

A Critique of Pure Liberalism - For a Liberal Restoration

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Law, Letters, and Ideas

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I. The Need for a Critique

When Immanuel Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, the word *critique* did not mean simple condemnation. Kant was attempting something more ambitious. He wished to put reason itself on trial—not in order to abolish reason, but to save it from its own excesses. Reason, left unexamined, was capable of exceeding its legitimate jurisdiction. It could mistake its own constructions for reality and become dogmatic precisely because it had ceased to understand its limits.

The purpose of a *Critique of Pure Liberalism* should be similar.

The argument advanced here is not that liberalism ought to be abolished. It is that liberalism must be saved from its purification.

Modern liberalism has progressively attempted to liberate the individual from external authorities: king, church, class, custom, inherited obligation, family expectation, traditional morality, and finally even certain conceptions of nature itself. There were profound achievements in this development. Liberalism protected conscience against coercion, the citizen against arbitrary government, minorities against persecution, property against confiscation, speech against censorship, and the individual against the suffocating power of inherited status.

But a principle can destroy itself by becoming absolute.

Liberty is no exception.

Liberalism originally asked an indispensable question: What justification has authority for restraining a free person? The liberal tradition characteristically gives liberty a presumptive priority and requires coercive political authority to justify itself. But another question must accompany it: What makes a person capable of using freedom well?

The first question concerns liberation.

The second concerns formation.

A civilization that remembers the first and forgets the second eventually produces a conception of freedom incapable of explaining what freedom is *for*.

The central thesis of this essay is therefore paradoxical: liberalism can survive only if liberalism ceases to be pure.

It requires institutions, loyalties and principles that are not themselves products of individual choice. It requires family, historical memory, moral education, community, inherited culture, constitutional authority, natural law, religious transcendence and a conception of reason capable of distinguishing desire from the good.

Without these, liberalism undergoes something resembling a mutation.

The analogy with cancer is useful precisely because cancer is not simply foreign matter invading an otherwise healthy organism. Cancer originates when processes necessary to life become disordered. Normal cells possess genes governing growth, division, repair and death. Mutations affecting proto-oncogenes, tumour-suppressor genes and DNA-repair mechanisms can disable the restraints that normally govern cellular multiplication. Growth, ordinarily indispensable to life, becomes uncontrolled.

Cancer is therefore, in a terrible biological sense, life's capacity for growth severed from life's principles of order.

That is the metaphor for pure liberalism.

Freedom is good. Autonomy is good. Choice is good. Pluralism is good. Individual rights are good.

But if the cultural equivalents of the tumour-suppressor genes disappear—if freedom loses the inherited mechanisms that tell it when, why and toward what it should exercise itself—the principle of liberation begins consuming the organism that made liberation possible.

The mutation is not freedom itself.

It is freedom separated from order.

Pure liberalism consequently threatens to eat itself whole like a cancer, not because liberty is malignant, but because liberty has become detached from the moral DNA that once regulated its growth.

And the same phenomenon can be described by another image.

Liberalism was once a great river. Its force cleared away obsolete barriers and carried political civilization forward. But a river has power precisely because it has banks. The banks do not negate the river. They make the river possible as a river.

Remove them and the river does not become *more perfectly a river*.

It becomes a flood.

Modern liberalism has escaped the embankments of its shores. Having confused every boundary with oppression, it increasingly lacks direction and directedness. Its waters spread everywhere precisely because they no longer know where they are going.

The task before us is not to drain the river.

It is to restore its banks.

II. Liberalism and the Discovery of Ordered Freedom

There is a temptation to tell the history of the West as a simple contest between liberty and authority. On this account antiquity was hierarchical, medieval Christianity authoritarian, monarchy oppressive, and modernity gradually liberated the individual from these accumulated restraints.

There is truth in this story, but only enough truth to make it dangerous.

The older Western conception of liberty was not simply the absence of restraint. Greek philosophy had already perceived that a person could be politically free while remaining internally enslaved.

Plato's *Republic* provides one of the clearest accounts.

