

Round Three: Conservatism: Final Thoughts

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I should begin by recording what a pleasure it has been to take part in these exchanges with an interlocutor of the calibre and generosity of Prof. Hicks. Most readers will not need reminding how few universities today could or would facilitate such a fair-minded to-and-fro on the philosophical tectonics that lie beneath so many debates in the public square today. That those debates too often resemble a dialogue of the deaf is a symptom of the failure of the academy to fulfil its essential function of modelling civil and illuminating disagreement on contentious questions that matter more than ever at this disquieting juncture in the long history of the West. It is one of the many strengths of Hicks's contributions to our exchanges that he recognises that the differences between us are, against the backdrop of the radical progressive outlook we strenuously reject, primarily differences of emphasis, even if I am convinced where he is not that wokus pokus is liberalism on steroids.

Our opposing treatments of liberalism and conservatism have been somewhat broad-brush and we have each sailed close to caricaturing the other's tradition. That liberalism elevates freedom above other values does not mean that it is a catalyst for social anarchy; at its best it understands that freedom needs foundations. That conservatism sees organically emerging hierarchies as a hallmark of any flourishing society does not mean that it repudiates liberty or rejects the moral equality of all. On the contrary, it is because it is committed to liberty and equality that conservatism insists on protecting the guardrails that protect those ideals.

All that said, Hicks is wrong to suggest that freedom is liberalism's only foundational value. What distinguishes liberalism from libertarianism is that it takes equality to be no less axiomatic. Equality is, after all, the moral ideal that animates liberalism's opposition to hierarchy in society. That double commitment is not only perfectly coherent on liberalism but inescapable, because once one gives priority to freedom of choice one cannot justify why the free choices of every individual should not be treated equally. On what basis, after all, can one judge one free choice to be better than any other if the only salient consideration is whether or not a choice is freely made?

Hicks suggests that the discomfiting nuances in my Burkean talk of "fetters" and "bonds" should alert us to the errors of the conservative outlook. I do not think we should take this semantic approach at all seriously. In the first place, it should go without saying that fetters and bonds are good or bad depending on the context in which they are imposed. After all, every liberal grants the distinction Locke draws in his *Second Treatise* between the "state of liberty" and the "state of licence"¹ and, in doing so, implicitly recognises that the ownership of property and the exercise of freedom must be fettered and bonded in some way if those rights are to be ordered towards liberty rather than licence. Second, if Hicks thinks that the language enjoining restraint carries a sinister freightage, that is only because we have grown so accustomed to the Promethean posture of liberalism, one that treats any and every constraint on autonomy and agency as morally intolerable. That is why so many of the virtues that depend on recognising the limits of the self are vanishing from our culture. Loyalty, honour, obedience, humility, responsibility, moderation, trust: none of these virtues can take root in a society of individuals who refuse to fetter their egos and their appetites or who insist that the bonds that stitch any commonwealth together should be severed rather than strengthened.

Hicks repudiates the authoritarianism he associates with conservatism. But the truth is that without authority there can be no freedom. To secure any freedom worth having we must secure the right to freedom, but that can be achieved only if rights are underwritten by

¹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 6.

an authority that imposes limits on the freedom of all in order to ensure that the freedom of the few does not crush the freedom of the many.

It is not conservatism but liberalism that is complicit with authoritarianism, because the more one ranks the freedom of the self over its duties to others, the greater the need for an authority powerful enough to take up the responsibilities that liberalism forswears and to protect and police those freedoms for the sake of civic peace. The more freedom individuals are given to construct a self-identity that floats free of the anchoring ties of kinship, heritage, and community, the more the state is empowered with the authority to protect and police the choices that individuals make. That explains why—in Britain at least—the most atomised generation of young people in history is also the generation most inclined to an authoritarian future. Atomisation and authoritarianism are structurally complicit.

