatic, reality has no right to "get in the way." The fact that this is not a very shocking idea should

worry us, and perhaps figure as an indication of our own kinship with the fanaticism we profess to reject.[1] I shall return to this point later.

All of this amounts to saying that the *basic mechanism* of fanaticism is the reduction of moderation to an anomaly. But of course, this does not yet constitute a *sufficient* condition for fanaticism. It is only when this supposed anomalous status of moderation (b above) leads to the active *rejection* of moderation (a above) that we encounter fanaticism proper. In other words, regarding moderation as an anomaly enables—but does not on its own require—fanaticism. This enabling ideological context becomes activated in certain contingent circumstances (e.g. times of social pressure) which in turn favour polarization (Chouraqui, 2019). A full working definition of fanaticism therefore will obey the following formula: *Fanaticism = basic mechanism + contingent polarization*.

15.2.2 A Working Definition of Moderation

My suggestion so far is to define the basic mechanism of fanaticism as the denial that circumstances make any legitimate normative claims on us. The "contingent interference" that fanaticism rejects can easily be cashed out in terms of moderating factors. A possibly more intuitive way to couch the same idea would be to say that *the basic mechanism of fanaticism is the view that moderation is unjustified*. This too seems a common-sense idea: In 2017 Craiutu argued that moderation is a straight antonym (p. 5) and an antidote (p. 16) to fanaticism. Below, I try to briefly systematize this definition of fanaticism by making two points: firstly, moderation should be conceived as a value-modifier, not a positive value. Secondly, what I called above "contingent interference" is best understood as "modification." These clarifications should allow me to explain in more technically appropriate terms why fanaticism and moderation are complete antonyms, and to revise my first definition of fanaticism as the denial that circumstances make any normative claim on us. I will conclude by defining fanaticism as *the view that moderation is unjustified*.

Common language seems to single out moderation for its paradoxical qualities. There is something to the logical structure of the word moderation that makes it possible to use phrases such as "moderation in moderation," phrases that later end up on t-shirts and bumper stickers. The paradox is perhaps not very amusing after the first time it is heard but it says something about the essence of moderation which is important for my purposes:

1 First, it seems to it imply that moderation cannot stand alone, it needs to moderate *something*.

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1 I argue elsewhere (Chouraqui, 2021), that this makes Kant's categorical imperative the archetypical philosophical formulation of fanaticism.

2 Second, it seems that any principle taken on its own (including moderation and all virtues[2]) can be immoderate.
3 There is no moderation *in itself*. Moderation is always secondary to the principle it moderates. As a result, moderation is always circumstantial and contingent.

This last point is central: moderation is secondary to what it moderates. This suggests first that unlike values proper, moderation does not motivate action, secondly that it is essentially context-dependent, and finally, that no principle is intrinsically moderate: moderation always comes from the "outside" of the principle as it were. I think that these three aspects are quite well synthesized under the notion of "a modifier." Moderation is a modifier because it interferes with the instantiation of a moral imperative on the basis of a contingent context. The words "modification" and "moderation" of course share a common root, but etymology almost never amounts to definition. In this case however, it might serve to direct our focus on the importance of the notion of "mode." Generally speaking, what moderation does is to interfere with the process by which a value is implemented in the real world. This interference is modal insofar as it is identical with the change in the mode of being of a given value from abstract (and transcendental) to a spatio-temporal instantiation. Acting out a certain value requires that this value change its mode of being. Moderation simply attends to this modification called instantiation: the transcendental principles will maintain themselves only *in a certain way*, or on a certain *mode*, when instantiated. Think of your garden variety cases of moderation: as per the proverbial example, a thief has stolen enough bread to be sent to the galleys, but she's done so to feed her starving children and they rely on her for subsistence. The circumstances may moderate the judge's verdict along one or both of two lines: *empathy*, or a *mediation* between two (apparently) conflicting values, in this case, possibly justice and charity. The modifier in this context, is the situation itself. It is in this sense that we can assert that moderation is an "empirical virtue." In other words, to value moderation is to acknowledge the legitimacy of the fact that some normative material is always lost in instantiation. Immoderation on the contrary, is the view that this loss is illegitimate and that it entails a diminishment of the normative value of the resulting act against the principle that animates it. As a modifier therefore, moderation not only functions by opposing and restricting positive values, it is also a value of another sort: secondary, dependent and relative.