Plato divides the embodied soul into three dimensions: reason, spirit and appetite. Appetite seeks satisfaction. Spirit—*thymos*—seeks honour, recognition, victory and vindication. Reason seeks truth and, properly functioning, apprehends what is good for the person as a whole.

The just person is therefore not someone without appetite.

Nor is he someone without ambition, indignation or passion.

Justice consists in their ordering.

Reason should rule; spirit should become reason's ally; appetite should receive its legitimate goods without becoming sovereign. Plato consequently establishes an analogy between psychology and politics. The ordered city resembles the ordered soul. Rule belongs to that element capable of considering the good of the whole rather than merely demanding satisfaction for itself.

This provides an older and richer meaning of freedom.

Freedom does not mean that every desire receives permission.

It means that the human being becomes sufficiently self-governing that desire does not become his master.

The alcoholic offered unlimited drink is not liberated by unlimited availability. The furious man permitted to strike every person who insults him is not thereby made free. The miser incapable of giving away a dollar is not free merely because his property rights are secure.

Freedom requires government within the person.

The classical tradition therefore presents us with an apparent paradox: self-government requires government of the self.

Aristotle develops the psychology differently. He should not simply be made into a second Plato. His account distinguishes powers or capacities of living things, including nutritive, perceptive or

sensitive, appetitive and rational functions. Human flourishing nevertheless similarly requires that appetite become responsive to reason. Virtue is not the destruction of desire but its education.

Christianity, and particularly the synthesis achieved by Thomas Aquinas, radicalized this idea without abolishing it.

For Aquinas, natural law is the rational creature's participation in eternal law. Human reason does not invent the moral universe. It discovers principles of action within a creation already possessing intelligible order.

This matters enormously.

Freedom in this conception does not consist in escaping nature.

Freedom becomes possible because human beings are rational participants in nature.

One can therefore describe the older Western conception schematically:

Appetite → disciplined by virtue → governed by reason → oriented toward the good → situated within natural law → ultimately participating in divine order.

None of this requires denying human agency.

On the contrary, Aquinas's conception of natural law depends upon it. Rational beings can apprehend something of the order in which they participate and act freely in accordance with it.

The great mistake is therefore to oppose freedom and law as though they were necessarily enemies.

A pianist is free at the piano because he has submitted himself to scales.

A poet becomes free in language because she has inherited language.

A citizen becomes capable of self-government because character has already been formed by institutions he did not invent.

The highest freedom is not indeterminacy.

It is the acquired capacity to choose the good.

III. Kant and the Sovereignty of Reason

This brings us to Kant.

The title *A Critique of Pure Liberalism* deliberately invokes the *Critique of Pure Reason* because Kant understood something that contemporary liberalism urgently needs to relearn: a faculty establishes its legitimate sovereignty by recognizing its limits.

Kant was certainly a decisive figure in the emergence of modern autonomy. But he cannot fairly be enlisted as a prophet of mere subjectivism.

Indeed, that would reverse his purpose.

The Enlightenment project in which Kant participated placed extraordinary confidence in individual human reason. Yet Kant's project was not simply to overthrow morality, religion, God or the soul. His philosophical undertaking sought to establish the legitimate authority and boundaries of reason while preserving the possibility of freedom and moral obligation.

This distinction illuminates the crisis of contemporary liberalism.

Autonomy originally meant the rational self giving law to itself.

Increasingly, however, autonomy has come culturally to mean something closer to:

the sovereign self choosing for itself.

The difference between those propositions is immense.

The first contains *logos*.

The second can collapse into will.

If there exists no intelligible human good antecedent to choice, then choice becomes difficult to judge except by reference to further choice. The good becomes what I choose because I choose it; authenticity becomes fidelity to whatever I presently understand myself to be; constraint becomes presumptively suspect simply because it constrains.

Liberalism then turns inward.

The sovereign individual no longer stands within an objective moral order and exercises freedom within it. The individual increasingly becomes the author of the order itself.

Here lies the mutation.

The liberal revolution originally sought freedom through reason.

Pure liberalism seeks freedom from everything, eventually including reason understood as an objective constraint upon will.

IV. The Beheading of the Soul

The political metaphor appropriate to this transformation is regicide.

The modern West famously beheaded kings.

