

The Liberal Spirit in America

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I. Our liberalism

Never has a people enjoyed a greater range of individual rights, or been more jealous of their freedoms, or been more convinced that the liberty they prize is good not only for themselves but also for other peoples than we in the United States today. The freest society in most respects that the world has ever seen has produced the world's most diverse society; the world's best army; the world's most organized, industrious, and productive economy; and a political order that to a remarkable degree contains the factions and divisions that have prevented so many other countries from innovating and solving collective problems. This represents the triumph in America of liberalism, a tradition of thought and politics stretching back at least to seventeenth-century England, whose fundamental moral premise is the natural freedom and equality of all and whose governing theme has been the securing of equal freedom in political life.

Yet cause for anxiety comes from many quarters. Freedom in America has produced or permitted massive income inequalities. It has given rise to a popular culture that frequently descends into the cheap and salacious. It maintains a public school system that fails to teach many students the basics of reading and writing and arithmetic; and at higher levels of education, it breeds an academic culture that preaches the relativity of values and that cannot reach agreement on what a well-educated person ought to have learned by the time he or she graduates from college. It has contributed to a destabilizing erosion of the old rules, written and unwritten, that govern dating, sex, love, marriage, and family. It has fostered among opinion makers and intellectual elites a distrust that borders on contempt for religious belief. And it has fortified among the highly educated an uncritical faith in the coincidence of scientific progress and moral progress.

To understand the challenge whole, it is first necessary to correct an unfortunate confusion of terms. In the United States, "liberal" commonly denotes the left wing of the Democratic Party. To be sure, as a result of bruising post-1960s political battles, many on the left have disavowed the term liberal, choosing instead the label "progressive," in fact a more apt designation for their outlook. Nevertheless, the term liberal retains a distinctive meaning, indeed a progressive one, in our political lexicon.

It was not foreordained that "liberal" would become synonymous with progressive politics as it has in the United States. Witness the career of the term in Europe, where it has come to designate something much closer to libertarianism. Yet neither is the equation of liberalism with progressivism an accident, for there is a powerful progressive thrust inhering in the liberal tradition. When it arose in the seventeenth century, before it acquired its name,

liberalism, particularly that of Locke, sought to limit the claims of religious authorities in politics and the claims of political authorities in religious matters. As these ideas took root, as religion receded from the center of politics (and as science and industry developed and markets spread), individual freedom acquired more space, more individuals began to enjoy its blessings, and power shifted to those who had long been denied it. When it came into its own in the nineteenth century, liberalism, particularly that of Mill, sought to limit the role in politics of status, wealth, and sex by assuring through the state formal equality. The result was to accelerate the pace at which power shifted to the people and to spread the blessings of freedom more equally. And when, in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century, it became synonymous with the left wing of the Democratic Party, liberalism aggressively sought to limit the role in politics of poverty, race, sex, old age, illness, and disability by guaranteeing to all individuals a certain minimum level of material goods and moral standing. As this outlook merged in the United States with the conventional wisdom, the press for freedom became indistinguishable in many minds from the improvement of social life through the push for equality in all ways and in all realms.

Yet there is more to the defense of freedom than progress in equality, as John Stuart Mill stressed in *On Liberty* (1859) and in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). Because moving ahead requires holding some things still, because freedoms won must be preserved, and because its improvement as well as its preservation depends upon citizens with particular skills, knowledge, and qualities of mind and character, a free society always requires a party of order as well as a party of progress. Hence, conservatives, who take a special interest in freedom's limits and its material and moral preconditions, are properly seen as belonging to the liberal tradition and in fact play an essential role in maintaining the liberal state. Generally speaking, where the right in American politics today differs with the left is not about the primacy of personal freedom but about the primacy of competing policies; that is, the care for which goods — those related to order or those related to progress — freedom most urgently requires.

And the difference over competing policies stems from a more fundamental disagreement between left and right about the primacy of the factors that menace freedom. Progressive liberals see inequality as the chief menace to freedom and government as an essential part of the solution. For libertarian liberals, who like progressives think that freedom yields progress and like conservatives stress that freedom depends on limits, it is government that is the chief menace to freedom, and the restraint of government is freedom's essential safeguard. And for conservative liberals, both of the traditional and neoconservative variety, it is the excess of freedom and equality that poses the biggest threat to freedom, and government is seen as both friend and foe in the battle to limit freedom and equality on behalf of freedom and equality.

To maintain that liberalism constitutes our dominant moral and political tradition is not to deny the presence in America of competing traditions. Biblical faith, for example, remains a powerful force in the lives of many Americans. And even for the larger numbers who no

longer organize their lives around sacred scripture and worship, biblical faith, through the impact it has had over the centuries on our moral concepts and categories, influences the scope and direction of our imagination and informs practical judgments, often in ways that rein in freedom's most ambitious and reckless claims. Moreover, anger, pride, envy, ambition, honor, love, and a host of other passions that dwell within us are inflected by, but resist reduction to, our love of freedom.

