

Taking the Long Way

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First Things

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And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them through the land of the Philistines, even though it was nearer.

—Exodus 13:17

For many decades now, America's political life has been divided between people who call themselves "conservatives" and people who call themselves "liberals" or "progressives." This suggests that Americans are moved to conserve the good we have and to champion liberty and progress, which might make us better still. These are noble aspirations. But unfortunately, the left and right alike seem confused about what liberty and progress really mean and require. Our conservative party is confused about what it should conserve and our liberal or progressive party is confused about what it should advance. The two are not misguided in exactly the same way, but both tend toward radically deficient visions of the life of a liberal society.

Now in 2026
there is no
conservative
party by
any serious
definition
of the term

A sound politics depends on an adequate understanding of personhood

Their confusions stem from a shallow and emaciated notion of the human person, albeit one that masquerades as a moral ideal. This diminished idea of man tempts us to an exaggerated idea of politics and fuels our "culture wars." It is likely now the greatest threat to liberty and progress in American life, and therefore also to what we should all seek to conserve.

The left's flawed idea of liberty has gained ground on the right's, and indeed tends to drag the right around by the nose. It begins from the straightforward premise that liberty consists of the individual's freedom from coercion and constraint—in essence, the freedom to shape one's life as one chooses. There will always be limits to that freedom, of course. But in this view most limits are artificial and unjust barriers rather than natural and necessary constraints. Therefore, the proper mission of a liberal society is to remove as many of them as possible.

Some limits are material or economic. The simple fact of scarcity constrains what we can do. But this constraint does not apply equally to all. Some are rich and have ample resources to exercise their liberty, while others are poor and have few options. What is more, the efforts required to meet our material needs—work—often amount to constraints on our freedom as well. This is especially true for the less well-off. They're more likely to work at jobs they don't like for the sake of a

paycheck. The liberal society tries to alleviate these constraints by redistributing wealth to some degree. A key goal of progressive taxation and the modern welfare state is to increase significantly the liberty of the poor at a relatively minimal cost to the liberty of the rich.

There are also social or traditional limits. Our society's established ways of doing things—especially in the sensitive realms of family, sexuality, and culture—unavoidably inhibit the freedom of people who would rather do otherwise. Here again the liberal society seeks to loosen or remove constraints, this time by enforcing an ethic of pluralism. Different moral and lifestyle choices are to be respected, provided they are freely made and do not come at the expense of other people's safety or freedom to choose. This ethic of pluralism gets reinforced by a soft relativism and non-judgmentalism. We're not to press our own views too vigorously for fear of compromising the freedom of others to make up their own minds about what's right and wrong. We do, of course, harshly censure racism, and in some contexts elaborate taboos develop that critics deride as "political correctness." But these actually serve the same end, and the ideal is straightforward. Our society is more just to the degree that individuals are free from what are deemed artificial social constraints. It's for this reason that some liberals see "political correctness" as ministering to a greater freedom.

also
sexism,
homo-
phobia + trans-
phobia

Still other limits are political. These often combine the other two. Liberals suspect that our laws too often answer to powerful interests that seek their own benefit by abusing the weak or strive to enforce their own moral views upon dissenters.

Therefore, we should limit such abuses of power and protect people's freedom. In essence, our society should be arranged to ensure that as many as possible of our binding obligations are individually chosen, and that our lives are, to the extent possible, our own to shape. Getting to that point will sometimes require coercive actions by the state, especially to limit the power of those who would coerce or constrain the choices of others. Restrictions on campaign contributions provide one example, prohibitions against hate speech another. The liberal vision of freedom deems these limitations legitimate if they are aimed at expanding the realm and reach of individual autonomy overall. Thus the paradox of liberalism: expanded government for the sake of freedom.