More consequentially, it has metaphorically beheaded the king within the soul.

In Plato's psychology, reason possesses a monarchical function. It rules not because appetite is evil but because appetite cannot perceive the good of the whole. Hunger understands food. Sexual desire understands its object. Anger understands injury. Ambition understands status.

None can answer the question:

What constitutes a good human life?

That question belongs to reason.

The removal of reason's governing authority therefore does not leave an egalitarian federation of psychological faculties.

It creates a succession struggle.

Appetite and spirit remain.

Indeed, they become more powerful precisely because there is no acknowledged sovereign capable of arbitrating between them.

The result bears an intriguing resemblance to Freud's later structural psychology, though the analogy must not be pushed too far. Freud distinguished the id, ego and superego. The id represents instinctual drives; the ego negotiates between desire, reality and competing psychic demands; the superego internalizes prohibitions, ideals and moral authority.

The superego is emphatically *not* identical to Platonic reason or Thomistic natural law. Freud's superego can itself become excessive, punitive or irrational.

Yet Freud perceived something the ideology of unlimited autonomy sometimes obscures: the healthy personality is not an undifferentiated field of desire. Human beings contain competing impulses requiring mediation, inhibition and organization.

Civilization therefore requires renunciation.

Every child discovers this before reading philosophy.

I want.

I cannot have.

I am angry.

I must nevertheless refrain.

I desire.

I must consider another person.

I could.

I ought not.

Between I want and I shall stands civilization.

Pure liberalism increasingly regards that intervening territory with suspicion.

Yet a society consisting of people educated principally to ask *What do I want?* cannot indefinitely sustain institutions that depend upon people asking *What do I owe?*

Marriage requires the second question.

Parenthood requires it.

Citizenship requires it.

Military service requires it.

Care for elderly parents requires it.

Religious vocation requires it.

The preservation of inherited institutions requires it.

Indeed, civilization itself is an intergenerational act of people maintaining goods they did not create for beneficiaries they will never meet.

Radical autonomy has difficulty accounting for this because inheritance contradicts the fantasy of self-creation.

We arrive in the world already implicated in things.

We possess parents before choosing them.

A language before understanding it.

A country before consenting to it.

A body before conceptualizing it.

A history before judging it.

A sex before theorizing it.

A culture before criticizing it.

And mortality before choosing anything at all.

Human existence is received before it is constructed.

That fact is not an insult to freedom.

It is the condition that makes freedom meaningful.

V. Liberalism as Cancer

We can now return to the biological metaphor.

Cancer does not ordinarily arise because cells acquire an entirely foreign principle called “growth.” Healthy organisms depend upon cellular growth and division. Cancer emerges when genetic alterations corrupt the systems regulating those processes. Mutations can activate

growth-promoting mechanisms, disable tumour suppressors, interfere with DNA repair, and permit abnormal cells to proliferate.

The analogy to liberalism is unusually precise.

The healthy political organism requires liberty.

But liberty exists within a civilizational genome.

Its metaphorical DNA includes distinctions between liberty and licence; right and wrong; justice and desire; citizen and consumer; authority and tyranny; equality and sameness; tolerance and indifference; conscience and preference.

Institutions function like regulatory mechanisms.

Family restrains individualism by teaching obligation.

Religion restrains sovereignty by placing human beings beneath transcendent judgment.

Natural law restrains will by asserting goods we discover rather than manufacture.

Tradition restrains chronological arrogance by giving the dead a voice among the living.

Community restrains atomization.

Law restrains appetite.

Education restrains ignorance.

Constitutional institutions restrain transient majorities.

And monarchy, at least in its constitutional and symbolic form, can represent something liberal democracy has difficulty generating from within itself: authority that does not originate merely in present electoral preference.

These institutions are liberalism's cultural tumour suppressors.

When liberalism attacks every inherited restraint simply because it is inherited, it progressively disables its own regulatory genes.

Family becomes merely contractual.

Religion becomes merely private.

Nation becomes merely administrative.

Sex becomes merely subjective.

Tradition becomes merely prejudice.

Authority becomes merely power.

Morality becomes merely preference.

Community becomes merely a collection of individuals.