Nor is arguing that many of today's progressives and conservatives are equally members of the liberal tradition and pillars of the liberal state to imply that if everybody were to sit down together, talk things over civilly, and sort through the issues reasonably, we would discover universal agreement on all the important questions. This is a popular conceit among professors, who can't bear the thought that the problems of politics are not amenable to conclusive resolution through rigorous reasoning (by them) and rational discourse (under their direction). Yet the lesson that emerges from an examination of the liberalism that we share suggests that the professors who dream of disinterested deliberations and ideal speech situations grounded in self-evident premises, governed by objective and necessary rules, and issuing in unassailable public policy choices have drawn exactly the wrong conclusion.

To be sure, agreement on basic liberal political institutions is as broad as is agreement on liberalism's fundamental moral premise: the natural freedom and equality of all. Who opposes representative institutions, separated powers, an independent judiciary, a free press, and legal guarantees of freedom of belief, speech, and association? However, the very scope of agreement among partisans about the lineaments of self-government brings home the permanence of disagreement in the politics of a free people. Theory teaches both that a balance must be struck between the claims of order and the claims of progress and that theory itself cannot specify the proper balance that we, in our peculiar circumstances, must strike. This is partly because theory does not determine the weight to be given to the competing goods that the party of order and the party of balance promote. It is also because that job falls to flesh-and-blood individuals, given to self-seeking and ambition. Nor can theory, once the balance has been struck, replace the need for such individuals to find ways to cooperate in maintaining it.

A liberal spirit conduces to the task of maintaining free institutions. Such a spirit is tolerant of opposing opinions and choices, which means that it is prepared to respect the rights of individuals with whom it disagrees and of whose conduct it disapproves. It is generous, both in seeking to understand what is true in other people's beliefs and in looking for the shared humanity in their diverse and indeed divergent strivings. And it is capable of restraining immediate desire in the interest of satisfying higher or more comprehensive desires. The exercise of these virtues enables citizens to ease the friction, take advantage of the opportunities, and handle the responsibilities that arise, amidst the frenetic motion, in a free society.

Where do the virtues that compose such a spirit come from? Will free societies always have such a spirit in sufficient supply? Thinkers on the left, particularly those influenced by Kant, such as John Rawls and Judith Shklar, have argued that free societies are in a sense self-sustaining: The experience of living under free institutions fosters in citizens a liberal character. Thinkers on the right, especially those who take their bearings from Tocqueville and Aristotle, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Harvey Mansfield, warn that free societies contain the seeds of their own destruction: The experience of freedom leads to a voracious desire for more of it, steadily severing individuals' attachment to family and faith, which they contend are the most reliable sources of the liberal spirit's virtues.

In fact, when properly formulated, these two opinions reflecting the optimism of the left and the pessimism of the right should be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. Free institutions do tend to teach toleration, generosity in the understanding of others, and self-restraint in the short term for the sake of long-term self-interest. But undisciplined and unbalanced by other principles, freedom causes toleration to metamorphose into rigid and unconvincing neutrality between competing goods. It transforms generosity in the understanding of others into the presumptuous conviction that one has understood other people's beliefs and needs better than they have and therefore should legislate so as to bring their conduct in line with their true interests. And it opens the door to excessive focus on calculating the best means for the satisfaction of desire, which soon crowds out calculations about the satisfactions found in fulfilling one's duty and eventually renders invisible the claims of duty that transcend calculation.

Why does the liberal spirit overreach? In part because to overreach is human. In part because of the common belief that freedom is made more secure by acquiring more of it. In part because the enjoyment of freedom pushes against and wears down not just the claims of this or that authority but the claims of all authority, save for that of the freely choosing individual. This is not to say that we are at the mercy of freedom's overreaching. In a free society, freedom creates the conditions under which we can bring our passion for freedom under control and discipline it to serve our purposes. Such an undertaking depends upon the awareness that our liberalism never fully embraces or exhausts our humanity. It also depends upon emancipating our understanding of the liberal tradition from a variety of misconceptions with which it has become encrusted and then grasping the temptations to which the liberal spirit is perennially prey. Such an examination is a preliminary to crafting policies, consistent with the principles of a free society, that will safeguard the best interests of the liberal spirit — but especially in the current clamor and confusion, an indispensable preliminary.

II. Misconceiving liberalism

In our day professors, largely representing the progressive wing of the liberal tradition, have taken the lead in promulgating the misconceptions that encrust the liberal tradition. They betray a determination to obscure or simplify into nonexistence the tensions that flow from

liberalism's fundamental premise, the natural freedom and equality of all. Although they sense the complexity, they prefer to devise stratagems to evade the conflicting principles and goods that constitute the liberalism of our moral and political life. Their evasions, however, may prove costly, since the principles and goods that support freedom do not balance themselves and will not be balanced wisely by us if we are lulled into disregarding the many and varied conflicts among them.

