

Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part IV: Classical and Modern Lessons of Moderation

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EDITOR’S NOTE: *This is the fourth of a five-part essay by the Hoover Institution’s Peter Berkowitz on the challenges faced by liberal democracy in America in light of Patrick Deneen’s recent book “Why Liberalism Failed.” Read the first three parts by following these links:*

In “Why Liberalism Failed,” Patrick Deneen contends that today’s liberal regimes deserve to perish because they do not live up to the classical conception of political excellence. But the spirit of his critique clashes with the purpose of the ancients’ examination of the best regime.

Plato and Aristotle considered the best regime — the regime devoted to virtue — to be practically unobtainable. Most people would live most of the time, they assumed, in inferior regimes that failed to foster the moral and intellectual virtues while spawning an abundance of vices. Plato and Aristotle did not therefore conclude that study of the best regime was unnecessary; nor did they generally argue for despising, abandoning, or overthrowing the inferior regimes. For classical political philosophy, study of human excellence and the just city explained why complete justice in politics was beyond reach. It also taught that for the most part statesmen and citizens ought to be occupied with preserving the imperfect regimes in which they inevitably find themselves by preventing deterioration into something worse. Philosophical exploration of the virtuous life and the best regime furnished standards by which the various inferior regimes could be properly evaluated, and in light of which their ailments could be diagnosed accurately and dealt with effectively.

Classical political philosophy inscribes this lesson of moderation in its account of democracy — the regime premised on freedom and committed to equality, and in which the people rule — and extends it. Plato in Book VIII of “The Republic” and Aristotle in Books IV–VI of “The Politics” show that what Deneen believes to be the special error of modern liberalism — the fostering of citizens who live enslaved to their desires rather than in accordance with virtue — is actually the defining defect of what Deneen calls “small-scale democracy,” which he considers an antidote to liberalism. At the same time, the classics indicate that democracy — or preferably, a regime that mixes democracy and oligarchy, combining rule by the people with rule by the few (who tend to be the wealthy) — is usually the best regime one can reasonably hope for.

Like all regimes, argued the classical political philosophers, democracy contains the seeds of its own destruction inasmuch as it tends to take its principles to an extreme while neglecting other pertinent principles. In radicalizing freedom and equality, democracy tends to set the stage for tyranny by unleashing all manner of immoral and politically destructive conduct. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, however, draws the conclusion that democratic citizens — even the dissenters from democratic orthodoxy among them — should therefore reject democracy. Rather, classical political philosophy concentrates on exploring means for tempering democracy's excesses and curbing the excessive expectations of politics harbored by democracy's critics. There is good reason to believe that from the perspective of Plato and Aristotle, the American Constitution would represent an admirable means for conserving democracy in light of the circumstances of modernity.

In offering counsel on how to preserve democracy despite its self-destructive proclivities, Plato and Aristotle followed the example set by Socrates. In his prime, he witnessed Athenian democracy's imperial overreach in the Peloponnesian War. Ultimately, his fellow citizens convicted him of impiety and corrupting the young, and sentenced him to death. Yet in full awareness of democracy's manifold defects, Socrates sought to his dying breath to mitigate his city's vices by defending its laws and by teaching about the virtues of citizens and human beings.

Socrates's devotion to Athens was not merely a matter of prudence. His student, and Aristotle's teacher, highlights in "The Republic" democracy's contribution to the discovery of the best regime, the just regime devoted to excellence. Plato showed that democracy — the form of political community with by far the greatest commitment to political freedom then known — provided an invaluable opportunity to encounter a variety of human types and to examine a diversity of opinions, which was crucial to understanding human nature and the possibilities of politics.

Tocqueville, whom Deneen admires but whose implications for liberal democracy in America he disregards, reinforces the classics' lessons of moderation. Democracy is more than a regime, according to the author of "Democracy in America"; it is also a historical era and form of life marked by "the equality of conditions." The spread of equality antedates but leaves an indelible stamp on modernity. It influences all aspects of life, argues Tocqueville, and it is, in crucial respects, just and advantageous. It benefits the poor as well as the rich, and it fosters and is fostered by civilization, political stability, the rule of law, science, commerce, enlightenment, and more relaxed and natural social relations.

But democracy's disadvantages are considerable, Tocqueville also maintains. It untethers the imagination, loosens political bonds, unravels community, dilutes discipline and duty, lowers moral standards, undercuts religion, and dissolves hierarchy in family and society. If measures are not taken to check its inculcation of softness and self-indulgence, democracy

can sink into an “administrative despotism” that reduces individuals to a “sort of regulated, mild, and peaceful servitude.” Like Plato and Aristotle, Tocqueville attributes to democracy the very moral vices and political harms Deneen faults liberalism for propagating.

Tocqueville further agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the task is not to replace democracy but to forestall its decline. The spirit of democracy, Tocqueville observes, has penetrated deeply into habits of heart and mind, beliefs and practices, and associations and institutions. It can no more be set aside than can the seasons and the ocean tides. So instead of raging against democracy’s disadvantages, he seeks to mitigate its flaws and supply it with virtues. He argues for preserving religious faith, the family, local community, and civic organizations because they fortify the spirit of democratic citizens by disciplining desire, elevating sentiments, bringing individuals together for projects of common interest, and encouraging a sense of duty. Critical as these nongovernmental practices and institutions are to remedying the diseases to which democracy is prone, Tocqueville insists above all on the cultivation of the spirit of liberty as vital to counteracting democracy’s pathologies.