History becomes something from which the autonomous present congratulates itself on escaping.

Eventually even truth risks becoming personalized.

The cancer metaphor must be handled carefully: persons holding liberal or secular views are obviously not cancerous cells. The metaphor concerns an ideological dynamic, not human beings.

And that dynamic is self-consuming.

Pure liberalism destroys the pre-liberal resources upon which liberal society depends but which liberalism cannot readily manufacture: trust, restraint, sacrifice, inherited moral vocabulary, stable families, communal loyalty and the willingness to subordinate immediate individual preference to goods extending across generations.

The mutation therefore transforms the principle:

Liberate persons so they may pursue the good

into:

Liberate persons from authoritative conceptions of the good.

And finally:

Liberate persons from the proposition that there is a good to be discovered at all.

At that point liberalism has crossed into nihilism.

VI. The River Without Banks

The flooded-river analogy reveals another dimension.

A river receives direction from limitation.

Its banks prevent the water from going everywhere and thereby allow it to go somewhere.

Modern liberalism increasingly interprets banks as injustices.

Every inherited boundary presents itself as a challenge:

Why should this restrain me?

Why should tradition bind me?

Why should biology matter?

Why should the dead possess authority?

Why should religious inheritance constrain the present?

Why should marriage have an inherited definition?

Why should nation create obligations toward strangers who happen to share my history?

Each question can sometimes expose genuine injustice.

But an interrogative civilization eventually encounters a problem: the questioning cannot provide its own stopping rule.

Why should *anything* bind me?

The river has escaped its banks.

It has maximum extension and minimum direction.

This is why modern Western societies can simultaneously possess historically extraordinary individual liberties and experience profound anxiety concerning identity, belonging and meaning.

We have multiplied choices while weakening the institutions that once taught people how to choose.

That condition has a classical sociological name: anomie.

The individual is liberated from thick structures of belonging but discovers that emancipation from obligation can also mean emancipation from significance.

A person belongs everywhere and therefore nowhere.

He can become anything and consequently does not know what he is.

VII. The Wounded Fisher King

Here literature reaches places political theory cannot.

The legend of the Fisher King gives us an image of civilization whose governing centre has been wounded.

The king is injured.

The land becomes sterile.

Order, fertility and sovereignty mysteriously participate in one another.

T. S. Eliot drew upon this mythic complex in *The Waste Land*, turning physical barrenness into an image of spiritual and cultural desolation.

Our own Fisher King is wounded.

The wound is not simply that Western societies have become less religious. Nor can every contemporary social problem responsibly be attributed to secularization.

The deeper wound is the loss of confidence that there exists an objective good capable of commanding appetite.

The sovereign principle has lost legitimacy.

Reason remains extraordinarily powerful instrumentally. We can calculate, engineer, optimize, predict and manipulate with astonishing precision.

But instrumental reason cannot answer its own final question:

To what end?

Science can tell us how.

Markets can tell us how much.

Elections can tell us how many.

Desire can tell us what we want.

None alone can tell us what we *ought to want*.

That is the wound of the Fisher King.

The civilization remains technologically fertile while becoming metaphysically barren.

And here the fertility symbolism becomes uncomfortable because it acquires a literal counterpart. Canada's total fertility rate fell to a record 1.25 children per woman in 2024, entering what Statistics Canada describes as "ultra-low fertility."

One should resist crude causation. Fertility decline has numerous economic, cultural, technological and demographic causes, including delayed family formation, housing pressures, education and workforce patterns, contraception and changing preferences.

Yet symbolism need not establish causation to illuminate a civilization.

A society increasingly uncertain that it owes anything to the past may unsurprisingly become uncertain about sacrificing itself for the future.

Children are the ultimate repudiation of radical autonomy.

They arrive with claims.

They interrupt plans.

They consume resources.

They destroy schedules.

They require adults to subordinate preference to obligation.

They are not lifestyle accessories but persons whose existence permanently changes the moral universe of their parents.

A civilization organized entirely around autonomous preference therefore has difficulty explaining why anyone should undertake the radical self-gift required by family life.