To move beyond the common simplifications, it is necessary to rejuvenate distinctions that the professors have sought to collapse and reconstruct the working relations between rival principles and goods that they conceive of in terms of harsh antitheses. First, liberalism is not, as is often asserted, the same as democracy. Many scholars, however, wish to collapse the distinction between the two by incorporating into the idea of democracy standards of freedom, efficiency, fairness, security — indeed of all good things. They would make the term “liberal democracy” a redundancy. It is, however, not a matter of semantics to insist that liberalism adds something important to liberal democracy, awareness of which is diminished by dropping “liberal” from the name. That added something important is the primacy of freedom, and that diminished awareness is of the ever-present potential for, and common reality of, conflict between popular will and individual rights. Scholars who fold their liberalism into their democracy are in the practice of maintaining that their progressive policy preferences are necessary to the full flowering of individual freedom and *therefore* are an expression of popular will, even though majorities to support the policies are nowhere to be found. Call this the Rousseauian fallacy.

In fact liberalism and democracy stand for competing, if related, principles. In contrast to liberalism, which puts freedom first, democracy puts equality first. Whereas liberalism is a doctrine about the limits that government must respect to ensure freedom, democracy is a theory that proclaims that the people, with no particular limits, should rule.

It is true that liberalism and democracy are linked by a critical affinity: Liberalism tends to think of freedom in terms of rights that are shared equally by all, while democracy tends to conceive of equality in terms of freedom to live as one pleases. It is also true that the experience of the past 250 years strongly suggests that freedom is best protected democratically and that self-government is more just when constrained by liberal guarantees of individual freedom. But the individual rights of the liberal tradition impose a defining limitation on the people's or popular will, proclaiming as a matter of fundamental law that there are some policies and programs that majorities, however strongly they may feel and however convinced they may be, are barred from enacting. Precisely where those limits fall must properly remain a permanent bone of contention, to be hashed out again and again as circumstances for which the law has responsibility change, but both the permanence and the propriety of the debate are obscured by equating liberalism and democracy.

Second, liberalism does not deny the claims of community. Nevertheless, an array of scholars has written as if freedom and community — or, more broadly, freedom and association — are thoroughly antagonistic and irreconcilable. On the one side, in the name of liberalism, scholars argue that individuals are constituted by their capacity for free rational choice and that community represents an external source of authority to which the individual's reason forbids him to submit. On the other side, in the name of communitarianism or civic republicanism — schools of academic political theory that arose specifically to challenge liberalism — other scholars maintain that the free and rationally choosing agent is a fantasy, because all individuals are constituted by duties and attachments that are given and not chosen, and that freedom is achieved not through the private choices that individuals make about how to conduct their lives but through the choices that citizens make in public with their fellow citizens about government and public policy. Both sides collude in fortifying a false dichotomy between individual freedom and association. The collusion serves the interests of the liberal theorists who wish to establish freedom as not merely the supreme good for politics but the sole good and the communitarian and civic republican theorists who wish to establish a similar monopoly for their favored good.

The interests of the liberal spirit, however, are better served by understanding that there is a genuine tension between the claims of freedom and those of community and association, but not one so thoroughgoing as to preclude a politics that gives substantial recognition to the claims of both. Recognizing that we are partly constituted by attachments we do not choose and duties we do not make is not to concede that individuals are incapable of questioning these attachments and duties and rejecting them or placing them on a different, more considered, footing. Nor is it to deny that political deliberation is a good — indeed, that choosing with fellow citizens public policy and the laws of the land is one aspect of individual freedom. Putting individual freedom first is not the same as proclaiming freedom the sole and self-sufficient good, in politics or beyond. Indeed, freedom and community or association can be mutually supportive. For example, the capacity for freedom, the makers of modern liberalism teach, is acquired in association. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1689), John Locke gives an intricate account of the role that education plays in inculcating the moral and intellectual virtues that equip individuals for a life of liberty; and in Locke's view, it is parents, within the confines of the fundamental association of the family, who have the responsibility to ensure that children receive this education. Throughout his writings, John Stuart Mill contends that flourishing voluntary associations where men and women meet and learn to cooperate for mutual advantage render individuals more independent and liberty more secure. Even John Rawls, in the neglected third part of his masterwork, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971), argues at length that the family and the voluntary associations of civil society instill qualities of mind and character presupposed by a well-ordered liberal society.

Third, liberalism does not reject virtue. Paralleling, however, the common arguments that seek to drive a wedge between liberalism and community, many scholars, both in the defense of liberalism and in the attack on it, still insist that the liberal tradition has little patience or place for virtue and that virtue has little patience or place for individual freedom. After all, liberalism was born in the revolt against the authority of the church and Aristotle, and the virtues were thought to revolve around the church's doctrine concerning human salvation and Aristotle's account of human excellence. So mustn't those who embrace individual freedom reject virtue, and mustn't those who cling to the virtues reject a form of political life that rejected the authorities on which they believe the moral life to be based?

