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From Deficient Liberalism Toward a Deeper Sense of Freedom

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Man's freedom as a human being, as a principle of a commonwealth, can be expressed in the following formula. No one can compel me to be happy in accordance with his conception of the welfare of others, for each may seek his happiness in whatever way he sees fit, so long as he does not infringe upon the freedom of others to pursue a similar end which can be reconciled with the freedom of everyone else within a workable general law—i.e. he must accord to others the same rights as he enjoys himself (Kant 1970, 7).

This passage by Immanuel Kant reveals both the appeal of contemporary liberal theories as well as their inherent problems. Liberal thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably John Rawls, embraced the idea that society's job is not to impose a common good (whatever that good might be) on its members, but to provide fair conditions in which individuals can freely choose their own particular goals as long as they do not breach other people's freedom. "This moral philosophy," as Charles Taylor (1989) put it, "has tended to focus on what it is right to do, rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance" (3).

The liberal idea that we should be free to choose to do what we think will make us happy has become the received view of our modern times. One of its most important implications is that the search for a good, meaningful life is a personal journey. In other words, the question of a good life becomes the question of what a good life is *for me* and this cannot and should not be decided by the community I live in. Ideally, then, my community will not impose a way of life on me but will allow me to choose the way of life I find most attractive.

The appeal of liberal ideas seems obvious. After all, who wants to be constantly nagged or, even worse, forced to live in a particular way? Who among us want to be told what is good for us instead of being left to decide on our own? It seems intuitive that we want to be the masters of our own destiny, final judges of who we are and who we want to be. We take for granted that this is not something to be decided by the state or the community or by our friends and family, for that matter. Most of us have more or less accepted these liberal intuitions, and liberal Western societies accommodate or enforce them.

It is customary to ascribe the hard-won freedoms we enjoy today to various social processes of the past, from civil unrest to revolutions, processes mostly inspired by the liberal thinkers of the last two hundred years or so. Those who live in liberal Western democracies are thankful that liberalism dominates most aspects of their lives (social, cultural, political) and has for some time. Yet there are many critics of liberalism, and not just in academic circles. Regular, usually more traditionally oriented, people may long for a lost past and the values that were lost with it: family bonds, community ideals, duties and honour, a sense of belonging.

## **Regarding Liberal Theory**

Philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have identified some of the weakest points of liberal theory (for a summary see Keeney 2016). The main tenet of liberalism—Kant’s contention that we should be allowed to pick and choose our own ends without communal interference—rests on the idea that the individual comes before the community. In a practical sense this means we, as individuals, come first; our needs, wants, desires, and their fulfilment have priority over some imagined communal good (unless the communal good serves our own good). In other words, our engagement with other people, the bonds we make, the partnerships we form and so on are entered into simply to satisfy our personal interests. If our interests are not satisfied in the relationships we form and the community we live in, it is advisable and morally justifiable that we either change the nature of our relationships or leave.

We may be aware that any engagement with other people necessarily involves a partial sacrifice of our own freedom, but we accept the sacrifice because in the final calculation, this sacrifice brings us more good than harm. The idea that we form communities for the benefit of the individuals within them flourishes in the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau to name a few. These philosophers differ considerably in their basic assumptions about human nature and the state of nature from which the first communities sprang, but they all focus on the individual who picks and chooses based on his or her preferences and interests, not on the community.

According to social contract theorists, the community is always derivative. However, this conception of the relationship between the individual and the group is highly problematic. At the heart of the “communitarian” critique of liberalism, for example, the critiques of MacIntyre (1987) or Taylor (1989) is the worry that the individual who theoretically and practically precedes community cannot help us understand who we are, who we should be, or what our life in society should look like. This is the case simply because such an individual is stripped of an entire cultural, social, historical context and is turned into a rather abstract human being.