The choosing individual is the foundation of this progressive vision of liberty, and all of society is to be constructed around that essential unit. It is by now cliché to cite Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's opinion in the 1992 abortion case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, but that's because it captures this vision so well. "At the heart of liberty," Kennedy wrote, "is the right to define one's own concept of

a good encapsulation of the central impetus of liberalism
(Also: "The one principle of it all is, I am my own.")

existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." All is to be made subject to the choosing individual, including the most profound of our human relations and obligations to others. All the world is "concepts," and to each his own.

When conservatives object to this idea of the liberal society, it is often on the ground that the range of government coercion it permits is too broad. But many conservatives (and all the more so libertarians) root their complaints in the same radical individualism as the progressives they oppose. They don't object to the liberal view of liberty. Instead, they see liberalism as betraying it. They insist, for instance, that public redistribution of wealth is a greater constraint on free choice than the economic want it is meant to address. The same goes for campaign finance laws and many other liberal efforts to limit liberty for the sake of greater liberty. They deem the paradox of liberalism a fatal contradiction.

Their individualism leads them to this view in part because the American conservative idea of liberty is often mediated by the concept of rights, and especially property rights. The fact of economic want is not a violation of these rights. Poverty in this sense does not necessarily involve injustice. By contrast, government redistribution of property can directly impinge on our rights of ownership, and thus can easily be seen as unjust. Conservatives therefore assert that an idea of liberty grounded in individual rights is superior to the liberal approach that seeks an overall increase in individual autonomy. Rights, especially property rights, impose meaningful limits on the power of the state, which is uniquely positioned to constrain our liberty.

This conservative idea of liberty, then, is less concerned with giving different people equal power to make their choices matter, but more concerned with letting every individual do what he wishes with what he has—provided he does not take from others. This is an ethic of protection rather than provision. A society cannot overlook the well-being of the poor, of course, and most conservatives acknowledge the need to use the power of government to make sure people's basic needs are met. But they regard doing so as part of our general obligation to keep our fellow citizens from deprivation. It has nothing to do with liberty, and so is not fundamental to what makes a free society free.

Both left and right, then, generally articulate their understandings of liberty in terms of enabling free individuals to make choices as they wish. The progressive sees freedom as a power to act while the conservative sees freedom as an absence of restraint. This is a real difference—a great deal of our political debate turns on it—but it can too easily obscure a deeper agreement. Both views equate greater human

^{as opposed to bonds or obligations}

Again: the one principle of hell

not sure how distinct those two definitions are

liberty with progress, as any good liberal would, and both believe that such progress is achievable by arranging our laws and institutions so as to best enable people's freedom to choose.

★ As a consequence, both seem to believe that advancing human progress is a matter of shaping society in a certain way, rather than of shaping the human soul in a certain way. They take the human person largely for granted. The goal of public life and the sign of a good and just society is progress toward an ever greater liberation of that person from artificial constraints so that his world can be, to the extent possible, what he wants it to be.

Personhood as something innate, a brute given, rather than something achieved

This doesn't mean that these progressives and conservatives are simply naïve about human failings. But they believe that the institutions of the liberal society, if properly arranged, can enable people who are thus liberated to live together peacefully and productively. Our political tradition, understood a certain way, seems to support this hope. James Madison suggests, in one particularly Machiavellian passage of Federalist 51, that the framers of our Constitution thought a "policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives" could be sufficient to sustain a free society. And of course it's a central tenet of free-market economics that free and fair exchange coordinates our individual choices in a particularly efficient and productive way.

This view of the common good as balanced or coordinated self-interest was facilitated by modern political philosophy's lowering of the goals of social life. Modern thinkers since Machiavelli and Hobbes have tended to assert that the purpose of society is simply to meet our basic needs for security in our person and property and our desire for liberty in all other things. This minimal view allows us to hope that an arrangement of institutions, incentives, and interests that keeps us out of each other's hair will be enough. The market economy, too, is premised on the notion that if all we want is prosperity and comfort, then we should be able to achieve those in spades without having to argue about moral premises too much.