Something similar to what was said about the tension between freedom and community should be said about the tension between freedom and virtue: It is genuine, but rightly understood, and what it reflects is a complicated relationship, not an insuperable opposition. As I have suggested, the liberal spirit embodies specific virtues, and the liberal tradition elaborates a compelling account of the virtues on which a free society depends. Moreover, in rejecting the political authority of religious faith and of Aristotle (and of other so-called perfectionist conceptions of man), one need not reject their truth. For, to understate matters considerably, not every respectable understanding of church doctrine requires that the church promote salvation through politics. And, again to understate matters considerably, not every respectable account of Aristotle or of perfectionist ethics in general requires that the state inculcate the ethics that truly perfects man. The liberal constraints on legislation by the state of particular conceptions of human salvation or human perfection are even compatible with the conclusion that some virtues on which the liberal state depends are better grasped by religious faith or the Aristotelian tradition of ethics.

Fourth, and closely connected, liberalism is not based on skepticism. This claim is often put forward proudly by academic liberals and advanced contemptuously by their critics. Academic liberals think that being grounded in skepticism about the human good is good for liberalism because it frees it from dependence on controversial opinions about human nature and the content of a truly good life. A foundation in skepticism provides liberalism, they suggest, a built-in safeguard against attempts to legislate morals: If liberalism is based on skepticism, how can it possibly promote one conception of the good life over another? Critics retort that because it is grounded in skepticism, liberalism cannot begin to do justice to the full range of human emotions, passions, and moral judgments, which are often oriented toward ideas about what is right and proper and fitting for a human being.

In fact, liberalism is firmly grounded in the belief in the natural freedom and equality of all human beings. This fundamental moral premise, at once descriptive and normative, is a statement of what human beings truly are that is rich with implications for how we ought to be treated in moral and political life and in what our good consists. Whether it is demonstrable by reason, it is liberalism's most basic affirmation, its first principle, and its non-negotiable starting point. It colors all that we say and think and do. The liberal tradition takes it to be universally true, but is not committed to the view favored by some progressive

liberals that its truth is everywhere at least implicitly recognized and can serve as a conclusive justification for intervening in other people's and nations' affairs. What is erroneously interpreted as the liberal tradition's fundamental skepticism is in fact the tolerant and generous stance toward opinions about alternative conceptions of the good life that grows out of liberalism's fundamental premise. If each person is free and equal, shouldn't each person's choice about what is of ultimate importance be respected? Yet how can the choice be respected if the thing chosen is not of some value, or if disagreeable choices are outlawed or subject to organized public censure? The good life, from the liberal point of view, is the freely chosen life.

Fifth, liberalism is not an obstacle to securing the rights of minorities and women. Critics are keen to point out liberalism's various compromises with oppression and discrimination in America and quick to conclude that liberalism has been the principal cause of the denial of property, power, and status to nonwhite unpropertied men. In the United States, the paradigmatic case is that of African Americans. They have had to overcome the Constitution's legal protection of slavery; the Supreme Court's pre-Civil War decision in *Dred Scott* (1857) holding that blacks were property; its post-Civil War decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) affirming the doctrine that states could maintain separate but equal public facilities for whites and blacks; Jim Crow laws; and today the excruciating challenge of inner-city poverty, which itself has roots in the legacy of American slavery and discrimination. Women, too, have had to struggle to attain equal rights. They lacked the right to vote until 1920, when they were granted it by the Nineteenth Amendment; throughout American history they suffered legal disabilities concerning the right to make contracts and the right to hold jobs; and public opinion conspired with law to deny them standing, access, and opportunities. Undoubtedly liberal institutions have harbored bigotry and have been enlisted in behalf of schemes of oppression; some progressives and feminists conclude that because of this history, liberalism is irredeemably tainted and must be overthrown.

Yet in the fight to attain equal rights, liberalism, far from being an obstacle, has been for minorities and women their most reliable ally. Discrimination on the basis of race and sex has a history that predates the advent of liberalism, and these injustices persisted in the United States long after the rise of liberalism despite, not because of, liberal principles. Indeed, at every step of the way in the battle to overcome legally enforced discrimination, minorities, women, and their friends have enjoyed their greatest successes when they appealed to liberal principles. And even when opponents of discrimination have appealed to non-liberal principles or, indeed, when they have poured scorn on liberalism — as in the cases of the student movement of the 1960s, postmodern theorists, and radical feminists — their appeal could gain a respectful and sympathetic hearing because of the power that liberal principles exercise in the consciences of most citizens.

Sixth, liberalism does not falsely promise to remain neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. This canard has its origins in the misguided effort by academic liberals, which had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s but is still going strong in many precincts, to show that

maintaining neutrality toward different ways of life lay at the very heart of liberalism. On behalf of this claim, they devised elaborate thought experiments designed to show how state neutrality is possible — and why it is necessary for the state to aggressively redistribute goods (Rawls) or, to the contrary, why it is mandatory for the state to scrupulously avoid redistribution in order to honor neutrality (Robert Nozick, for example). Their critics delighted in demonstrating that every such thought experiment, no matter how ingenious, presupposed the good of autonomy, or a life organized around the principle that individuals should live in accordance with ends that they have chosen for themselves. In other words, contended the critics, neutrality was valued by academic liberals as the primary principle for government because it served the interests of the autonomous life.