The biblical faith that Deneen holds aloft as a primary alternative to liberalism also furnishes good reasons to seek conciliation with the modern tradition of freedom. That is in no small measure because liberalism develops a politics suitable to the new conditions of modernity — with its dramatic disruptions to everyday life driven by science, commerce, technology, and culture — that is consistent with major biblical moral teachings.

Like Lockean liberalism, the Bible begins not with community or human beings in relation to one another but with the individual. According to the first chapter of Genesis, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him.” To underscore that, being created in God’s image, all human beings are equal in the most important respect, the Bible immediately continues, “male and female created He them.” This does not imply that people are not also social and political animals — the Bible amply affirms that they are — but rather that just forms of association must respect what is equally sacred in all.

Like Lockean liberalism, the Bible directs men and women to bring nature under their control. In the very first command He issues to human beings, God declares, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.” This broad divine grant authorizes the use of nature for human purposes, though it does not confer a license to despoil and lay waste to the earth’s bounty.

And like Lockean liberalism, the Bible places man in a pre-political condition, the Garden of Eden, that showcases the waywardness of human desire and passion, the moral knowledge that precedes political life, and the ill-suitedness of human beings to life outside of political community. One important implication is borne out by the rest of the Bible: Because human

beings, while made in God's image, are also born vulnerable, fallible, and self-interested, political society can at best discipline and elevate but never conquer refractory desire and obdurate passion.

The Garden of Eden story also reveals that the yearning for "pure and unmitigated freedom" that Deneen equates with liberalism is, from the biblical perspective, a temptation built into our humanity. After doling out punishments to the serpent for beguiling the woman, and to the woman and the man for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God says, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil." To prevent Adam and Eve from also achieving immortality by eating from the tree of life, God expels them from the garden. He takes this drastic step because human beings are prone to supposing that to be like Him in one respect entitles them to be like Him in all respects, or that the "supreme and complete freedom" that God demonstrated in creating the world out of nothing is the birthright of every child. The longing for total freedom is not, as Deneen contends, foisted on humanity by liberalism, but a reckless ambition that is inseparably bound up with the beautiful biblical teaching — a sustaining source of the idea of individual freedom and equality under law — that human beings are made in God's image.

Deneen's nearly unremitting hostility to liberalism reflects an adversarial stance to the modern tradition of freedom of the sort that, at least when it comes to tradition and culture in general, he condemns as a form of scholarly malpractice and a manifestation of our "technological age." Whereas the "original mandate" of the humanities was, Deneen writes, "to guide students through their cultural inheritance," scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries tended to adopt a scientific or positivist approach. In the spirit of progress and technical mastery, they sought to expose the errors and narrowness of canonical works, refute their arguments, and undermine their authority. According to Deneen, contemporary poststructuralists and postmodernists — much as they regarded themselves as vastly more sophisticated — ganged up with the social scientists to participate in the debunking and discrediting of tradition and traditional learning. Rather than receive inherited works with gratitude and explore them with humility as the original teachers of the humanities counseled, they dismantled, reconfigured, and imposed their will on them. Deneen displays just such an orientation in his reduction of liberalism — the tradition also of Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Madison, Mill, and Hayek — to the pursuit of absolute emancipation. In his vehement opposition to the modern tradition of freedom, Deneen flouts the reverence toward tradition he commends, and makes common cause with progressives, scholarly technocrats, and postmodernists whom he censures for their malice toward tradition.

Since Deneen has a great deal to offer, it is a pity that, in the case of the modern tradition of freedom, he betrays his commitment to recapturing tradition. He is at his most convincing in analyzing detrimental features of contemporary liberal democracy — particularly the scorn for inherited wisdom, the demotion of duty in favor of personal preference, and the obsession with material goods and superficial amusements at the expense of citizenship, friendship, and love — promoted by the individualism and statism that arise from taking the principles

of freedom and equality to an extreme. His single-villain genealogy of American morals, however, encourages scorn for his country and ingratitude toward its many blessings. It discourages the shouldering of the responsibility to correct America's errors while conserving its accomplishments. And, at a perilous moment, it legitimates dangerous anti-liberal sentiments and movements at home and around the globe. Were his advice to abandon liberalism heeded and his wish to overcome liberalism fulfilled, the result would be a regime — or state of war — exceedingly less friendly to the beliefs and practices he defends.

In his zeal to vanquish liberalism, Deneen defies the lessons of moderation taught by the pre-modern sources to whose authority he appeals. Contrary to his philosophical polemic, classical works and venerable biblical ideas — as well as the incomparable Tocqueville, whose marvelously manifold sensibility mixes premodern and modern elements — illuminate the lessons of moderation within the modern tradition of freedom itself. One great benefit of examining Deneen's attempt to overcome liberalism is that it brings into focus practical motives and intellectual resources for rediscovering liberalism.

Part V of "Anti-Liberal Zealotry" will be published on Friday.

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