Another problem of liberal theories is their claimed neutrality with respect to the ways of life and values particular individuals might choose to pursue. Critics argue this neutrality is only superficial. In a liberal society, traditional options are far less valued; in fact, they may be frowned upon or suppressed under various excuses. So it seems liberalism taps into a more substantial concept of the good life than it is ready to admit.

Finally, the crux of the idea that we choose our own ends is the assumption that such ends are up to us—they are our subjective choices. Unlike their pre-modern counterparts, people living in today’s Western liberal societies have a peculiar job: they have to come up with their own singular purpose. Without going into all that is packed into this view of the human, let me just say that this assumption presupposes relativism about human ends because there seems to be no rational and objective method for determining whose way of life, i.e. whose chosen end, is the better one. All the purposes available to us seem to be on equal grounds, and the onus is on us to select which one is best for us. In sum, it is up to us to search for, find, and actualize our true selves in the way of life we find most fitting, while it is up to the

state and society to let us do so. Liberal theorists do not mind this kind of relativism, but many people who are otherwise liberally minded do care, so it should be stated openly.

### **The Loneliness of Liberal Societies**

Reflections on the shortcomings of liberalism and the loneliness of liberal societies can be found in fiction as well, for example, in work by Michel Houellebecq (*Atomized*) and Viktor Pelevin (*iPhuck 10*) but also by far subtler writers of the past, such as James Leo Hurley (*Midnight Cowboy*, *All Fall Down*). The bleak reality of the isolated, lonely people in these novels is echoed in the worries expressed by ordinary, traditionally oriented people around us. Traditionalists simply cannot see the value of independent lives of successful professionals who live more or less alone and are ready to move anywhere and leave their closest family and friends behind to pursue a career. It is true that traditionalists overly romanticize the past, but it is also true that yearning for what has been lost in a modern way of life expresses a basic need to reconnect with other human beings, to love and be loved, and to do something for other people rather than confining ourselves to what is recommended by liberal pop culture: self-discovery and self-affirmation.

Despite academic critiques and the ones coming from the public domain, the appeal of liberalism is not waning and there is a reason why. After all, do we really want a society that will impose a uniform good for all, a society that will sanction ways of life deemed unacceptable or will cast us out if we happen to be different? It is not hard to envision what can go wrong in such a scenario. People have been sacrificed for the greater good on more than one occasion, and we do not have to go far back in history to find examples. Socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will do. But even if we exclude such extremes, the question remains: do we really want to live in a society that will impose its values on us and dictate how we live our lives?

We often hear people saying what others should believe and how others should behave but very rarely, if ever, do we hear people saying they will happily accept what others tell them to believe and do. Herein lies the never-ending appeal of liberalism despite its shortcomings: we simply do not like to be ordered around. I believe that until we tackle this issue head on, it will keep coming back to us, no matter how acutely aware we are of all the problems of liberal societies or how sophisticated our critiques are.

### **Considering Alternatives**

Let me now move from criticism to an explanation of why this appeal is deceptive and where we can find an alternative to liberalism. The first thing to recognize is that the values, ideals, goals, and ends we choose for ourselves do not come from a vacuum but from our homes, peers, society, and culture. In the process of growing up, children emulate their parents and peers, their beliefs and behaviours, driven by the need to belong and learn. This need is strong in adults as well; for example, people who emigrate and find themselves in a new culture do much the same thing, and those who accept the new values of their new home tend to be happier (Downie et al. 2004).

While a liberal theorist might not deny this simple psychological truth, she would insist that we should still be free to choose to comply with or to rebel against the values of our societies without repercussion because every lifestyle is of equal worth, and one way of life should not be prioritized over another, at least not in the public domain, as it must remain neutral. But is it really the case that we cannot judge what is good objectively? Is the question of a good life purely a matter of personal taste? I believe the answer is no but to show this, let me tackle the nature of the values we endorse and the sense of autonomy they provide us with or deprive us of.