The debate about liberalism's neutrality, however, has been ill-conceived and has come to a dead end. The critics are right about the bias that inheres in the doctrine of neutrality, but they are wrong to think that liberalism is somehow at fault for not coming clean or for breaking its promise. This is because the doctrine of neutrality is the invention of Anglo-American post-60s academic liberalism. The larger liberal tradition makes no such representations or promises. It sees the determination to promote a single conception of human perfection or vision of religious salvation through the force of law as a major threat to freedom. It fully expects that a political society grounded in the natural freedom and equality of all will be distinguished by its openness to human diversity and by the value it places — both to the individual and to the wider society — on “experiments in life,” in John Stuart Mill's phrase. While this may look like neutrality, it isn't. Individuals whose fundamental beliefs place less of a premium on individual choice, to say nothing of those who see celebration of individual choice as a revolt against God or a betrayal of the nation, will certainly be put at a disadvantage in a free society. For this, liberalism need offer no apology. While it cannot and does not require neutrality, liberal respect for individual choice does counsel toleration. Toleration calls upon individuals to live with and respect the rights of others, including the rights of those who embrace ways of life of which they disapprove so long as these individuals are willing to respect the rights of others. Laws that put toleration into practice will certainly make life harder for individuals whose way of life requires them to enshrine in public law their religious ideals or conceptions of moral perfection. This goes not only for those who put their faith in the Bible, but also for those who put their faith in autonomy.

Seventh, along the same lines, liberalism does not invest the state with responsibility to make individuals autonomous or give it authority to perfect citizens' powers to make rational choices about moral and political life. This has been the view advanced by so-called perfectionist liberals. They are critics of the idea of liberal neutrality, but on behalf of what they regard as the liberal state's affirmative responsibility to emancipate individuals through thoroughgoing public education from the dead weight of religion, tradition, parental authority, and the accidents of personal experience. They do not go so far as to argue that individuals must be forced to be free, but they do sometimes envisage a contest over

children's souls between parents and a secular and secularizing state. Without such state intervention, argue perfectionist liberals, citizens cannot fully enjoy their liberties, or deliberate reasonably about public affairs, or effectively maintain the political institutions characteristic of a free people.

The liberal tradition, however, does not suppose that all individuals are cut from the same cloth, nor does it require that state education make all individuals in the same mold. Indeed, it counsels against states that make promotion of the ideal of autonomy a goal of the state on the principled grounds that the state lacks authority or competence to promote human perfection, the liberal interpretation included. It does not follow that the state is prohibited from imposing any educational requirements on children. There are jobs to be done in a liberal state, and an educated citizenry is needed to perform them. To maintain a liberal state, however, it is not necessary that every citizen be a virtuoso of enlightenment sentiment and critical reasoning. Indeed, that way lies a state-induced conformism that imperils freedom by depriving it of competing outlooks. It is enough — it is in fact a great good — for the liberal state to secure that degree of freedom that allows individuals, with the help of others beginning with one's parents, to perfect themselves.

The misconceptions that encrust the liberal tradition do not come from nowhere. In every case they represent an effort to overlook the interplay of competing principles and goods within it. To be sure, there would be fewer sources of confusion and instability if liberalism and democracy were one and the same; if the claims of liberalism and those of community were entirely irreconcilable; if liberalism and virtue were utterly antagonistic; if liberals by definition couldn't legislate morals because their fundamental moral and political beliefs were devoid of moral content; if liberalism were the principal source of the oppression and discrimination that minorities and women have suffered on its watch; if liberalism could once and for all be applauded for its commitment to the doctrine of neutrality or condemned for its betrayal of it; if the autonomous individual were the only individual liberalism could respect. But the suppression of crucial distinctions and the promulgation of false dichotomies, often under the initiative of liberals themselves, is for contemporary liberalism a still greater source of confusion and instability.

III. The paradox of freedom

The single greatest source of instability in the liberal spirit stems from the momentum that freedom develops in a free society. Public opinion and popular culture sing its praise. Social and political institutions absorb its imperatives and give voice to its demands. Private life is permeated by it. Progress in freedom gives new meaning to the virtues that epitomize the liberal spirit: It dissolves toleration into indifference or neutrality; it dissipates generosity into busybodiness or bossiness; and it collapses rational or enlightened self-interest into petty selfishness. By placing the individual at the center, freedom also creates fertile ground for the growth of age-old vices, particularly narcissism, vanity, and sanctimoniousness. At every turn, the spread of freedom emboldens the liberal spirit's inclination to expose and

overthrow the claims of arbitrary authority. However, as the claims of freedom themselves acquire authority in a free society, the liberal spirit finds it difficult to limit its campaign against authority to that which is arbitrary. Or rather, with each new success, the liberal spirit comes closer to viewing all authority as arbitrary. Eventually, the liberal spirit turns upon the authority of freedom itself, attacking the very source of its moral standing. Thus does postmodernism arise out of the sources of liberalism.

