Round Two: A Conservative Critique of Liberalism

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Criticisms of liberalism do not come naturally to those formed in the Anglo-American conservative tradition. For although liberalism traces its origins to early modernity, many of its most enduring insights long predate the Enlightenment. The sovereignty of the self against coercion by church or state, confessional liberty (and the associated freedoms of expression and association), the right to property, the inalienability of natural rights, the equality of all before the law, the checks and balances of parliamentary democracy, the principles of equity and trust: each of these jewels in liberalism's crown had begun to be won centuries before its actual arrival. Each of them was the outcome of a delicate dance between the myriad moving parts of England's emerging constitutional landscape, a complex and highly specific configuration of historical conditions that were uniquely conducive to liberalism's birth. In other words, liberalism—at least in its Anglosphere varieties—marks not a rupture in the history of ideas but the final fragile fruition of the social order that the first self-consciously conservative thinkers took at such pains to preserve and protect from the anarchic adulation of freedom that would have such catastrophic effects in Continental Europe.

It was the Girondin revolutionary Madame Roland—that archetype of the liberal mugged by the political consequences of elevating egalitarian freedom above every other value—who famously exclaimed, as she was lowering her neck onto the guillotine, "Oh Liberty! What crimes are done in your name!" At the core of my disagreement with Professor Hicks is the claim that Madame Roland's astonishment was understandable but unfounded: a society that prizes freedom above all else is a society that will, in time, descend into tyranny. Hicks rightly raises the question of why we should rank liberty over other goods, but he seems to leave it unanswered. The conservative grasps a paradox that the liberal fails to see, which is that if we truly value liberty we should never treat it as ultimate. If that seems puzzling, consider the paradox that the political liberal's axiomatic organising

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principle (as Hicks himself observes) is not freedom, but the total monopoly on coercive power by the state. That acknowledgment implicitly recognises a paradox that every conservative cheerfully accepts, namely, that limits liberate, that the exercise of freedom is possible only if freedom is restricted.

On the conservative view, liberalism's preference for individual freedom over the ties that bind the individual to family, community, and nation gradually erodes those ties until the state remains as the sole guarantor of individual freedom, a state of affairs as certain as any to bring about the tyranny that liberalism wishes to avert. The liberal mind constantly tests and questions the limits of what a society can tolerate to the point at which the liberal state must abandon its neutrality and invoke ranking principles for resolving conflicts between the free choices of its citizens, conflicts that arose only because of liberalism's beguiling myth that the only acceptable limits to freedom are those imposed by positive law. For the conservative, recourse to the legal adjudication of the limits of human freedom is a mark of a dysfunctional moral community. As Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila once observed, dying societies accumulate laws like dying men accumulate remedies.[1]

Two central assumptions have animated liberalism from early modernity onwards: first, that true freedom is freedom from any and all involuntary ties and, second, that the recognition of the moral equality of all human beings is strictly incompatible with a hierarchically ordered society. At the beginning of the modern era, the Anglosphere had secured such an unprecedented degree of geopolitical dominance that both these axioms came to acquire the status of a dominant orthodoxy, one that all people of good will and right mind would sooner or later acknowledge as universal truths. But it is an illusion to suppose, with John Locke, that we are "by nature all free, equal and independent"[2] or,

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[1] Nicolás Gómez Dávila, "Las Sociedades Moribundas Acumulan Leyes Como los Moribundos Remedios," in *Escolios a un Texto Implícito: Selección* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1977), p. 106.

[2] John Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), sec. 95.

with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that because we are born free we must repudiate the shackles with which our society burdens us.[3] We are born bound to others. We are born bound in the most basic sense imaginable to our biological mothers and in the most fundamental social sense that we cannot develop as persons without the dense webs of reciprocal ties of family, a community, and a nation. As Aristotle argues in the opening book of his *Politics*, it belongs to our nature as a species that we can flourish only in the context of a political community made up of concentric circles of constraints from household (*oikos*) to neighbourhood (*komē*) to state (*polis*).[4] Note that those complex matrices of human relations could not bring about the formation or flourishing of persons that they do in the absence of some kind of hierarchical structure; moreover, they would collapse in the absence of widely acknowledged principles of power to configure them correctly and hold them in place.

And yet, as Hicks correctly notes, liberalism resists both hierarchy and power as incompatible with the pursuit of freedom as the ultimate good. What sets liberalism apart from its rivals, he claims, is that "[h]ierarchical authoritarians … make the possession of power itself the top political value." But the possession of power is the enabling condition for organising any society, including the liberal social order that makes it possible to elevate freedom as the highest value. None of the ideologies he mentions, however morally bankrupt they have proved to be, seeks power simply for the sake of it, even if many tyrants can and do mask their thirst for power in ideology. Nor is liberalism uniquely immune to tyrannical impulse that Hicks rightly attributes to other ideological outlooks. As he notes, liberalism also requires "the government's universal compulsive power" to achieve its ends. The trouble is, as I suggested in my opening essay, that liberalism's aim of

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[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. and ed. G. D. H. Cole (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1923), Book I, chap. 1.

[4] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), Book I, chap. 1.

securing the absolute liberty of all, especially of those individuals and groups whose free choices disrupt their society's inherited norms and self-understanding, can and does give rise to authoritarian constraints that are much harder to escape. That is precisely because liberalism pretends to achieve freedom from all constraints, including those necessary for securing a functional common life, and because it pretends to operate on the basis of a strictly neutral appraisal of the good even though it rests on highly contentious presumptions about human nature, including the claim that freedom is always and everywhere the highest good for every human being.

Postmodernism itself is an outlook that Hicks has analysed and criticised powerfully over the years. But the fragmentation of metaphysics that postmodernism ushers in—neatly distilled in Jean-Paul Sartre's rejection of stable order of essences in favour of an anarchic flux of an "authentic" or freely authored existence—represents nothing less than the logical fruition of Hicks's own philosophy. As Hicks notes, "[l]iberalism believes in the individual's fundamental need for freedom to pursue his or her meaning of life." That idea lies close to the core of postmodernism. As it elevates the freedom of the individual self to stipulate his own conception of reality, liberalism must also insist on the equal legitimacy of every other freely chosen conception, whatever logical contradictions may then arise.

One strategy—favoured by quite a few guests on *Triggernometry* over the years!—is to retreat from the obvious excesses of liberalism in its neoliberal or progressive guises back towards the uplands of "classical liberalism." If I am right, that approach is doomed to fail. For liberalism is oriented by definition towards a horizon of total emancipation from any and every unchosen bond, including, in the case of transgender ideology, emancipation from the limits of one's very embodiment. The atomisation of modern society, the tectonic contradictions of identitarianism, and the shattering of civic and economic harmony are not puzzling aberrations of liberalism but the outworking of its inner logic.