The barren kingdom of the Fisher King consequently becomes a disturbing image for the West: rich beyond the dreams of its ancestors, technologically triumphant, sexually liberated, politically free—and increasingly uncertain about reproducing itself.

The injured king and the infertile land belong together as myth because authority and generativity are both forms of continuity.

VIII. Odysseus Has Not Come Home

Beside the Fisher King we may place another figure: Odysseus.

Odysseus is the wandering Western man.

He possesses intelligence, courage, ingenuity and extraordinary self-confidence. But his journey is prolonged by temptation, error, divine opposition and, at crucial moments, pride.

His great problem is not that he lacks a home.

It is that he cannot get back to it.

Ithaca exists.

Penelope waits.

Telemachus waits.

The household remains his.

But the king is absent, and in the vacuum of legitimate authority the suitors consume the household.

This is a powerful image for modernity.

Western civilization has not literally lost its inheritance.

Athens remains.

Rome remains.

Jerusalem remains.

The Bible remains.

Homer remains.

Plato and Aristotle remain.

Augustine and Aquinas remain.

Magna Carta remains.

Dante remains.

Shakespeare remains.

The common-law inheritance remains.

The scientific revolution remains.

The Enlightenment remains.

What has been lost is confidence that these constitute our home.

We wander among civilizations as tourists.

We know a little Buddhism, a little Stoicism, mindfulness, therapy, consumer spirituality, political identity, self-help and fragments of Christianity.

We collect pieces.

But collecting fragments is not the same thing as inhabiting a civilization.

Our predicament resembles Odysseus because our wandering is partly the consequence of our own hubris.

Modernity achieved extraordinary things by challenging inherited authority. Its successes encouraged a dangerous inference:

because some inherited authorities were wrong, inheritance itself is suspect.

And eventually:

because reason has liberated us from many false authorities, autonomous reason can create its own moral universe.

Odysseus's intelligence becomes cunning when separated from humility.

So does ours.

The return of Odysseus therefore represents more than political restoration.

It represents homecoming.

The restoration of the king means the restoration of rightful hierarchy: reason above appetite, good above preference, truth above will, duty beside right, inheritance beside innovation, transcendence above politics.

The suitors must no longer consume the house.

The King must return.

IX. What Does “The Return of the King” Mean?

The phrase requires care.

The restoration proposed here cannot simply mean that every liberal democracy should abolish its constitution and install an absolute monarch. That would substitute romanticism for political philosophy.

The king is first an anthropological and metaphysical principle.

He represents legitimate authority.

The king within the person is reason ordered toward truth.

The king within morality is natural law.

The King above the created order is God.

And the political monarch, where constitutional tradition sustains one, can embody an analogous principle: that the state is more than the temporary possession of whichever faction won the last election.

This gives constitutional monarchy a peculiar philosophical importance.

A prime minister governs.

A parliament legislates.

A court judges.

But a Crown can symbolize continuity.

The monarch did not create the nation by winning an election and does not personally own the country. The office descends from the past and is held temporarily for the future. Its very structure contradicts the proposition that political legitimacy is exhausted by immediate preference.

Properly constitutional monarchy therefore need not contradict liberal government.

It can place liberal government within a larger temporal order.

The Crown says symbolically:

The country existed before this government and will exist after it.

That is exactly the proposition radical individualism finds hardest to say about itself.

I inherited something.

I did not make it.

I am responsible for it.

I must transmit it.

The restoration of monarchy in the deeper sense is therefore a restoration of stewardship.

X. The Liberal Heresy

We can now distinguish liberalism from what might be called its heresy.

A heresy does not usually consist of pure falsehood.

It takes a partial truth and absolutizes it.

The liberal heresy begins with genuine truths:

The individual possesses dignity.

Conscience must not be coerced without grave justification.

Political authority is limited.

Minorities require protection.

The state does not own the person.

People require spheres of privacy.

Power requires accountability.

Speech requires substantial freedom.

Persons must possess meaningful freedom to order their own lives.

These are achievements worth defending.

The heresy begins when these propositions are detached from their complementary truths:

The individual is social.

Freedom entails responsibility.

Rights imply duties.

Conscience requires formation.

Choice can be mistaken.

