

HOW TO CONFRONT A CRISIS OF CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

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In his new book, Leon Kass shows Americans how to honor the benefits of liberal democracy, including individual freedom and human equality, while recognizing their high costs.

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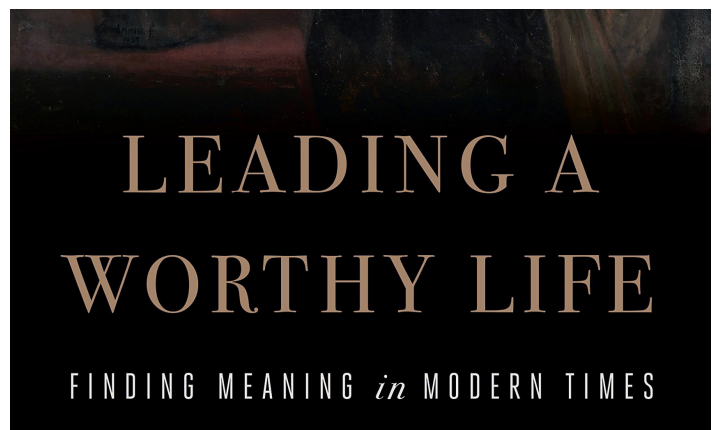
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Dark forebodings about the future of liberal democracy in America are agitating left and right these days.

On the left, respected figures encourage fears that the end of days is drawing near for the American experiment in self-government. The culprit: Donald Trump's war—limited only by incompetence and emotional incontinence—on individual rights, the rule of law, and democratic norms.

On the right, some eminent men and women agree that Trump presents a uniquely toxic political threat and must be resisted intransigently. Others, farther to the right, take a longer and grimmer view, seeing Trump not as a cause but as a symptom of an already fatally flawed enterprise. Liberal democracy in America, according to them, inevitably generates isolated individuals, enfeebled families, and withered communities; a working life of grinding drudgery, preening ambition, insatiable greed; an educational system that inculcates ignorance, narcissism, and self-righteousness; and a degrading popular culture that radiates hostility to honor, nobility, and holiness.

One common response to these prophets of doom and gloom is to double down on the goodness of contemporary life. Touting the manifest material improvements and gains in freedom and



equality that have been inseparable from the rise of liberal democracy over the last three centuries, stalwarts of the status quo maintain that humanity has never had it so good.

It would be truer to say that liberal democracy in America has imposed high costs *and* conferred substantial benefits. Luckily for us, we have at hand a rigorous and reasonable assessment of both the costs and the benefits. In [*Leading a Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times*](#), the incomparable Leon Kass has gathered sixteen masterful essays on the character of our times published over the last several decades. His governing concern in the book, as throughout his extraordinary corpus of writings, is (as he writes in the introduction) “the permanent possibilities for a rich and meaningful life.”

In the book’s first three parts, Kass serially addresses love, family, and friendship; human excellence, human dignity, and biotechnology; and liberal education. In each case, he shows that our era is marked by a loss “of cultural and moral confidence about what makes a life worth living.” In the final part, Kass reconstructs central ideas from three rival Western traditions—classical political philosophy, biblical wisdom, and the teachings of modern freedom—whose insights, he maintains, can provide invaluable assistance in bolstering our confidence.

Kass approaches his task in the full recognition that we are not the first people to confront “a crisis of confidence.” In the wake of its defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, he observes in the introduction, Athens, too, suffered a breakdown of culture and a crumbling of orthodoxies. But the weakening of tradition also created an opportunity to take a fresh look at traditional claims about justice, human nature, and politics—an opportunity seized by Socrates. Immortalized in the dialogues of his student Plato, Socrates investigated conventional opinions about morality and politics while exposing the confusions of those who thought they could see through and dispense with inherited beliefs, practices, and institutions. Kass’s explorations of modernity’s “mixed blessings” exude this Socratic spirit.

In Part I, and in particular in his reflections on love and family, Kass sees more harms than happiness. Written amid the rise of the campus hook-up culture in the 1990s and 2000s, his essays predate the entrenchment at colleges and universities of Title IX bureaucracies that equate now-unfashionable opinions about the sexes with harassment, and sex regretted with sexual assault. His book was already in production when the #MeToo movement burst forth last fall, exposing reprehensible harassment and assault by men along with women’s acquiescence in a world of heedless promiscuity.