It may seem that we can never truly feel autonomous in our choice of what to be because we are always shaped by the societal values of our parents and peers. However, whether we feel autonomous or not depends on the nature of values we pick. Values that remove the locus of causality from us reduce our sense of autonomy, while those that reinforce our causality strengthen our autonomy (see, for example, Ryan and Deci 2017).

For instance, if we wholeheartedly accept that the most important thing in life is to be rich, we cannot fully feel free because the locus of causality remains outside us. That is, whether we are rich or not, whether we become rich or not is not up to us; rather, it is due to circumstances, and we can rarely influence these. Now, even if we fulfil our dream and become rich, the locus of causality still remains outside us; we can lose the wealth in no time. However, if we make a different choice and decide the most important thing in life is to be kind to others, to be generous, to love others and help them, the locus of causality stays within us, because becoming such a person is in our power. When we opt for such values, our sense of autonomy grows, and our sense of helplessness in the face of unpredictable life events decreases.

Furthermore, not only the kind of values we choose but also the reasons for our choice affect whether we feel pressured or free. If we embrace a value only for some external benefit, for example, to advance at the workplace, this value has not truly become our own. The locus of causality in this case remains outside us, even if the value is the right one: such as being kind to others. What this means is that when we are kind for the sake of being kind, we can feel autonomous. If we are kind because we want a promotion, the feeling of autonomy diminishes. Interesting research by Oarga, Stavrova, and Fetchenhauer (2015) shows that cultures in which people are taught to help others simply for the sake of helping are happier than those in which they are taught to help for reciprocity (i.e. to help others in order to be helped later). None of these ideas is new, of course. They date back to classical philosophers and the Christian church fathers. But it is always interesting to see old ideas vindicated in new research venues.

This quick venture into the nature of our values, locus of causality, and sense of autonomy yields an interesting and unexpected insight: we feel most autonomous when we focus on others and not on ourselves. As we have seen, a number of values that we can fully internalize, values that make us feel free, are values about other people and how we should feel about them and behave toward them. This means that doing things for others, even sacrificing for them, is, in fact, liberating. Another interesting implication is that we have objective criteria to identify which kind of life is better than others. A life valued by religious and more traditional people, a life devoted to our fellow humans, a life guided by love, is

better than a life devoted to self-interest. The former life, unlike the latter, will give us an uncompromising sense of freedom.

But as good as this sounds, does it mean we can impose these values on others, make them feel love, make them be generous, make them be kind simply for the sake of being kind? Is it even possible to do that? We need to think carefully if we are to have a cogent, promising, and appealing alternative to the liberal motto encapsulated in Kant's quotation that opened this piece; motto that states that we should be free to choose our own happiness as long as it does not violate the freedom of others. Obviously the "vertical", top-down imposition of values, even if possible, will do no good, as most people will embrace such values externally at best. The imposition of values will make people behave according to them, but most people will not feel these values are their own and, accordingly, will not experience them as liberating. This means we need to find a way to transmit these values *and* strengthen autonomy at the same time.

### **Expanding Altruism**

Research on parenting strategies in traditional societies, such as the work by Pan, Gauvain, and Schwartz (2013), can be of help here. These researchers studied a group of Chinese traditional families and the way they communicate what is important in life to their children. They found parents who insist love and care for grandparents are good on their own merits transmit to their children not only love for the grandparents and the need to help them but also a sense of autonomy. Such children end up appreciating the values of their community and are more proactive and altruistic. Parents who focus on the value of the reputation of the family and duty are less successful and end up with more rebellious teens who feel more oppressed by tradition.

These are just some hints on creating a community that would focus on altruism. In such a community, unlike ours, people would less worry about their entitlements, rights, inner journeys, and self-discovery and be more concerned with the well-being of their fellow humans. They would be ready to sacrifice their own comfort, perhaps even their lives, for others and in return, would feel free without expecting to be free. This is only a start. But we can build on it and develop educational techniques aimed at making the world a better place, one in which a sense of communal good accompanies a sense of autonomy.

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