So the virtue of moderation establishes the normative appropriateness of allowing the process of instantiation to modify normative

2 For "one can love virtue too much, and commit too excessively to a just action" (Montaigne, 2007, I, 29).

principles. This process of instantiation, in turn, is dependent on circumstances and therefore, moderation can only emerge on the basis of the subject's spatio-temporal localization. As I will argue below, moderation makes no sense from a strictly abstract or transcendental perspective and this is why our systematic moralists, unlike their premodern predecessors, are at best uncomfortable with it and at worse, sternly reject it.

This leads to the following three conclusions:

-Moderation is best understood as a modifier or as the view according to which contingent interference may be normatively legitimate.

-As such, moderation is a *sui generis* virtue, irreducible to other principles, values and imperatives.

-Most importantly for our purposes, moderation as a modifier is exactly the antonym of fanaticism as established above (that is to say, as the view that contingent interference is normatively illegitimate). The virtue that corresponds to moderation is the ability to acknowledge that *situations* in and of themselves make legitimate normative claims.

15.3. Liberalism and Transcendentalism

Liberalism is a broad, vague and indeterminate term. It has fuzzy conceptual, historical and geographical edges. Naturally, this makes it hard to make any kind of technical argument about it. For the present purposes, what concerns me is liberalism as a component of "our" self-identity—the self-identity of the liberal democratic western mainstream. In the following, I mean "liberalism" as the factor that determines "our" aversion to fanaticism. This isn't much by way of defining liberalism. In fact, defining liberalism as a feature of "our" self-description makes the definition rely on something even more vague: "us." And yet, we more or less know what we mean by this: "we" are those who abhor fanaticism, abhor irrationality (or what we take to be irrationality) in the public sphere, heirs to the Western Enlightenment, we are mostly part of a mainstream that is still dominated by a white, mostly male and mostly well-educated and rich ideology from rich Western countries. More importantly, we are well-adjusted in these countries: we are representative of these countries and they are of us. Recall that this paper seeks to investigate why "we"—so characterized—have been so ineffective in countering fanaticism. My hypothesis is that this is because we are ourselves committed to an ideology that is complicit with fanaticism. Boosting that ideology to fight fanaticism is bound to boost fanaticism, too. In this section, I argue that any plausible definition of liberalism will imply a commitment to the "basic mechanism" of fanaticism, i.e.: liberalism can only regard moderation as an anomaly. In a way, this gives me room to get on with my

argument without engaging in the risky exercise of providing a strict definition of liberalism. But it is also to be expected that any weakness in my argument will come from the assumptions that I am making about the nature of liberalism.

There is no way for me to provide an a priori, generalizable, and replicable argument for the kinship between the "essence" of liberalism and the basic mechanism of fanaticism. In fact, this is such a counter-intuitive view that my order is tall: I must first make the view plausible, and then demonstrate it. In this paper, I can only attempt the first step. In order to make the view that liberalism is complicit with fanaticism plausible, I will argue that three views that can plausibly be assigned to something like the essence of liberalism are themselves connected to the basic mechanism of fanaticism. They are committed to it in one of two ways: the first is by outlawing the crossing of conceptual lines. The second is by separating public and private reason. In order to consolidate the point, I will also present these three views via a number of the great names of the liberal tradition, with the suggestion that if I am right about them, I might be right about the liberalism they are associated with. If this can admittedly not constitute a full-fledged demonstration, I hope this scheme might bring out the plausibility of the view.

