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Saving Liberalism's Soul by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* by David Walsh. University of Missouri Press. 386 pp. \$39.95.

On good liberal grounds alone, academic liberals should appreciate David Walsh's powerful new defense of liberalism. A valuable contribution to the increasingly edifying debate led by conservatives over liberalism's future, Walsh's book begins by gently but firmly exposing the illusions that conceal from contemporary liberalism the source of the liberal spirit's formidable moral authority.

Walsh brings the fundamental illusion into focus in a brief discussion of what is by common consent the masterpiece of academic liberalism, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Although that text is primarily devoted to constructing an ideal theory of justice, Rawls does consider whether his principles of justice --- equal liberty and the toleration of inequalities so long as they benefit all --- can form the basis of any actual polity. And to the question of whether, under the principle that allowable inequalities must benefit the least-well off, the poor will still resent the greater resources of the wealthy even as the wealthy will resent the sacrifices they must make to improve the lot of the poor, Rawls makes the simple and astounding answer: No. Rawls asserts that liberal principles will cure the selfish passions because they "lead to social arrangements in which envy and other destructive feelings are not likely to be strong. The conception of justice eliminates the conditions that give rise to disruptive attitudes. It is, therefore, inherently stable." To this quite debatable empirical proposition, for which Rawls provides scarcely a shred of empirical evidence, Walsh asks, "Are not envy and vanity and the desire to dominate more deeply rooted temptations than Rawlsian liberalism seems to suspect? Do we not sense them as possibilities that can perhaps infect even our most noble aspirations?"

Walsh supplies, from within *A Theory of Justice* itself, Rawls's answer to these probing doubts: "Men's propensity to injustice," Rawls coolly asserts, "is not a permanent aspect of community life; it is greater or less depending in large part on social institutions, and in particular on whether these are just or unjust." Rawls's sentiments (an appropriate word since little in the way of argument about moral psychology or human nature is adduced in *A Theory of Justice* to support them) are seen by Walsh as a contemporary manifestation of the old Millian illusion of inevitable progress, the conceit that history and enlightenment are cooperating to bring about the moral improvement of mankind. Rawls's sentiments of course could as easily be seen as an expression of the idea often associated with Rousseau that man

is born good and made bad by society. Or they could be viewed as a descendant of the Marxian belief that once the crippling effects of the division of labor have been overcome and the state has withered away, then social life can be organized so as to overcome alienation, actualize equality, and make men and women perfectly free.

But whatever their provenance, to subscribe to Rawls' sentiments at this late date it is necessary to systematically ignore the ample evidence offered by history, literature, and the morning newspaper. In other words, what contemporary liberalism so alarmingly lacks is knowledge of the complexities --- the heights as well as the depths --- of the human heart.

Walsh is hardly the first to point this out. What distinguishes his study is the emphasis he places on liberalism's "existential appeal." This consists in the liberal tradition's ability to give political expression to the principle or moral belief, widely shared among modern men and women, that the individual is sacred, the unique bearer of a fundamental human dignity. Walsh sees this belief as part of the Christian heritage of the West --- and again, he is by no means the first to view the liberal tradition as in considerable measure a secular and political development of Christian morality. But he is not simply siding with those conservatives who argue that the secularization of Christianity in liberalism has betrayed its patrimony and is rapidly depleting its accumulated moral capital. Rather, Walsh sees in the liberal tradition a distinctive development and deepening on the political plane of the Christian belief in the transcendent dignity of the human being; but he sees that this development and deepening have come to endanger liberalism's genuine achievements by cutting the liberal spirit off from the sources that sustain it.

The problem is reflected in the discrepancy between liberalism's extraordinary political achievements and the anxiety that is felt all around about its future. Everywhere that freedom has been tasted, liberalism or democracy limited by liberal principles has come to be seen as the standard of legitimacy, "the most appropriate form of government for human beings . . . the form of order that speaks to our human dignity as rational, self-governing beings." And yet, Walsh argues, liberalism's most powerful philosophical critics, extending back to Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, continue to suspect it of issuing in moral relativism and the anarchy of mere appetite.

Many today see support for this suspicion in the increasingly severe social problems, cultural cleavages, and impoverished public life that afflict liberal democracy in America. And they find further confirmation that nihilism is the truth of liberalism in the resolute refusal of liberalism's most esteemed philosophical proponents to provide a reasoned defense of liberal principles. To be sure, contemporary liberals such as Rawls and Rorty present their unwillingness give an account of liberalism's foundations as a mark of philosophical virtue, the intellectual equivalent of learning to live within one's own means. Walsh sees the virtue in such philosophical modesty, but he sees as well the pride that contemporary liberals take in their self-imposed intellectual austerity, and he hears the boast in their implicit claim that their modest means are the only valid ones.