Desire can be disordered.

Authority can be legitimate.

Tradition can contain wisdom.

Nature can possess normative significance.

The dead can have claims upon the living.

The unborn future can have claims upon the present.

A society can possess a common good irreducible to the aggregation of individual preferences.

And human beings can flourish by accepting obligations they did not choose.

Pure liberalism retains the first column and forgets the second.

Restored liberalism reunites them.

XI. What Must Be Restored

The restoration therefore requires neither the abolition of liberal institutions nor the construction of a confessional police state.

It requires cultural reconstruction.

Several institutions are indispensable.

First, the family.

The family is the first school of non-contractual obligation. Children do not negotiate their admission. Parents discover duties they cannot simply terminate because the arrangement has ceased maximizing personal utility. Siblings learn that justice is not identical to preference.

Family therefore teaches the grammar liberal society requires but cannot itself generate:

gift, duty, forgiveness, patience, authority, inheritance, sacrifice.

Second, religion.

Religion introduces the vertical dimension.

The citizen discovers that neither the individual nor the state is God.

This limits both.

A government confronted by transcendent moral law cannot legitimately define good and evil by decree.

But neither can the individual.

Divine law consequently provides a limit upon Caesar and upon Narcissus.

Third, natural law.

Natural law provides the intellectual bridge between revelation and public reason.

Its proposition is not simply “obey because authority commands.”

It is that reality is intelligible; human nature is intelligible; practical reason can identify genuine goods; and freedom becomes excellent when directed toward those goods.

Fourth, tradition.

Tradition should neither be worshipped nor discarded.

It is accumulated moral capital.

Every generation has the right to criticize its inheritance, but no generation begins from zero.

Tradition gives the dead a seat at the table.

Fifth, nation and local community.

Universal human dignity need not abolish particular affection.

I can believe every human being possesses equal dignity while accepting special obligations toward my parents, children, neighbours and compatriots.

Love becomes real through particularity.

A person who professes equal love for seven billion people but will not care for the neighbour next door has misunderstood universality.

Sixth, constitutional authority.

Democracy itself requires limits.

Courts, legislatures, federal structures, local institutions, constitutional conventions and, in constitutional monarchies, the Crown distribute authority across time and institutions.

Politics ceases to be one enormous plebiscite of instantaneous preference.

These institutions are the banks of the river.

They do not destroy freedom.

They give freedom direction.

XII. Athens, Jerusalem and Rome

But restoration cannot consist merely of strengthening institutions.

Institutions require a story.

The West requires renewed confidence in the civilization from which its moral language emerged.

That inheritance might be described—necessarily imperfectly—as Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian.

This does not mean pretending that Western history is homogeneous. It is filled with argument, schism, war, contradiction, injustice and reform.

Nor does it mean denying what the West has learned from Islam, the civilizations of Asia, Indigenous peoples or the modern encounter among cultures.

A tradition capable only of speaking to itself is not a living tradition.

But genuine dialogue requires somewhere to stand.

The Western inheritance contains several substantial elements worth affirming.

From Greece comes confidence in reasoned inquiry; philosophy; the search for causes; the distinction between appearance and reality; reflection upon virtue; the idea that political order should be examined rationally; and the proposition that human flourishing requires cultivation of character.

From Rome comes law, citizenship, constitutional memory, civic duty, institutional continuity and a political imagination capable of distinguishing public office from private possession.

From Judaism comes radical monotheism, creation, covenant, moral law, historical consciousness, the prophetic critique of power and the dignity of the human being before God.

From Christianity comes the universalization of the moral community; the immense dignity of each person; the command to love neighbour and enemy; the moral elevation of the weak, poor and suffering; the limitation of worldly sovereignty beneath divine sovereignty; forgiveness; sacrificial love; and a conception of human equality grounded more deeply than political convenience.

From the medieval synthesis comes the reconciliation, however imperfect, of faith and reason; natural law; the university; layered jurisdictions; corporate liberties; and the conviction that political power exists within an objective moral order.

From the common-law and constitutional traditions comes government under law, procedural fairness, institutional restraint, property rights, historical liberty and the gradual limitation of arbitrary power.