15.3.1. The Moralization of Conceptual Rules:
Transcendentalism of the Ideal

Here are the three views that I take to be central to liberalism and committed to the basic mechanism. The first is the Cartesian view that correctness is determined by a priori relations between ideas. The second is the Kantian moralization of this view, namely that goodness is determined categorically. Finally, the third view I examine is the view that sound political decisions are grounded in public reason.

One of the most basic senses of the term "rationalism" is the belief in a preestablished harmony between the structure of the mind and the structure of the world. A case in point is the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas which, because they are structural for the mind, are held by Descartes to be applicable to the world. There are many ways to cash out this correspondence, and indeed, Descartes himself is ambivalent. Sometimes, he is seen appealing to an anticipation of Kant's notion of a synthetic a priori. There he regards clear and distinct ideas as providing access to the objective world. At other times, he leans towards occasionalism: clear and distinct ideas correspond to the world only via divine epistemic benevolence. At yet other times, he seems to subscribe to some sort of hermeneutic-phenomenological semantic ascent (in the response to the 6th objections for example) where this correspondence is causal: what the "real" refers to is "what

we mean by real" and this is only intelligible according to said structures. Regardless of which of these three Cartesian lines one takes, the upshot is the same: the basic nature of truth is that it demands that conceptual lines not be crossed. The truth of a confused idea, if any, is dependent on the clear and distinct ideas it combines. Interestingly Descartes himself does not make the normative step to draw from this the conclusion that goodness too requires that we refrain from crossing conceptual lines. Rather, his musings lead him towards a provisional ethics of suspension. But again, it is only via Kant and Rousseau, both of whom make this move, that Descartes is to be seen as the father of modern liberalism.

For Kant virtuous behaviour is a behaviour that coincides with and respects the categorical structures of thought (Camus 1951, pp. 115–116; Kant, 1785/1993). His doctrine of the categorical imperative, of course, is a case in point for it founds morality on the epistemic interdiction of contradiction, by proposing a test for universalizable consistency. Under the categorical imperative, an act is permitted if and only if it doesn't imply contradiction, or as Korsgaard puts it, "Our substantive principles must be derivable from formal ones if they are to be binding on the will." (2009, p. 46). As a result, Kant even defines the Enlightenment as a combination of individual subjection and public freedom. In other words, the individual taken as such is to make no legitimate normative claims. It is only as "humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other" (*Groundwork* 4.429) (that is to say, precisely not as the individual that they are) that individuals make any sort of legitimate normative claims. Importantly, this directly commits Kant to the basic mechanism of fanaticism: it is only if individual freedom is permitted that moderation is possible, since only the individual has access to context and since, as per our definition above, moderation only exists in context. This amounts to saying that the Cartesian-Kantian moment sealed the commitment of Western rationalism to the notion of purity. If we bear in mind that moderation is a modifier, it is apparent that the notion of purity is its exact opposite: a pure object is an object free of any modification. Like moderation, purity is a modifier, but unlike moderation, it is an empty modifier. To be pure is to be unqualified. But, as is to be expected, to be unqualified means to be abstract, purity refers to essences, and essences are only captured conceptually. Take the case of chemistry, where purity—pure water as H_2O say—refers not to empirical water, but to its definition. The Kantian fetish for purity, like any fetish for purity, presupposes the alignment of the world of experience with the world of concepts (Kekes, 1983; Scurr, 2012). Although this is all admittedly very schematic, it might be enough to suggest that the rationalist DNA of modern liberalism commits it to a first kind of transcendentalism: that political normativity is grounded at the conceptual level. This transcendental

commitment, in turn, conflicts with the notion of moderation which supposes that at least *some* normativity emerges in any situation and is irreducible to any transcendental justification.

