

## Round Three: How Liberalism Solves Everything

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Let me turn, in this third round of our exchange, to the role that *history* plays in evaluating our competing political theories. So far Professor Orr and I have articulated conservatism's and liberalism's theoretical claims about human nature and the values that are to be protected and enforced politically.

Conservatism, in Professor Orr's version, makes social *tradition*, *order*, and *hierarchy* its top values. Liberalism, on my account, makes *liberty* of the *individual* its top value. Underlying those choices of value, two fundamental philosophical differences have emerged, both of which have significant differences for how governments will use their political power of compulsion.

One fundamental difference is over our basic human status: Are we free or not?

Note Orr's frequent use of what liberal me sees as dangerous metaphors. He refers positively to the "ties that bind us" in his first essay and repeats that formulation in his second. "We are born bound," he asserts even more strongly in his second essay. He tells us that "unfettered" markets are bad—and that it's a liberal illusion that "we must repudiate the shackles."

Pause and reflect upon the significance of the language: *fetters*, *shackles*, *ties*, and *bondage*. For Orr's conservatism, these are to be taken as *basic* and as *good*. No one of those words is more than eyebrow-raising in isolation, but the repeated pattern is something more.

Furthermore, the language of being bound and tied *is not true*. We are born into circumstances of family, geography, and broader society—but we are also free agents in development. Our mothers may prepare traditional foods, yet we individually can form our own taste preferences. Family membership begins unchosen, but we can decide which siblings and cousins we want to remain associated with. As a

growing-to-adulthood person I can (and should) think freely about the religion of my father and the politics of my mother and choose whether to accept or reject those beliefs. Most of my peers growing up may listen to certain music and follow certain fashions—and I can choose to join them or decide to explore on my own. Those raised in the country can decide to move to the city, those raised in the mountains can take jobs by the seas, and vice-versa. We are all free agents who choose for ourselves the (hopefully) integrated set of life circumstances that will make our lives meaningful. And if we do not find those circumstances already existing, we can work to create them.

True, one may choose to accept, more or less passively and uncritically, the circumstances of one's birth. Conservatism as a *temperament* may pull strongly in that direction. Or one may more thoughtfully choose to accept one's found circumstances. But it is a *philosophical* mistake to elevate that acceptance to a universal statement of the human condition, and it is a *political* error to suggest that government power should be based on such preferences.

A second fundamental difference between liberalism and conservatism is over the relationship between liberty and order. Professor Orr sometimes characterizes them as an either-or dichotomy and sometimes as best understood as ordinally related, with order being more fundamental. In Orr's dichotomy version, conservatism's order is the opposite of liberty, which leads to libertarianism, anarchism, and even postmodern nihilism. In his ordinality version, liberty at most can be a secondary value if and when nested within a proper conservative order.

Neither of those versions is true, from my liberal perspective. Rather, liberty *is* the principle of order.

More generally, liberty is the organizing *social* principle. Here, Orr properly recognizes and endorses a Hayekian “spontaneous order” principle: the aggregate of individual free choices constitute social patterns such as marriage commitments, business arrangements, sports leagues, and religious institutions. It's not that first there is order and then some liberty happens within it. Rather, *the order is made by the free choices* of those who create the institutions.

More narrowly, liberty is the top *political* value. A government is one social institution among many, one that specializes in one function: protecting the liberty of its citizens. Here too, liberty is not *opposed* to order; it *is* the principle of political order. A liberal government gives this basic *order*: respect freedom. And it gives plenty of consequent *orders* to those who do not. The police *orders* suspects to arrest and *orders* them to jail; courts follow procedural *orders* to determine whether liberties have been violated and *order* those convicted to pay fines or to be incarcerated; and the military uses its *order-intensive* methods to protect its citizens from foreign invaders.

Order is baked into liberal social and political philosophy. It's just not a socialist, fascist, aristocratic, or conservative understanding of order, each of which charges government with ordering society on the basis of values other than liberty.