In the contemporary crisis, Walsh argues, such false modesty is precisely the luxury liberalism cannot afford. While the liberal tradition has weathered many storms, it has never faced the current threat: the weakening grip of its existential core or animating spirit. When Christian belief was strong and widely shared, when an unspoken and deeply felt moral consensus about the sanctity of the individual prevailed, liberal regimes could function quite well without a fine-grained articulation of the goodness of freedom. But when these sustaining beliefs are shaken or corroded, articulating the moral sources of the liberal spirit takes on a new urgency.

Liberalism is not the sole cause of the crisis that has overtaken it, but according to Walsh it bears a considerable measure of responsibility. The goodness of individual liberty points toward a transcendent good whose support the liberal tradition has been steadily driven to disown and whose reality liberalism increasingly feels compelled to deny. The ethos of liberal neutrality seems to have at last forced liberalism to become neutral regarding its own goodness. The liberal longing for increasingly comprehensive kinds of freedom has increasingly come to threaten the respect for limits and order that are freedom's precondition. The liberal state's care for the individual runs the risk of turning citizens into irresponsible individuals unable to care for themselves. And the premium liberal thought places on dispassionate judgment and instrumental reasoning, though born of the moral intention to respect individuals by respecting their abstract rights, dehumanizes office holders and bureaucrats as well ordinary citizens by promoting a view of human beings as objects of technical manipulation.

Through extended discussions of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Mill, and Tocqueville, Walsh explores the resources within the liberal tradition for renewing the liberal spirit. In keeping with his guiding conviction that the liberal tradition is animated by a "spiritual core" whose foundations it covers in silence, Walsh seeks to illustrate the myriad ways in which devotion to the sanctity of the individual and a conviction of the necessity of personal freedom for the realization of human dignity organized and anchored the thought of the makers of modern liberalism. Not all his illustrations are equally persuasive but all are thoughtfully drawn and deserving of careful consideration.

Walsh is more sanguine than many conservative commentators concerning the prospects for renewing the liberal spirit, although the obstacles to that renewal are, he acknowledges, certainly daunting. His approach is to build on moral aspirations that are already present in experience --- though growing thinner and dimmer all the time --- and to reason as much as possible from within the structure of liberal thought.

A model of his approach is his provocative discussion of abortion. On the one hand, he sees how the demand for protection of a woman's right to choose an abortion has roots in the liberal respect for the protection of individual freedom. On the other hand, he observes that treating a fetus (or unborn child) as a thing to be disposed of for the convenience of another rather than as a developing human being corrodes the devotion to the sanctity of the

individual that lies at the foundation of the liberal concern for freedom. Walsh does not argue, like Rawls and Habermas and the deliberative democrats who follow them, that the only valid arguments about abortion in a liberal democracy must be based on universal abstract moral principles to which all can in principle agree. Nor does he argue on the basis of religious dogma. Rather, he contends that abortion is bad for liberty because it damages the spirit that sustains respect for the individual.

In sum, Walsh shows that today more than ever the defense of the liberal spirit requires reflection on the needs of the human soul. And he makes a convincing case that a philosophy, however high-minded its intentions, that denies itself the right to ask questions about the human soul leaves liberalism defenseless against the confusion and slackening of spirit that now assail it.

Walsh's argument is complex and compelling. He writes with generosity and clarity about a remarkable range of texts, and his analysis is enlivened by colorful metaphors and arresting insights. True, his book is made too long by a repetitiveness that tests the patience of even a friendly reader, and readers who are not friendly are sure to be put off by his occasional recourse to the language of faith. That, however, is their loss, for time and again Walsh illuminates the heart of the matter: the liberal tradition has greatly advanced the cause of human dignity, but there have been costs, and even liberalism's solid achievements have been made vulnerable by a progress that has left liberals increasingly unable to say what freedom is good for and why individuals are worth respecting.

Because his criticism of the liberal tradition is bound up with a genuine admiration for its achievements, Walsh is an unusually judicious guide to the infirmities of academic liberalism: the uncritical self-assurance of its own essential correctness; a pride in its own tolerance that is often manifested in sanctimonious and unyielding condescension toward opposing viewpoints; and a narrow and intense concentration on principles and their implications for public and private law accompanied by a disregard for the impact of the actualization of those principles on citizens' character. Walsh calls liberalism back to its sustaining sources and reminds it of the virtues that enable it to honor its core principles. He criticizes contemporary liberalism in the name of the liberal spirit, and in the course of his criticism he defends the liberal spirit by displaying it in action.

Peter Berkowitz teaches government at Harvard and is the author of *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Harvard University Press). His new book, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, is forthcoming from Princeton University Press.