15.3.2 *Transcendentalism of The Universal*

Interestingly, there is another transcendental commitment at work in the liberal tradition, and it is one connected to the notion of public reason. In general, the move of liberalism towards public reason is motivated by something like my previous point: that transcendental "idealization" can turn out to conflict with the freedom of the actual people subjected to it (Gaus, 2016). The increased focus on public reason has involved moving away from the notion of reason as an *objective* ground of value (as in earlier forms of rationalism), to reason as a *universal* ground of value. This looks just like the move to immanence that we are looking for: legitimacy no longer comes from an abstract, objective source, but from the subjects themselves. In fact, the idea of public reason usually presents itself as seeking to address the claims of non-ideal, empirical people and societies. Although it may go some way towards bridging the divide between ideal and non-ideal theory, it still falls short of accommodating moderation. Upon closer inspection, it turns out to reveal a *second* transcendental commitment of liberalism, namely the idea that there is a pre-established harmony between the laws that govern justification and the laws that govern correct *in situ* action. This all seems pretty abstract but there are empirical ways to ascertain the continued commitment of the doctrines of public reason to transcendentalism. In fact, the case of public debates about moderation is a central one. It shows that even those theories of public reason that emphasize deliberation, (e.g. Habermas, 1996, 1.2.1) suffer from a set of transcendental commitments that renders them unable to accommodate moderation.

   Moderation, I argued above, has a distinctive theoretical status insofar as it is conceptually secondary: by its very definition, it presupposes other pre-existing entities which it moderates (say: values). As I suggested in passing, this distinctive status is not a privileged one but rather amounts to a conceptual disadvantage: moderation is logically derivative and secondary. It is interesting to note however, that in a liberal context, this *conceptual* disadvantage routinely translates into a *strategic* one. The liberal story, I think, goes as follows: moderation constrains, without transcendental justification, the application of transcendentally warranted imperatives, values or principles. The values, it is assumed in this context, demand to be enacted, ideally without interference. A conscientious moral agent will therefore respond with hostility to any obstacles to their enactment of morality. In their inner deliberation, the conscientious subject needs a good reason to be moderate, *and they*

presuppose that what makes a reason good is its fittingness to principles. This amounts to a commitment to the basic mechanism of fanaticism. It is notable however, that it is also a hallmark of liberalism. In the context of public deliberation, and in spite of those theorists' best efforts to the contrary, the problem is only made worse.

Moderation is placed at a political disadvantage precisely to the extent that politics is a matter of discourses, in particular discourses of justification.[3] Let's briefly examine this discursive disadvantage of moderation. Moderation is famously an "unappealing virtue" (Craiutu, 2016). This is probably because, as a modifier, moderation is easily cast as a *failure* to implement the value whose enactment it moderates. In this context, it attracts charges of hypocrisy, weakness of the will, "compromise" or "equivocation" or "complacency" (Molière in Dandrey, 2017, p. 32). Secondly, by its very nature, it cannot be measured against any transcendental standard (there is no a priori standard of moderation). Moderation is strictly speaking lawless or, as Craiutu puts it, it is "deprived of the benefits of a structured system of justification" (2016). In the meantime, in societies organized around public reason, moderation never wins the argument, for it cannot appeal to a standard of value shared between those in dispute: *de moderatio non est disputandum.*

There are two salient points to make here: the first is that, *pace* Craiutu, who seems to suggest that any system of justification will fail to justify moderation, this weakness is contingent upon the structures of intersubjectivity (i.e.: the pragmatics of persuasion and deliberation), not the structures of justification (i.e.: what makes X morally right or wrong) *as such.* There is a way of thinking of justification in moderation-friendly ways. Although this possibility has long been de-emphasized by the liberal tradition, it may be the case (and I think, in the case of moderation, it is the case) that the rules of sound deliberation (which proceed from principles to decisions) do not match the rules of sound action (which, at least if moderation is to be involved, cannot be reduced to principles)[4]. In other words, the secondary status of moderation (as a modifier) in the logical realm becomes cashed out as a political weakness in the normative realm, but it is so only for contingent reasons, namely, *because of the liberal reduction of moral justification to successful deliberation.*