Freedom's momentum can be seen in the unfolding of the liberal tradition. Early on, as exemplified by Locke, the liberal spirit rebelled in particular against arbitrariness in the exercise of political authority, the authority exercised by the state over the individual. Later, in Mill's age, as liberalism attained maturity, the liberal spirit increasingly chafed at authority in the moral realm as well, targeting more directly the claims of public opinion, of clergy, and of parents to issue authoritative judgments about how others should live. In our day, as liberalism has grown both more aggressive and more complacent, the liberal spirit not only has found threats to freedom lurking everywhere, but also has demanded that the state rather than the individual take responsibility for rooting them out. The next frontier is the constraint imposed by our biology. Astounding developments in the realm of biotechnology are encouraging the liberal spirit to see natural constraints on human life as arbitrary and capable of being overcome, if that is what individuals desire, by drugs, by surgery, by gene therapy, and by genetic engineering.

There is reason to worry, however, that the relentless breaking down of barriers in the political realm, the moral realm, and the natural realm poses a threat to freedom by destroying the conditions for its humanly satisfying exercise. For freedom has roots in our nature, depends on the maintenance of order in our affairs, and receives its highest justification from the ends it enables us to pursue. Yet the advance of freedom tends to subvert our understanding of our natures, our respect for the imperatives of order, and our willingness to view any ends as authoritative.

Freedom's self-subverting tendencies give rise to the paradox of freedom: Freedom depends upon a variety of beliefs, practices, and institutions that are weakened by the increasingly forceful reverberations of freedom throughout all facets of moral and political life. Some more traditional conservatives will say that such weakening is the baleful and inevitable consequence of modern freedom. Some more radical progressives will contend that what the traditional conservatives regard as a baleful weakening is really a long overdue liberation. But both the traditional conservatives and the radical progressives see only what they want to see. Freedom's self-subverting tendencies are real but not the whole story. They are inseparable from progress in freedom and, indeed, are inseparable from freedom's self-correcting powers. The very freedom that brings traditional authorities and institutions into question creates an opportunity for a reconsideration of their function and foundation. Indeed, freedom's self-subverting tendencies are the object on which the liberal spirit's self-correcting powers — its ability to stand back, take a fresh look, discipline passions, ferret out prejudice, and assess its situation reasonably — are currently most in need of focusing.

Consider first the realm of education. Education is indispensable to preparing citizens for the rights and responsibilities of freedom. Instilling in their children a sense of good and bad, forming their principles, and generally directing their education is itself an expression of parents' freedom. But parents' freedom is also limited by their responsibility and the individual rights of children, which are enforceable by the liberal state, to ensure that their sons and daughters receive a certain basic education. Especially at the elementary level, where it is compulsory in the United States and provided by government to all and by private schools for those who wish and can afford it, basic education focuses on reading, writing, and arithmetic. As students move from grade school through junior high and high school, schools generally see their mission as increasingly including instruction in the history and ideas that form the basis of their own political society. In the United States, because of the universal principles on which it is based, this also impels schools to educate students in the history and ideas of other peoples and places. As an obligation that falls equally upon all young people, schooling helps form manners and moral sensibility, or mores. At higher levels, a liberal arts education — one that involves general study of history, literature, art, philosophy, the social sciences, and the natural sciences — enlarges the perspective, refines the moral sensibility, and deepens the understanding. This makes for more responsible individuals, capable of bringing under their control a wider range of decisions that affect the kind of life they live and the kind of person they will become.

But freedom's progress also hollows out education. First, it undermines parental authority, treating the effort by parents to pass on their way of life as an attempt to bind their children to the past. Increasingly, the liberal spirit comes to see education as itself an arbitrary authority, intruding impermissibly on the self's right to live and interpret the world as it sees fit. Educators respond by adopting a progressive thrust for schools. No longer will schools teach truths; instead, they will prepare students to decide for themselves what is true despite the fact that basic literacy and general knowledge of the world are preconditions for evaluating rival truth claims. Eventually, this leads to an approach to education that centers around providing a forum in which students are invited to make and express their own truths. The result is the very opposite of the original understanding of a liberal arts education, for an educational system devoted to making each student the highest authority of what is true for him or her locks in ignorance, shelters inherited ways of viewing the world, and, by signaling that what has been written and thought in the past could not compare in significance to what individuals are feeling in the present, cuts students off from the history of human political and intellectual achievement.