In reality, however, such hopes are possible because we presuppose the existence of a human being and citizen capable of handling a remarkably high degree of freedom and responsibility. We do not often enough reflect on how extraordinary it is that our society actually contains such people. A population of citizens generally capable of using their freedom well, not the American Constitution or the market system, is the greatest modern achievement of our civilization. That achievement is the prerequisite for liberalism, whether progressive or conservative, not only at its origin but in every generation. Thus the dangerous impoverishment of our political

though not nearly enough of them

culture today: The idea of liberty that both progressives and conservatives generally articulate takes the person capable of freedom for granted without pausing to wonder where he might come from.

★ An idea of liberty is an essential part of the answer to that crucial unasked question. But it is not the libertarian freedom generally voiced by today's left and right. Surely liberation from coercion alone does not prepare us for the practice of liberal freedom. To liberate us purely to pursue our wants and wishes is to liberate our appetites and passions. But a person in the grip of appetite or passion can't be our model of the free human being. Such a person is not someone we would trust with the exercise of great political and economic freedom.

The liberty we can truly recognize as liberty is achieved by the emancipation of the individual not just from coercion by others but also from the tyranny of his unrestrained desire. This is hardly a novel insight, of course. Socrates helped Thrasymachus to see it in the fifth century b.c. Well before that, on Mount Sinai, it was revealed to a nation of slaves freed from Pharaoh's dominion. But it is a truth our high self-esteem sometimes makes us forget.

★ This older idea of liberty requires not only that people be free to choose but also that they be able to choose well. This liberty arises when we want to do more or less what we ought to do, so that the moral law, the civil law, and our own will are largely in alignment, and choice and obligation point in the same direction. To be capable of freedom, and capable of being liberal citizens, we need to be capable of that challenging combination. And to become capable of it, we need more than the liberation of the individual from coercion. We need a certain sort of moral formation.

The liberation of the individual from outside coercion is the short way to liberty—and the way that most progressives and conservatives today seem to have in mind. The formation of the individual for freedom is the long way to liberty—and the way that our liberal society plainly requires. The long way is a prerequisite for what the short way promises; it is a necessary preparation. But our political instincts now incline us to seek shortcuts. We're tempted to pursue individual liberation without preparation.

This leads to an increasingly dangerous failure of self-knowledge. A liberal society depends on the long way of moral formation, yet it does not understand itself as engaged in such formation. Its commitment to pluralism makes its politics neutral regarding the souls of its citizens, or rather commits it to shaping those souls for neutrality—forming people only to live and let live. That is how we are taught to think of what our society does.

But we are wrong, of course. Our society is not as shallow in practice as we say it is. Our bipartisan, individualist language of liberty keeps us from seeing that the liberty that liberalism offers exists in large part to foster precisely the moral formation we need and the institutions that engage in it. Religious freedom, freedom of association, freedom of the press—these are liberties designed to protect our traditions of moral formation, and they do just that.

That we are often blind to this, and so are as a nation better than we think, has always been a peculiar problem in our politics. But that problem is now increasingly debilitating, and demands to be addressed. Addressing it, and so coming to know ourselves better, will require us to think anew about the theory and practice of American liberty.

The theory and practice of American liberty have always been remarkably different from one another. Our theories have tended to be stark, abstract, individualistic, and fairly radical. Our practice has been elaborate, practical, communitarian, and fairly conservative. Our theories present our sort of liberal society as the product of a new discovery of the Enlightenment—a sharp break from what came before. Our practice reveals our liberal society to be a great achievement of Western civilization—an extension of our political, religious, cultural, and moral traditions evolved over a great span of time.

This puzzling duality is evident even in our national charter, the Declaration of Independence. The declaration opens with a bald assertion of profound theoretical principles—and then proceeds into a concrete listing of practical grievances, almost all of which describe long-standing practices disrupted and long-standing privileges denied. Pretty soon, King George III stands accused of “taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments.” This is certainly an unusual justification for a revolution.