From the scientific revolution comes disciplined empirical inquiry and extraordinary confidence in the intelligibility of nature.

From the Enlightenment and liberal constitutional tradition comes religious toleration, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, political accountability, legal equality and the insistence that coercive power justify itself.

These inheritances need not devour one another.

They can correct one another.

Athens without Jerusalem can become rationalism.

Jerusalem without Athens can become fideism.

Rome without either can become imperial power.

Christianity without constitutional restraint can become clerical domination.

Liberalism without tradition can become atomization.

Tradition without liberalism can become oppression.

Markets without morality can commodify everything.

Morality without freedom can become coercion.

The civilization survives through counterpoint.

Its harmony does not require one note.

It requires many notes related to a key.

XIII. From Fragmentation to Polyphony

This suggests a different answer to pluralism.

Our society frequently imagines diversity as fragmentation: communities standing beside one another, possessing incompatible truths, united principally by procedural rules preventing them from fighting.

That is a fragile peace.

A civilization requires something thicker.

But thickness need not mean uniformity.

Consider a choir.

Unison is possible, but harmony is richer.

The soprano does not become the bass.

The tenor does not silence the alto.

Their differences are necessary to the composition.

But they must share a key, tempo and score.

Otherwise the result is not diversity.

It is noise.

Restored liberalism should understand pluralism similarly.

There should remain enormous space for disagreement about politics, aesthetics, vocation, philosophy, religious interpretation and ways of life.

But beneath those disagreements should exist a civilizational grammar:

Human beings possess intrinsic dignity.

Truth exists independently of our preferences.

Reason can apprehend at least part of it.

Freedom is ordered toward human flourishing.

Rights generate corresponding duties.

Power is subject to moral law.

The weak possess claims upon the strong.

The family is a fundamental institution deserving protection.

Men and women are embodied creatures rather than disembodied wills.

Human beings inherit obligations as well as rights.

History deserves gratitude as well as criticism.

Political authority is necessary but limited.

Law must itself answer to justice.

Religious conscience deserves protection.

Civil disagreement does not make opponents enemies.

The future has claims upon the present.

And no human individual or political institution is sovereign in the absolute sense.

That is sufficiently substantial to constitute a civilization.

It is also sufficiently capacious to contain extraordinary diversity.

XIV. Against Nostalgia

Restoration must nevertheless distinguish itself from nostalgia.

There was no golden age.

Monarchs committed injustices.

Churchmen abused authority.

Families could become oppressive.

Traditional societies excluded minorities.

Women were denied political and economic opportunities.

Religious coercion caused immense suffering.

Class systems hardened into injustice.

Colonialism inflicted grave wrongs.

The restoration of liberalism therefore cannot mean pretending that the liberal revolt occurred without cause.

Liberalism arose partly because inherited institutions sometimes betrayed their own principles.

The answer is not to reverse history.

It is to integrate what history has taught us.

We should retain liberalism's suspicion of arbitrary power while rejecting its suspicion of all authority.

Retain individual rights while restoring duty.

Retain pluralism while recovering common culture.

Retain democracy while respecting institutions that stand beyond transient majorities.

Retain markets while refusing to make market value the measure of all value.

Retain autonomy while recovering human nature.

Retain reason while recovering humility.

Retain modernity without becoming prisoners of the present.

Restoration means retrieval, not regression.

XV. A Liberalism Capable of Surviving

We can now define restored liberalism.

It would be a liberalism confident enough to acknowledge that it did not create the world.

It would recognize persons as free but embodied; autonomous but dependent; equal in dignity but unequal in talents and obligations; rational but passionate; individual but social; contemporary but historical.

It would recognize that the state cannot save souls but that society cannot survive without forming character.

It would defend conscience without pretending conscience is infallible.

It would defend choice without pretending choice creates value.

It would defend diversity without abandoning truth.

It would defend equality without denying difference.

It would defend reason without reducing reality to what can be measured.

It would defend science without asking science to become metaphysics.

It would defend religion without demanding theocracy.

It would defend tradition without making tradition immune from criticism.

It would defend markets while insisting that some things should never be treated merely as commodities.