Work, or wage labor, provides the material means in a free society by which individuals make themselves self-sustaining. Work is driven by necessity: We must put bread on the table and maintain a roof over our heads. But under the auspices of freedom it becomes a badge of honor. For most, jobs are the most sustained activity in public life: They serve as a highly visible symbol of our personal independence and as a mark of our ability to care for ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives. Work channels ambition and competitiveness into

undertakings that benefit society. It fortifies such necessary virtues as discipline, industry, cooperation, and the calculation of long-term benefit. And for those fortunate to be employed in skilled labor or as professionals, mastery of craft in work provides a sense of pride and the pleasure of developing one's powers. Moreover, by operating to open the workplace to all regardless of class, race, or sex, the claims of freedom humanize the world of work.

But freedom becomes increasingly uncompromising, demanding of work that it be rewarding through and through because otherwise it might be experienced as a form of servitude. The very effort to meet this uncompromising demand threatens the functioning of other parts of a free person's life. Especially as work becomes more attractive and more fulfilling, we allow it to consume more of our time and energy. It encourages the neglect of private and public affairs. It squeezes vital realms — friendship and family, community and the arts, charitable work and politics — into smaller and smaller compartments. Moreover, since, however attractive and fulfilling it may become, work is still constituted by an exchange of pay for labor, the more we work, the more we tend to equate reward and worth with financial remuneration. And by opening the workplace wide to women, which it unequivocally and rightly insists upon, the ethos of freedom ensures that both sexes will every working day imbibe large doses of the code of commercial conduct and willy-nilly bring back into the home greater quantities of the cold spirit of calculation.

Romantic love, in the era of freedom, comes to occupy a commanding position in the hearts of men and women. In a world in which one authoritative good after another loses its luster, romantic love offers the hope of a taste of the transcendent in the here and now. Romantic love has roots in the powerful push and pull of sexual desire and in the abiding human longing to be loved for who one truly is. It gains in standing as freedom progresses. By releasing individuals from the obligation to marry a mate of somebody else's choosing, the obligation to remain in an unhappy marriage, or for that matter the obligation to marry at all, freedom provides the opportunity to search the world so long as one has breath for one's one true love.

But freedom also undermines romantic love by imparting lessons of impermanence and by establishing systems of separateness. Aided by the invention of the birth control pill, which for the first time in human history cheaply and effectively separates sex from reproduction, freedom teaches us to postpone permanent relations: Before you can know that you have found your one true love, women as well as men must experiment vigorously. Otherwise, how will you know what you have missed or be sure of what you have found? Yet the dream of one true love depends upon the idea of exclusiveness, and how can what is widely shared also be exclusive? Moreover, the more we pile up experiences in dating and mating, the more we build up systems of separateness in which we learn to think of ourselves as independent agents capable of entering and exiting relationships at will — and the more we cultivate exactly the opposite of the orientation of the heart in love, which longs for forever. Having raised the stakes for romantic love, freedom also undercuts the conditions for its attainment.

Family offers a fixed point amidst the turbulence and uncertainty of a free society. It serves as a “haven in a heartless world.” Where public life puts one endlessly to the test of merit, the family gives to its members unconditional acceptance and love based not on what one has achieved but on who one is. It permits the domestication and maturing of romantic love. It is the fundamental social unit where children first learn to love and be loved, receive protection during the long period in which they are unable to care for themselves, and acquire the emotional, social, moral, and intellectual training necessary to eventually take responsibility for themselves as fully functioning adults.

But freedom also unravels the fabric of family. It loosens the ties among family members and across generations by conditioning the individual to see his essential responsibility as to himself. It suggests to men and women that they should put their work or their pleasure ahead of duties owed to the family, in part by reducing those duties to calculations about benefits, in part by instilling a preference for going it alone. It induces parents to regard children as investments, the caring for whom must be weighed against the time and energy taken from work and leisure. As marriage is delayed so that individuals can find themselves before committing, and as family commitments are squeezed to conform to the professional aspirations of both parents, family size falls, depriving children of the education that comes from sibling solidarity as well as sibling rivalry. At the same time, the standard internal structure of the family — one mother and one father — increasingly comes to be viewed as itself a matter of private choice, paving the way for the normalization of families consisting of one parent or two mothers or two fathers or other combinations growing out of the routinization of divorce and the increasing comfort with diverse sexual preferences. As mobility separates grandparents from grandchildren, more elderly people are deprived of the joy of children, and more children are deprived of grandparents’ love.

Biblical faith lends support to the idea, central to the era of freedom, that each individual is of special significance. One does not have to believe that liberalism represents a secular and political interpretation of biblical faith to appreciate that the moral premise of natural freedom and equality of all is fortified by a religion that proclaims that all men and all women are created in God’s image and are holy because He is holy. Moreover, communities of worship constituted by biblical faith provide a source of that individual discipline and self-restraint that enables free individuals to govern their love of freedom and live well together. And such communities offer a choreography of life in which the routine of everyday is endowed with larger significance, individuals give and take solace, and life’s cycles and turning points are honored.