But the disorder and distress of the present have been long a-building. The last half-century, Kass writes, has witnessed the vanishing of “socially prescribed forms of conduct that help guide young men and women in the direction of matrimony”; the deterioration of relations between the sexes, which “manage to appear all at once casual and carefree and grim and humorless”; and increasing numbers of talented young women who, while prospering in their professional lives, appear in their romantic lives “sad, lonely, and confused.”

To combat the decline of romance, and the resulting breakdown of marriage and the heavy cost borne by children of broken families, Kass aims to restore an appreciation of the seemingly altogether lost culture of courtship—a term that, as he well knows, sounds not only archaic but redolent for many of a hopelessly benighted world of domineering men and submissive women. Yet courtship’s formalities, however mocked and derided they have come to be, enabled women and men alike to focus on lasting love and to pursue it artfully and deliberately.

Kass concedes the unlikelihood for society as a whole of “the restoration of sexual restraint,” which lies at the heart of courtship and which depends on a recovery of “female modesty” and its correlative, male self-control. Yet individuals do remain free to buck contemporary norms and rebel against the new libertinism. Only thus, he cautions, will young men and women learn to conduct their romantic lives in a manner that better satisfies the profound human longings for a love that transcends the first overwhelming compulsions of erotic attraction, for a soulmate to share life’s joys and hardships, and for the precious gift of children and the humanizing warmth of family life.

Shifting in Part II from courtship and marriage to physical and mental health, Kass finds a different ratio of harm to happiness. A medical doctor who also holds a PhD in biochemistry, he honors the spectacular advances in treating disease, prolonging life, and improving intellectual and physical functioning. At the same time—and reflecting concerns central to the President’s Council on Bioethics, which he chaired from its inception in 2001 until 2005—Kass throws into sharp relief the high costs of our growing capacity to engineer “ageless bodies” and fashion “happy souls.”

Kass’s deepest reservations stem from the threats to human excellence and human dignity presented by biotechnological advances. If we rely on implants and drugs rather than on effort, discipline, and education to enhance human functioning—from running, jumping, and throwing to feeling, thinking, and remembering—will our attainments fulfill our aspirations for excellence? If medicines calm our spirits, brighten our moods, and block the formation of painful memories, will we learn from experience and maintain the capacity to refine and elevate our passions? What becomes of dignity—in the basic sense of what is owed to each because of our shared humanity, and in the lofty sense of flourishing as citizens and human beings—when we achieve physical and spiritual satisfaction without activity?

As Kass proceeds to show in Part III, liberal education once provided students with the store of knowledge and the habits of mind to pose and pursue such questions. But liberal education today—or the nefarious imposter that has conquered our campuses—is more likely to stunt curiosity, truncate sympathies, sap imagination, dull critical faculties, enervate understanding, and restrict horizons. That’s what happens when colleges and universities encourage the belief that moral and political questions have single, one-dimensional, and incontestable answers—answers that happen to coincide with progressive orthodoxy.

Colleges can still provide benefits, Kass observes, including “professional training, research and scholarship, general broadening and culture, the arts of learning, and familiarity with the intellectual tradition.” But rarely do they make a priority of liberal education’s defining mission which, he states, consists in cultivating “thoughtful reflection about weighty human concerns in quest of what is simply good and true.” To foster such thoughtfulness—a vital source of the toleration and civility critical to political cohesion in liberal democracies—it will be necessary, argues Kass, to rescue the humanities, a field now besieged from within by professors who have hijacked the curriculum (especially literature, history, religion, and philosophy) for partisan political ends and beset from without by the sciences with their insistence that the truths of mechanism and materialism are the only truths.

So grave is the failure of our educational system that we are in danger of losing even a working acquaintance with the moral and spiritual sources that sustain liberal democracy in America. In Part IV, the final chapters of his book, Kass distills a lifetime of learning and reflection on those sustaining sources. He associates them with three cities: Athens, Jerusalem, and Gettysburg.

From among the crowning achievements of Athens’s philosophical ferment, Kass is particularly drawn to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Unlike contemporary moral philosophers and professors of ethics who derive abstract conclusions from abstract premises, Aristotle teaches that the aim of ethical inquiry is to clarify the best way to live in concrete reality. And in contrast to both the moralists who search out universal and objective moral laws and the moral relativists who assert that all ethical judgments are inherently subjective, Aristotle argues that ethical study revolves around the moral and intellectual virtues—those qualities of character and mind that enable human beings to live in accordance with the finest in human nature.