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3   Vallier (2015), seems to pursue a similar intuition.
4   Note that this relies on the assumption that sound deliberation is determined immanently (in terms of epistemic correctness) and not externally (in terms of moral soundness). In the latter scenario, the match between sound deliberation and sound action will be maintained, but at the cost of a circular and question-begging argument: circular because it claims to determine sound action via deliberation whilst defining sound deliberation in terms of sound action; question-begging because it presupposes the match whose existence is to be demonstrated. Much of the ideology of the modern age relies on this fallacy it seems.

The second point is that the rhetorical weakness of the appeal to moderation (say, when it is countered, as is often the case, with an appeal to purity or duty, or accusations of hypocrisy) is a major factor in the dynamics of radicalizations: the liberal conflation of justification and deliberation motivates a race to the extremes, for extremism, in this context, is always more persuasive (it claims a direct appeal to principles). As I argued elsewhere (Chouraqui, 2019), these appeals to theory become more intense and more politically momentous in times of social and political pressure. These are times in which the number and intensity of social debates increase and their stakes intensify: in such contexts, the debate between moderates and radicals (of any sort) becomes biased in favour of those able to answer more of the questions put to them by the opposite side: and at this game, the moderates are at a disadvantage, for by definition they cannot appeal to any fixed, objective, or universal standard to determine whether and how much moderation every situation requires. In other words, times of increased social and political pressure advantage the positions that fit the *structures of debate* rather than those that fit the *situation* and so, for purely contingent reasons, to do with the pragmatics of deliberation. This second point too has some urgent accents: one shouldn't be surprised by the fact that a world such as ours where opinion-formation is highly mediatized is also a world where polarization is rife. As I hinted above, there is reason to expect that this perverse situation is made worse not just along the axis of the *extent* and *volume* of public discourse but also along that of the *stakes* of the items under discussion: stressed societies tend to polarize more quickly not because they are reluctant to moderation but because they are reluctant to conceptual and rhetorical ambiguity. So, moderation is at a political disadvantage to the extent that politics is made up of discourses, in particular discourses of justification. This infelicitous interaction between the liberal commitment to justification as deliberation and the logical deficit of moderation seems to point to a certain complicity between liberalism and fanaticism.

In short, the inability of the theories of public reason to accommodate moderation has to do with the universal ascent: public deliberation *de facto* suppresses particular and localized inclinations, while it is only such localized inclinations that are entrusted with implementing moderation. That this is the case may be implicitly inferred from the characterization of moderation as a modifier, but maybe the argument may be made explicit here. The view that moderation is the charge of the particular and not just the universal individual relies on a hermeneutic argument. Every situation where moderation is relevant needs to be *interpreted* in order to be subjected to general principles, and this interpretation requires situational wisdom that is irreducible to any principle. In fact, the liberal's rejection of the particular almost exactly coincides with her rejection of interpretation as hermeneutics construes it. One of

the great lessons of the hermeneutic circle is that interpretation always comes out of a transgression: the hermeneutic circle can only be broken arbitrarily. Yet, if it is not broken, situations cannot access their meaning. This necessity for the arbitrary results from two features of the nature of meaning.