It would defend democracy while remembering that truth is not determined by majority vote.

And it would defend freedom while insisting that freedom reaches perfection not when nothing governs the person but when the person becomes capable of governing himself.

That is liberalism restored.

XVI. The Homecoming

The West does not require another revolution nearly so much as it requires a homecoming.

The image with which we began was pathological: the cell whose mechanisms of regulation have failed.

The second was geographical: the river that has burst its banks.

The third was mythological: the wounded king and barren kingdom.

The fourth was epic: Odysseus wandering while disorder consumes his house.

They describe the same condition.

A part has become detached from its whole.

The cancer cell ceases to obey the organism.

The flood ceases to obey the river.

Appetite ceases to obey reason.

Freedom ceases to recognize the good.

The individual ceases to understand himself through inheritance.

The present ceases to regard itself as trustee for past and future.

The kingdom loses its king.

And Odysseus cannot find Ithaca.

The solution in every case is not annihilation but reintegration.

Liberalism need not die.

It must remember what it belongs to.

Its great discovery—that the human person possesses a sphere of freedom that political power must respect—should remain one of the permanent achievements of Western civilization.

But the free person is not a sovereign atom.

He is a creature before he is a creator.

A child before an adult.

An inheritor before an innovator.

A member before an abstraction.

An embodied being before a choosing will.

And a participant in an intelligible moral order before he becomes its critic.

The deepest freedom therefore does not consist in liberation from every limit.

A musician without musical form produces noise.

A language without grammar becomes unintelligible.

A river without banks becomes a flood.

A body without regulation becomes diseased.

A society without authority becomes anomic.

And a soul without a governing principle becomes divided against itself.

The restoration of liberalism must consequently begin with the restoration of hierarchy properly understood—not hierarchy as domination, but hierarchy as order among goods.

Reason must again govern appetite.

Spirit must again defend what reason recognizes as good.

Freedom must answer to truth.

Positive law must answer to justice.

Human law must remain open to natural law.

Natural law must recover its intelligibility as participation in an order not manufactured by human will.

Politics must acknowledge limits.

The present must answer both to the dead and to the unborn.

And Western civilization must cease treating its inheritance principally as an indictment.

Athens, Rome and Jerusalem are not prisons from which we escaped.

They are cities through which we came.

The inheritance they bequeathed is neither racially exclusive nor culturally sealed. Precisely because its central claims concern reason, human dignity, moral responsibility and universal truth, it can be offered to anyone and criticized by anyone. Its renewal must therefore be invitation rather than coercion.

There will still be liberals and conservatives, Christians and Jews, believers and unbelievers, traditionalists and reformers, immigrants and native-born citizens, cosmopolitans and patriots.

The object is not ideological uniformity.

It is civilization.

We need not all sing the same note.

But we must recover a key in which our different notes can become music.

That recovery requires humility. Modernity must acknowledge that the generations before us were not merely waiting to be corrected by us. Liberalism must acknowledge that institutions older than liberalism may contain knowledge liberalism requires. Reason must acknowledge that freedom without truth becomes arbitrary. Politics must acknowledge that not everything can be settled politically. The individual must acknowledge that belonging is not necessarily bondage.

And the West must finally acknowledge that one cannot permanently inhabit a *Waste Land*.

The Fisher King must be healed.

The river must return within its banks.

The damaged code must recover its regulatory order.

The wandering king must come home.

Odysseus's return does not destroy Ithaca's freedom. It ends the disorder produced by the absence of legitimate rule. So too the restoration of authority need not mean the destruction of liberalism. Proper authority makes ordered liberty possible.

The King returns not to abolish freedom but to restore the conditions under which freedom has meaning.

This, then, is the critique of pure liberalism.

Not a rejection of liberty.

Not a repudiation of modernity.

Not a romantic flight into an imaginary past.

It is a critique in the Kantian sense: an inquiry into limits undertaken for the sake of preservation.

The liberal tradition taught Western civilization to ask authority:

By what right do you restrain me?

The restoration of liberalism requires that we retain that question while recovering another:

For what good have I been made free?

Between those two questions lies the possibility of ordered liberty.

And perhaps the possibility of homecoming.

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