(As this debate is about social principles and laws, set aside the temptation to see political liberalism as asserting that individuals are free to choose their own physics, chemistry, or biology. The metaphysically given is not a matter of choice; our social and political arrangements are.)

The liberal-versus-conservative theoretical principles can be argued abstractly but must be integrated with empirical evidence, the best of which is historical, selectively seeing history as a laboratory of political experiments. What does history teach us about *theoretical* liberal and conservative principles in *practice*? Functionally, how have *abstract* conservative appeals to tradition, order, and hierarchy worked in *particular* contexts in contrast to how liberal appeals to individual freedom worked?

Professor Orr's conservatism repeatedly stresses three values. Tradition: "the longer a precept or habit has survived, the more conducive it is likely to be." Hierarchy: we must get past "the hostility to hierarchy." Order, that is, deference to "the structures and patterns of the world as we find it."

Now let's march through modern history's key social and political transformations.

In the 1400s and 1500s, innovators in the art world—among them Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael—had to fight for the *freedom* to explore new themes and methods. Those using the language of *tradition* resisted and opposed them, sometimes to the point of censorship and bonfires of the vanities. The liberty of artists was eventually won socially and politically.

In the 1500s and 1600s, new versions of religion asserted themselves, claiming that *individuals* have a solemn responsibility to think and decide *freely* how to commit their souls. Those religious *traditionalists* who used the language of *hierarchy* and *order* resisted them, again to the point of revenge cycles of censorship and human bonfires. Liberty and a culture of tolerance for individual religious pursuit eventually prevailed.

In the 1600s and 1700s, the new sciences—*free-thinkers* and experimenters among them—threatened *traditional* views and the established *hierarchy*, which again felt justified in using threats and violence to suppress wrongthink. Socially and politically, again after many hard-fought battles, we came to valorize individual *free-thinking* and *challenge* to traditional views in doing science.

In the 1700s and 1800s, women and anti-slavery activists more vocally and effectively began demanding universal *freedom* for all *individuals* as a matter of moral right. We know who appealed to *hierarchical* family roles and following parental *orders*. We also know who deferred to longstanding *tradition* with respect to slavery. Yet the liberal philosophy won after many messy battles and even war.

The point is *not* that individual conservatives *now* have the same particular opinions about art, science, and slavery as conservatives did generations ago. The point is that the language they use is the same—tradition, hierarchy, order—and the methods and goals that language valorizes are as empty or obstructionist as they were in the past.

The only exception is this. Conservatism in the modern world is frequently after-the-fact agreement with liberalism. In the modern world, the liberals won the debates over the politics of art, science, religion, and about the status of women and slaves—and then they changed the social practices, sometimes revolutionarily. *After the fact*, conservatives made their peace with the new, more liberal reality.

Conservatism at its best, then, from the liberal perspective, functions as a supplemental social force that helps to consolidate liberalism's achievements. Once liberalism becomes the standing tradition, some conservatives sign on to the new order.

A final remark. The tension remains when, as is always the case, humans confront new challenges and our fundamental philosophical commitments are put to the test. In our era, we wonder whether liberalism can meet the challenges of immigration, robotics, primitive tribalisms, transgenderism, social media hate speech, and biological viruses or whether we need to revert to some form of illiberalism to save the day.

In my judgment, both theory and history are confidence-boosting. The track record of liberalism also includes its 1900s battles with illiberalisms on a world-historical scale. National Socialism, Fascism, Militaristic Authoritarianism, and International Communism were formidable adversaries, each mounting philosophical and political threats to liberal ideals and practice. Yet the more liberal nations of the world did rise to the challenge—initially rather slowly—and they did win the wars. They then emerged to rebuild, grow, and flourish. To put it bluntly, if we can beat the Nazis and the Commies, we can beat anything.

Free people solve problems and create. They have the ingenuity, the experimental outlook, and the willingness to learn from their mistakes. They also have the capacity to produce great wealth and mobilize resources to meet any challenge.

Nothing is automatic and there are no guarantees in life. Yet it's realistic to have a healthy confidence in the power of free societies to solve our current and future problems.