We can find the chasm between theory and practice even deeper in our political tradition. To put the matter all too simply, the liberal political theory we claim as our birthright emerged in Britain after an era of nightmarish religious wars, in part to justify an already existing society in terms other than the contentious religious and political ones on which it had originally, gradually, come to be. This involved the formulation of an alternative creation story (man in the state of nature), alternative laws of nature, and alternative ideas of the purpose of politics and the character of human thriving.

Liberal political thought could be made compatible with British liberty as it had taken shape over a half-millennium and surely helped direct that tradition's development toward even greater freedom and prosperity. But these alternative theories came to be understood as something like the actual foundations of the liberal order and therefore as guides for the future development of liberal societies. When asked to play these roles, their profound inadequacy became apparent.

In essence, our liberal theories offer us truths wrapped in falsehoods—the truth that we are all created equal wrapped in the falsehood of a society built by independent individuals choosing to unite; the truth that we all deserve to be free wrapped in the falsehood that freedom is the absence of restraint. The truths may add up to a case for the long way to liberty, but the falsehoods can easily be taken as a case for the short way: the liberation of the individual from outside constraints to pursue his wants as he wills.

The great philosophers of liberalism and their great interpreters among our statesmen and teachers have always been able to see through the wrapping, and to show us the truths at the core of our liberty. Many such teachers, although surely not enough, are at work today charting the long way to liberty for generations of students. But it is not hard to see why many are drawn instead to the short way. They can all too easily see themselves justified by the principles of American liberty as we know them.

Our theories of liberalism appear to recommend a different, thinner kind of liberty than the one we often practice. Far from reveling in unlimited choice, in practice we often affirm and even celebrate ennobling constraints. The enduring appeal of marriage provides an obvious example. But we are unsettled. We have gradually been losing the language in which to justify our practice of liberty against the demands of our coarsened theories, and at nearly every point of intersection between them we now find a heated conflict.

The elements of the long way to liberty are coming under assault one after another. The very foundations of our way of life are subjects of unending controversy; not just marriage and family, but academic standards, religious institutions, and other social forms animated by traditional modes and orders. In these controversies, the progressives confidently employ a liberal vocabulary of arguments in favor of ever-greater empowerment, while many of the defenders of our traditional ways of life are left struggling not to sound like they speak a foreign language, or are compelled to translate their rich moralism into the coarsest utilitarianism.

To be sure, those "coarsened theories" often corrupt our practices, but the more surprising thing is the people w/ bad theories can often learn from hard experience that they need to act in ways unjustified by those theories

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The long way to liberty begins unavoidably with marriage and the family, and the case for the short way begins as a case against their necessity. The family is above all the nursery of the next generation, which enters the world incapable of exercising liberty and plainly in need of both protection and moral formation. The family is proof against the notion that all human relations can be turned into matters of choice.

yes!

When we ignore the limits of choice and the need for preparation for liberty, however, the traditional family can come to seem instead like a constraining social form justified, at best, as a reliable way to meet some basic material needs. This is exactly what's implied in many of the defenses of the traditional family mounted in our public debates; the family's utility in protecting individuals from poverty is held up as proof against its detractors.

The evidence is strong, to be sure, but this way of arguing concedes too much to its critics, challenging them only on the ground of material utility. It ignores the deeper truth that the family, more than any other human institution, forms us morally. To live as a father and husband, wife and mother, child and sibling, is to live lives shaped by duties and obligations that sometimes grate but often bring joy. This is why the family is best suited to creating individuals freely discharging their responsibilities, the very foundation of any liberal vision of society. Indeed, the family helps us see that freedom ultimately is impossible without responsibility. We can hardly be surprised, therefore, that so many of our culture wars are focused on the family.