But freedom also puts faith on the defensive. God’s will or law is primarily known through tradition and the imperfect human beings who must preserve and transmit it. But of all forms of dependence, dependence on the will of other human beings sits most uneasily with the liberal spirit. It is one thing to submit to God, another to submit to those who purport to interpret His will or law, especially in a world that daily furnishes rival and incompatible accounts of ultimate matters. Emboldened by freedom, individuals endowed with the liberal

spirit seek to go beyond practicing the faith of their choice to creating rituals and observances that better reflect their own distinctive sensibility and understanding. However, as religion loses its ground in anything outside the individual's imagination, it loses the authority to discipline the soul and set boundaries for conduct. Some see this as progress and go further by trying to make a religion out of choice or, to use a popular term for the radicalization of choice, self-creation. This sanctification of individual will comes close to what traditional religion warned against as the temptation of idolatry.

Modern science serves freedom by greatly expanding human powers. It enables us to draw energy from natural resources, produce and distribute vast amounts and variety of material goods, communicate at long distances, travel quickly and in comfort, cure disease and prevent illness, and in innumerable ways improve the quality of daily life. It also represents an exhilarating exercise of man's rational faculty, in which progress depends on the determination to push the outside of the envelope, to constantly advance the limits of knowledge.

But freedom accelerates to a breakneck speed the determination to surpass limits and achieve mastery over nature that is at the heart of the scientific sensibility. This puts science on a collision course with ethics, which is based on an appreciation of limits. Science teaches that no limit is deserving of respect, save perhaps the safety of individual scientists and their human subjects. But since science in its own terms cannot give an account of why even those limits are worth respecting — the natural freedom and equality of all cannot be verified experimentally — it slowly erodes respect for the individual. Scientists may be motivated in their research by a desire to produce results that benefit humanity, but the goal of benefiting humanity draws no support from the scientific point of view. Indeed, science's assumption that the world is strictly explicable in terms of cause-and-effect relations has a tendency to obscure the uniqueness of human beings and reduce us to objects for study and manipulation. Energized by freedom, science encourages individuals both to think of themselves as sovereign over all of nature and at the same time to consider themselves as subject to nature's unvarying laws, as are all other objects in the universe. But a free man is neither master nor slave.

The paradox of freedom at work in the realms of education, work, romantic love, family, faith, science, and elsewhere as well is not set in motion by some perversity or pathology that sneaks up behind and seizes upon the liberal spirit. Rather, it springs from an instability built into liberalism's fundamental moral premise. The naturally free and equal individual is a sovereign individual, since his freedom signifies that he is his own highest authority. At the same time, the naturally free and equal individual is a subject individual, since his sovereignty rests on a premise whose authority it explicitly or tacitly recognizes, which affirms the equal sovereignty of all others. Hence, a free society is composed entirely of sovereign individuals and entirely of subject individuals because each is always at the same time both. As a consequence, the liberal spirit is simultaneously radically aristocratic and

radically egalitarian. This multiplicity can be extraordinarily fruitful, preparing the liberal spirit, for example, to appreciate the world's many-sidedness. It can also be a recipe for disaster, inclining the liberal spirit to divide sharply against itself.

IV. Conserving liberalism

Ours is the era of equality in freedom. Our freedom encourages us to cast aside arbitrary authority and topple unjust hierarchy, but it also undermines the just claims of political order and moral excellence. It severs onerous bonds of association, but it also separates and isolates. It is the touchstone of our equality, yet it permits and indeed encourages competition, which results in vast disparities in wealth, power, and glory. It makes us responsible for ourselves and infuses us with a sense of the humanity and rights that we share with all people on the planet while loosening the claims of duty. It is bound up with the realization of our most cherished hopes while putting awkward pressure on and destabilizing them. It eloquently exalts choice and then falls crushingly silent concerning what actions and ends are choiceworthy, leaving it perilously close to teaching that the choice is all.

The promise and the dangers of our era are indissolubly connected. The more freedom we have, the more we want. And the more we get, the more we weaken freedom's foundations in moral and political life. However, the very same circumstances that unleash freedom's self-subverting tendencies also create opportunities for the exercise of the liberal spirit's self-correcting powers, which primarily consist of the free mind's ability to understand its interests well and devise measures to secure them.

When the free mind turns its attention to our present predicament, it may well conclude that it is in the liberal spirit's best interest to conserve something of its origin. This requires reacquainting ourselves with the liberal tradition's teachings about freedom's foundation in our nature and freedom's material and moral preconditions. In light of what we now know about freedom's history, the free mind may also conclude that it is necessary to correct something of the liberal spirit's origin, particularly the inclination or temptation, present from the beginning, to see freedom as an end in itself disconnected from the service of other human purposes, including those that are neither defined nor determined by freedom. Then, in part because to be bound to any one tradition is contrary to the liberal spirit's own imperatives, in part because it is foolish to suppose that the liberal tradition, much as we owe it, offers the last word on who we are and what we can and should become, the truly free mind is likely to seek to go beyond the liberal tradition to think more comprehensively about what freedom is good for.

Improving by conserving the liberal spirit is easier said than done. But the doing first requires the saying, and to say something useful, the challenge must be accurately understood.