First, the objective properties of an act, a situation or an object never suffice on their own to mandate any specific interpretation of them. Objects of meaning are always (to varying degrees) semantically indeterminate. That is to say, the meaning of an object is never reducible to its self-evident properties. As a result, and secondly accessing any final interpretation involves a choice which is up to the interpreter, and it is always a lawless choice. Indeed, it precedes any possible application of the law or possible deliberation, for laws and deliberations deal with already interpreted objects. In this context, it is visible that even those theories of public reason that emphasize actual intersubjective deliberation will rely on an impossible notion of "the appropriate interpretation" which the hermeneutic argument shows to be beyond reach. They are, at best, left hoping for the legal system to determine what the right interpretation is, returning to categorical clarity in exactly the ways such theories tried to avoid (e.g.: Habermas, 1996, p. 108)

This should be enough to demonstrate firstly, how deeply entangled with transcendentalism liberalism is, and secondly, how those transcendentalist commitments are of the kind that makes moderation impossible. This also gestures to a third point (although it doesn't demonstrate it): this commitment to the kind of transcendentalism that excludes moderation *is essential to liberalism*. Taken together, these three points amount to showing that liberalism (at least in its current forms), is committed to what I called above the 'basic mechanism' of fanaticism.

15.4 Conclusion

My aim in this paper was merely a preliminary, and negative one: I have argued that liberalism has transcendental commitments that make it unable to accommodate the empirical demands made by the imperative of moderation. I have also argued that this goes some way towards explaining the relative inability of liberal societies to stand up to fanaticism: they are unable to provide a solid grounding to discourses of moderation because they share the basic mechanism of fanaticism with their opponents. Finally, this mechanics of complicity that becomes installed between liberals and fanatics, should also provide a starting point from which to understand the participation of liberalism in the dynamics of polarization that it aims to reject.

This argument is disappointingly negative. It makes no claims about whether this situation is problematic (it is so only on the basis of the current concern about fanaticism in its current forms, a concern whose

validity I have not questioned), and if it is, how it should be addressed. I hope the reader will allow me to outline below, in frustratingly brief and programmatic ways, three lines of inquiries that the current argument calls for:

The first preliminary point would have to focus on clarifying why the resulting view will have to be novel. In particular, there are two time-honoured traditions that seem to come close to addressing the issue. One would have to show how they are insufficient. The first such tradition is a version of Aristotelian virtue-ethics. After all, it too is animated with the concern to do justice to the claims of specific situations against the claims of transcendental principles. This is a line that fails however, because it does not allow for the possibility of understanding moderation in the modal terms I have outlined in Section 15.2. As a result, moderation becomes seen as a positive but untheorizable principle, and this conflicts with the account of moderation as a modifier. Secondly, one may ask about the ability of so-called ethical and political pluralism to provide a sufficient account of an ethics of moderation (Berlin, 1969; Gaus, 2016; Kekes, 1994). This, too, will not do. A return to pluralism would be overburdening the theory we are trying to outline with unreasonable and unnecessary commitments. This is especially true of the disastrously costly commitment to rejecting the unity of value. The upshot would be that pluralism may have the potential to restore moderation to its dignity (probably by casting it as a mediator between conflicting values) but it will do so at the cost of reducing moderation to such a mediating function thereby enshrining the necessity for normative conflicts (and its almost inevitable consequences of polarization and violence) in ways that the modal account (made possible by the notion of moderation as a modifier), can spare us.

The second concern would involve examining how much of liberalism a putative commitment to moderation would demand that we reject. It is, after all, in the name of something like liberal values that we as a society have come to be concerned with moderation, and although at the structural level (at the level of the *basic mechanism*), they are incompatible, the values that animate our commitments to moderation are consonant with the values that animate our commitment to equality, justice, and dignity, to name a few. What aspects of liberalism must we amputate and can any such amputation save it?

On the basis of the first two lines above, the third and final concern will be to provide a positive account of an alternative system that combines the values we wish to retain from liberalism with the value of moderation. It is to be expected that this is an account that will have to reorganize the relations between modes of being and the bindingness of values. Recall that moderation is a modifier, and this makes it exist only in a diminished, modal sense (this is the point overlooked in Aristotelianism). It seems that it is because moderation is cast in

this diminished mode that the rationalist and liberal tend to overlook it. Any system that will restore moderation to its proper place will have to stand up to a long-acquired bias for supporting moral and political theories with a univocal ontology.

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