Noteworthy how many of us raised in bad families strive so vigorously to correct those errors in the raising of our own children

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Work is another crucial element of the long way to liberty. Like the family, it, too, has an obvious economic utility, enabling us to support ourselves and our families financially. But work also buttresses dignity, inculcates responsibility, encourages energy and industry, and rewards reliability. It can help form us into better human beings and better liberal citizens. To see only its material utility is to imagine that work, like family, could be replaced by more efficient forms of distribution. If work is nothing more than a means to material support, nothing is lost if we provide for the needs of those with meager means in ways that do not require them to enter the workforce.

Recent efforts to weaken work requirements in state and federal welfare programs have reflected this narrow view of work. Progressive economic policy at least since John Maynard Keynes has appealed to a sense that the ideal economy would be less focused on work. But this view ignores the formative potential of work beyond its utilitarian value. We have every reason to weave a social safety net, but we must beware the shortcuts of a shallow notion of liberty that deny us the long way to a fuller freedom.

Interesting to consider the premises of the technological "liberation" from work in light of this - another way (in addition to family commitments) in which our cultural elites may be reserving formative practices & institutions for themselves

technological "liberation" from work in light of this - another way (in addition to family commitments) in which our cultural elites may be reserving formative practices & institutions for themselves



An excessively utilitarian understanding of the human good also inclines us toward a thin, unedifying notion of education. Even (or perhaps especially) in higher education, we are increasingly squeezing out liberal learning to make room for more skills training and STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) degrees. We surely need technical education, but that cannot be all that education means.

- ③ Liberal learning is out of step with our times because it offers us not vocational skills but the shaping of habits of thought and practice. It forms our souls through exposure to beauty, to truth, and to the power of the sublime that we can only glimpse through the mediation of rare artistic genius. It is, in this sense, closer to an aristocratic idea of leisure than to the modern idea of training. It is decidedly not utilitarian. It is no short way to liberation. And it is therefore under fierce assault precisely in the academic institutions that should be havens for liberal formation.
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- ④ If a non-utilitarian notion of learning is far removed from our experience, then surely an older idea of leisure itself is utterly foreign. Here there is not even much controversy. We have almost all agreed that leisure is an opportunity for entertainment and unmediated pleasures. It would not be easy now to make the case for a different understanding of leisure as an opportunity to build habits of virtue, although some people do of course continue the practice of such edifying leisure.

But democratic citizens have another opportunity for building orderly habits, which might substitute for some of the advantages of civilizing leisure if we let it. Alexis de Tocqueville was keenly aware of the need to inculcate the habits of freedom in people living in democratic times. And he thought that civic life itself could advance this cause through both the private associations of civil society and the public institutions of an active democracy.

- ⑤ He stressed the importance of local government. "Local institutions are to liberty," he tells us, "what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions, a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty." This doesn't mean that local government necessarily makes for very good government. It often doesn't, as Tocqueville also noted. By a utilitarian measure of administrative efficiency, it could easily seem inferior. But in terms of preparing us for the burdens of liberty, it can be invaluable. It is useful for progressing down the long way, but not the short way, to liberty. And so we find that the partisans of the short way are often also partisans of administrative centralization, while our traditional practice of liberty points toward subsidiarity.

But if the long way to liberty is truly to lead us to a freedom that is more than license, it must draw as well upon an ideal of human emancipation that is more than political. The ultimate soul-forming institutions of the liberal age, as of every age, are religious institutions, and the ultimate preparation for liberty is the practice of faithful obedience. Religion in this sense offers a direct challenge to the ethic of the liberal society, and an explicit correction of its excesses. It is therefore not surprising that among the most heated debates in our culture wars lately have been arguments about the standing and protection—the space—granted to the practice of religion in America.