Although Kass admires Aristotle’s catalogue of virtues—he gives special attention to courage, greatness of soul, practical wisdom, and friendship—the study of virtue does not, for him, exhaust inquiry into the worthy life. Because, in the spirit of Aristotle, he is concerned to recover an understanding of ethics that places at the center “the state of our desires, the shape of our wishes, the direction of our intentions,” Kass is drawn also to study of the Hebrew Bible, which addresses the human capacity for reverence and passion for the sacred.

Central to the biblical wisdom that Kass associates with the holy city of Jerusalem are the Ten Commandments. Although God delivered them to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, they possess, he maintains, “universal significance.” Without mentioning equality, the Decalogue *teaches* it by directing its injunctions to all members of the community. The commandment prohibiting idolatry categorically forbids the demeaning worship of either nature or man. Next, fully attuned to the “twistedness and restlessness that lurk in the human heart and soul,” the commandments require practices that foster righteousness and holiness: keeping a day of rest to express gratitude for the world’s wonders, and honoring one’s parents to whose union we owe our existence and to whose initial care we owe our survival. Finally, they enumerate fundamental prohibitions—on murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness against neighbors, and coveting

neighbors' belongings—that maintain basic human decency and form the minimum conditions of community.

What, though, of political freedom and human equality? Neither Athens nor Jerusalem rests on or elaborates the principles that were resoundingly affirmed in 1776 in the Declaration of Independence and adroitly embodied in 1787 in the Constitution. These create a framework in which rights are understood to inhere equally in each without regard to race, class, or sex, and all citizens can discover and lead worthy lives. At Gettysburg in 1863, Kass argues, Abraham Lincoln not only preserved the founding significance of those principles but also improved on them.

The Declaration of Independence solemnly states that Americans “hold” human equality and the sharing of fundamental rights to be “truths” that are “self-evident.” But the nation’s founding compromise with the monstrous realities of slavery—a compromise given legal, if abashed, sanction by the Constitution—casts doubt on the extent to which Americans of the founding generation truly accepted that all human beings shared equally in freedom.

Lincoln sought to remove the doubt. At the consecration of the soldiers’ cemetery at Gettysburg, he went beyond asserting the self-evident nature of freedom and equality. He declared that America, which had been “conceived in liberty,” was now “dedicated” to securing freedom equally for all. Freedom and equality, Lincoln taught, were not only premises on which the American experiment in self-government rested but promises that the nation was committed to honoring. This was the “new birth of freedom” proclaimed at Gettysburg.

What to make of Kass’s praise of Athens, Jerusalem, and Gettysburg? Has he made matters too easy? Although spiritual denizens of the three cities may learn to coexist peacefully, and while a combined ethos of the three cities may dwell in the same individual soul, do they not resist complete and final reconciliation? Surely it cannot have escaped Kass’s notice that the proud exercise of moral and intellectual virtue, the humble obedience to God’s commandments, and the free pursuit of happiness represent conflicting conceptions of the worthy life.

In fact, Kass has not made matters easy but more complicated and more challenging, and also more rewarding. Intellectuals typically align themselves with a single tradition while dismissing its challengers, thereby circumscribing their horizons and depriving themselves of the wisdom furnished by rivals. Kass does the opposite. He seeks to recover the three traditions despite his awareness—at once disquieting and invigorating—that a final synthesis is elusive.

This, indeed, has been his method throughout. Rather than focusing on proofs and refutations, he strives to give rival opinions their due. Thus, he honors the principles of individual freedom and human equality in which America is grounded while recognizing their tendency to loosen constraints, inflate self-regard, and induce conformity. He is acutely aware of the benefits to physical health and material prosperity conferred by scientific inquiry without falling for the comforting illusion that science provides ethical guidance concerning the wise use of powerful new medicines, devices, and therapies. He sharply criticizes the pretensions to moral superiority

typical of our time even as he takes advantage of America's hard-won freedom and prosperity to recover forgotten opinions about nobility and righteousness. Such are the decidedly "mixed blessings" of modernity.

When it comes specifically to the present condition and future possibilities of liberal democracy in America, one measure of Kass's sobriety and moderation—and success—is his boldness in paying tribute to the rival traditions that have nourished that democracy. One crucial implication of these essays is that *only* in a regime grounded in individual freedom and human equality can the unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, contest among Athens, Jerusalem, and Gettysburg be peaceably and fruitfully lived out. Toward that end, a cultivation of Kassian sobriety and moderation would not only enable more of us to lead worthy lives but also greatly improve the prospects of liberal democracy in America.