ABSTRACT. In this paper, I address the question, "Who are the political and ideological opponents of liberalism?" I suggest that Dworkin's way of dividing liberals from their conservative opponents over the issue of pluralism fails to get at the main issue of redistribution. But arguments for and against redistribution share a common pluralistic conception of politics and morals, viz., that they are to be conceived in terms of an agreement amongst autonomous individuals who are each trying to maximize their own welfares.

I argue that this ignores our relations with the non-autonomous and is parasitic on a wider and more generous notion of the political and moral community. I suggest that such a community must form a focus of its members' loyalties and an end (telos) for human virtues. I then draw some lessons for business ethics, arguing that it is an essentially specialized enterprise which ought not to used to model moral and political relations in general.

(1) The question, "Who are the opponents of liberalism?", can be addressed on at least two significantly different levels. At the level of political practice, we could identify individuals, groups, and movements who are in both rhetoric and action anti-liberal. Thus, confining ourselves to the domestic sphere and ignoring international politics, all of us would likely list the so-called 'Moral Majority' in the U.S., the Greens in Western Europe, the Government in Poland, and a number of other 'radical', anti-liberal movements. At the level of ideology, the question is more difficult to answer. With ideologies, our concern is with putative justifications of political activities and programmes. Because justifications have to confront canons of evidence and inference that real life political movements can often indefinitely avoid, we have to admit that there will be real difficulties in pairing ideologies with political movements. Yet the question posed requires such a pairing. But our pairings can always be called into question by either confronting our picture of anti-liberal ideologies with discordant political phenomena or using ideological criteria to discount the phenomena in question.

(2) And yet it is possible to identify political movements and ideologies that are recognisably liberal and anti-liberal. What divides them? Ronald Dworkin has in various places offered an avowedly liberal account of what divides liberals from their opponents. Thus, he claims that it is misleading to think that liberals emphasize equality, while their conservative opponents stress the value of liberty. Instead, he argues that both are agreed that government should respect the equality and liberty of all citizens. Each citizen is to be treated as of equal worth and dignity on either view. Where liberals and their opponents divide is over what it is to treat each person in this way:

What does it mean for the government to treat its citizens as equals? That is, I think, the same question as the question of what it means for the government to treat all its citizens as free, or as independent, or with equal dignity ... It may be answered in two fundamentally different ways. The first supposes that
government must be neutral on the question of the good life. The second supposes that government cannot be neutral on that question, because it cannot treat its citizens as equal human beings without a theory of what human beings ought to be (p. 127). That is, the liberal response to “the question of the good life” is to let each citizen freely frame his response so long as that response does not interfere with other citizens each making their own favoured responses. Anti-liberals, Dworkin claims, believe that “treating a person as an equal means treating him the way a good or truly wise person would wish to be treated”. Those who deviate from whatever the anti-liberal ideal of virtue happens to be (e.g., a puritan notion of rectitude or socialist ideal of sharing) are rightfully coerced, not so much because such deviants thereby interfere with others’ pursuits of personal ideals but rather because of their failure to act virtuously; that is, they fail to instantiate in their own lives official standards of the good life.

(3) Now for Dworkin an important advantage of this account is that he is able to respond both to ideological opponents—who characterise liberalism as a kind of compromise position, a sort of accidental package of goods assembled by divergent interest groups moved essentially by their own concerns and not by any common “constructive morality” (p. 117) — and to political opponents—who claim liberals are ‘wishy-washy’. Dworkin holds that by being steadfastly neutral on “the question of the good life” liberals provide a distinctive and correct account of the Kantian notion of treating all persons with equal concern and respect. Moreover, Dworkin claims his account of liberal ideology can be tested against the political facts, for he says it offers a coherent account of “the last clear liberal consensus” (p. 121):

Relatively recently—sometime before the Vietnam war—who called themselves ‘liberals’ held certain positions that could be identified as a group. Liberals were for greater economic equality, for internationalism, for freedom of speech and against censorship, for greater equality between races and against segregation, for a sharp separation of church and state, for greater procedural protection for accused criminals, for decriminalization of ‘morals’ offenses, particularly drug offenses and consensual sexual offenses involving only adults, and for an aggressive use of central power to achieve all those goals. (p. 113)

(4) But it can be plausibly objected that this picture of liberalism is dated and to that extent is likely to mislead us about current conflicts between liberals and their opponents. In particular, consider the ‘new conservatism’ that motivates a number of major political leaders, e.g., Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as well as some outspoken Progressive Conservatives and even a few Liberals. It would be hard to say that all these people are against economic equality, internationalism, freedom of speech, racial equality, procedural fairness, and so on, and in favour of their opposites. Indeed, the only item on Dworkin’s list that rings true is the very last which concerns the “aggressive use of central government power to achieve all these goals”: for these conservatives’ greatest concern is to limit the use of central government power. And if we ask them why they wanted to so limit governmental intervention, it is not implausible to suppose that at least some of them could sincerely and accurately respond with what Dworkin takes to uniquely characterize the liberal position, viz., concern for equal respect and opposition to moral totalitarianism. Such conservatives would have no difficulty in appealing to Dworkin’s core idea that individual rights are trumps over collective preferences. There are then problems with Dworkin’s characterization of liberalism at both the level of political practice and the level of ideology. That is, there are problems at both levels unless we are wont to say that there has been a metamorphosis of old-fashioned liberalism into two distinct new species. And even if we did want to say this we would still have the problem of accounting for this transformation in both ideological and historical terms.

(5) My suggestion is that with the pluralist/anti-pluralist distinction Dworkin cannot capture this vital difference between ‘liberal pluralists’