Religious institutions are not just counterbalances but foundations of the liberal order. They command us to a mixture of responsibility, sympathy, lawfulness, and righteousness that align our wants with our duties. They help form us to be free. And what is true of religion in particular is true more generally of the institutions of the long way to liberty: They are foundational to liberalism not so much because they counteract its vices as because they prepare human beings to handle the burdens and responsibilities of being free.

bad theory, better practice The long way to liberty has always been part of our liberal society, and indeed has been the bulk of what our society actually does, even if it is not how our society often understands itself. But it is now a subject of unending, heated controversy as our society turns against its own foundations. In our time, a commitment to the long way requires us to defend against a corrosive pseudo-liberalism. Championed by some progressives, but too often enabled by conservatives, it encourages precisely philistinism—a form of freedom that is but license for the morally unfree, and actively disparages every form of nobility, refinement, dignity, order, and transcendence.

In this view, the problems created by radical autonomy at the level of the individual can be addressed by technocratic management at the level of society, while the costs of technocratic management can then be offset by the pleasures of radical autonomy. But this circular logic leaves out—and compels many liberals actively to reject—the most critical ingredient in any free society: the human being formed for freedom. The formation of the person is replaced by a transformation of society.

What happens on the long way to liberty is so offensive to today's progressives because the authority of our traditional institutions stands in the way of the social transformation they desire. And here, finally, we return to the question of progress—the great aim of modern politics. The progress that progressives dream of involves

remaking the social order so that it becomes friendlier to an idea of liberty as the emancipation of the will—remaking society so that it becomes finally worthy of the liberated, autonomous individual.

But this has things backwards. Real progress very rarely looks like social transformation. It more frequently looks like personal transformation. Each of us alone is weak and corrupt, but through profound moral exertion, and moral formation, we can rise above the dirt and make ourselves a little more noble, more responsible, more decent, more sympathetic, more loving, more free.

The idea that the measure of progress is social transformation, so that the forces of good and evil can be understood as forces of change and reaction, holds out the promise of liberating us from the need for personal transformation. The impersonal historical process, the journey society takes, can substitute for a personal moral process, making men moral by default.

This hope is rarely stated as explicitly now as by the radicals of the last two centuries. But it is implicit in any vision of society as an engine of social transformation that advances the progressive liberation of the individual from unchosen obligations. It was the theme, for instance, of President Obama's second inaugural address. The substitution of social progress for personal progress is the ultimate shortcut.

★ When the Book of Exodus tells us that God did not take his liberated people to their promised land through the land of the Philistines but opted instead for a longer way through the desert, it also tells us why: "for God said, if they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." Untutored and unformed, confronted too quickly with the costs and burdens of liberty, they might choose slavery.

For us, too, bearing the duties and responsibilities of freedom without being prepared for them poses great dangers, especially the danger of abandoning our liberty in return for security or the passing pleasures and distractions of our abundant age. This danger is avoidable only if we take the long way to liberty, the way that prepares us through the practice of responsibility and through the formation and refinement of our souls.

This is no easy task, of course. Not everyone has the good fortune of a flourishing family, or the opportunity for rewarding work, or a liberal education, or a humbling faith, let alone all of these at once. But some combination of these soul-forming institutions is within the reach of most, and the work of reinforcing them, sustaining

the space for them, and putting them within the reach of as many of our fellow citizens as possible is among our highest and most pressing civic callings. That calling, rather than a hyper-individualist liberationism, should be the organizing principle of our political life, helping us see what to conserve and how to advance.

It is a calling that requires us to think about our choices in more than crass terms of utility. And ultimately, it is a calling that requires us to choose, and to help others choose, the path of family, faith, work, learning, and community, and to avoid the path of philistinism—even though it is nearer.

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This is of course wonderful, but I would add that we will only devote ourselves to these formative institutions if we

- (a) love ourselves properly
- (b) love them — see my essay on "Recovering Piety"

6 I think I want to say that only if we are able to love ourselves properly — without disabling illusions — will we be ready to practice piety towards the institutions that can & should shape us so that we realize what (as Arden says) we were made for

see "Precious Fire"
"The Horatians"