Conservatism, by contrast, has historically understood freedom not as the bare assertion of a person's autonomy, but as an achievement—hard won and easily lost—of society as a whole. A free society emerges, slowly and fitfully, from the accumulation of historical narratives, inherited norms, unspoken conventions, constitutional principles, social distinctions, and communal identities that collectively explain why that society is so much more than a random agglomeration of solitary freedom-seekers. The only way to restrain authoritarianism is to safeguard these mechanisms, however inequitable or irrational they may appear at first glance, because they are the only means we have to sustain the social trust that makes the tyrant redundant. It is an egregious error of liberalism to elevate above all else the self-determination of individual agents, not least because who I am as an individual is inseparable from how I understand myself in relation to others. Always and everywhere, human beings have yearned to belong to something greater than themselves. That is why my aspiration to freedom ceases to be intelligible if I force myself to pretend that I am not the inheritor of these criteria of right action, these tried-and-tested norms for human flourishing, this particular society with this particular history, and so on. Respect for tradition, as G. K. Chesterton famously framed it, is nothing more than the democracy of the dead, the refusal to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking

about.² On liberalism, though, the enabling conditions of a free society are only obstacles to freedom, ones that are ripe for subversion the next time the revolutionary kaleidoscope is shaken.

Hicks claims that the Renaissance, the Reformation, the early stirrings of feminism, and abolition of slavery are fruits of the fight for freedom. His implication is that these moral revolutions were inspired by an embryonic crypto-liberalism, as if any aspiration to freedom as a moral ideal is compatible only with the liberal outlook. But none of those movements can be explained even in part by any doctrine of liberalism. The Renaissance emerged not in spite of the tradition-bound hierarchy of the Catholic Church, but because of it (Michelangelo did not pay for the Sistine Chapel himself). Besides, that era is more accurately understood as the kind of exercise in retrieving tradition—specifically the artistic, literary, philosophical, and political traditions of Greece and Rome—that elsewhere liberals deplore in the quest for year zero. As for the Reformation, its leading figures saw themselves as recovering the pristine sense of Scripture and renewing the spirit of the Early Christians after the theological obfuscations and institutional corruption of Catholic Christianity. And the animating spirit of abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce was not a liberal yearning for self-determination, but rather a deep theological conviction, rooted in an ancient canon of sacred texts, that in a divinely created order freedom and equality are the rightful possessions of every human being. So Hicks's potted history seems to me to underscore the opposite of what he infers from it, namely, the enduring power of perennial principles as these are refracted through particular traditions, principles that can be realised only in the context of a stable and fine-grained social order.

It is a longstanding caricature of conservatism that it treats traditions as intrinsically valuable. But that overlooks the pragmatism of the conservative outlook, a pragmatism that resists liberalism's utopian conviction that once tradition and order are eliminated, a world of perfect freedom and equality will emerge. On the conservative view, traditions, like freedom, are instruments that are valuable only to the extent that they facilitate collective flourishing and consolidate social

² G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), p. 48.

unity. Conservatives take traditions seriously only because they recognise that they distil subtle answers to questions that are central to the human condition. That is not only a rational presumption, but one based on the bitter and bloody experience of attempts—typically undertaken in the name of freedom—to replace the finely tuned coordination mechanisms of custom and convention with grand coercive schemes that turn out to be far less equitable than what they overturned.

In the final analysis, the value that liberalism invests in individual freedom is arbitrary. It is arbitrary in the sense that it attributes significance to the mere exercise of *arbitrium* (“decision”) while remaining neutral on the moral status of the motive or consequences of the ways in which it is exercised. To do otherwise would be to take a stand on the meaning of the good and the right, but for the liberal that would contradict the freedom of every person to settle those questions privately. Hicks is right to conclude his final contribution to our exchanges by recognising the power of free societies to address the many and various challenges that confront us. But no society can be free if its members are free to do as they please. The freedom of a free society is the shared inheritance and achievement of a people, not the bare accumulation of options available to its individual members. Until liberalism rids itself of that fatal confusion, the civilisation that elevated freedom above all else will continue to watch it seep slowly away.