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PRESENTE Y FUTURO  
DEL LIBERALISMO  
*PRESENT AND FUTURE  
OF LIBERALISM*

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## The Meaning and Force of Liberalism

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My paper is a brief and abbreviated observation on the role of natural philosophy and science in the development and self-understanding of liberalism. The most basic idea is this: The boundary between wishing and choosing is defined by the limits of my power. I merely wish for things beyond my power; I actively choose what I judge to be within my power, now or in the future. Therefore, if all forms, both natural and cultural or social, are malleable, no forms can permanently limit my power. If all forms can be transformed, then there can be no reasonable or legitimate constraints on my freedom of choice.

### Introduction

The United States has the ambiguous distinction of embodying the best and the worst of liberalism. The best consists in checked and balanced, representative constitutionalism, for the sake of protecting the individual from tyrannical abuse and society from violent factional conflict. The best can be seen in the comparison between liberal regimes and non-liberal alternatives, regimes which do not permit, or actively

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destroy, the full range of human achievement. The worst is liberty without limit, and the resulting erosion of human community, and of the very capacity for self-government presupposed by the liberal regime. The worst can be seen by looking inside American society at the embarrassing, depressing, alarming things that happen there. I believe that the worst effects are more significant for the present and future of liberalism. Therefore, these effects need to be understood in terms of their essential causes or commanding origins. The fundamental viewpoint for this analysis is that liberalism must be seen as a part of the modern (17th century) project of mastery of nature and self-determination.

The past, present, and future of liberalism are linked to two ideas about freedom and nature. They are: (1) the concept of freedom or liberty as absence of external constraints on the choices of individuals; (2) the nonteleological understanding of nature and human nature. The first is familiar to students of political theory. The second derives from natural philosophy, is less familiar, and, therefore, requires some discussion. These two ideas together constitute an abiding impulse that orients liberalism on its diverse and seemingly paradoxical course. This course runs from originally limited, representative government, with well defined rights and judicial restraint, to presently extensive, bureaucratic government with expansive rights created by unchecked judicial decree. To understand the meaning and force of liberalism, and to save what is best in it, one must be aware of the two large conceptions about freedom and nature that sustain and propel it. This paper attempts to explicate them by contrasting them with alternative and historically opposed doctrines, namely, with the premodern accounts of freedom as internal equilibrium of soul, and nature as normative.

## Freedom

*The Premodern Account: Freedom as moral-intellectual equilibrium-internal to my soul.*

In *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle describes a city deeply divided between extremes of rich and poor. The very wealthy are habituated to arrogance, the very poor are sunk in malice. Neither extreme can follow reason. «What comes into being, then, is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy, the others by contempt».

Freedom here is a condition internal to the human soul. It is characterized by the guidance of reason. When I am in this condition, I am free from passions that would otherwise destroy my vision of what is good and right. Freedom means *freedom from* my own distorting passions, of desire, fear, and anger, and thus *freedom for* the exercise of moral virtue and practical wisdom. Being free in this way is perfective of my human nature, but it is a demanding mission. I and my community are responsible for much. Nevertheless, the achievement of freedom or virtue is the natural end or *telos* of the human being, the political animal possessing speech, the being capable of thought and action<sup>1</sup>.

*The Modern Account: Freedom as absence of external constraints on my choices.*

Thomas Hobbes says it plainly:

«By liberty is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments» (*Leviathan*, Chap. 14).

John Locke follows him, and Locke is a major philosophical source of the American founding.

«Freedom is the fence to [my preservation, and] the foundation of all the rest» (*Second Treatise*, §17; my emphasis).

«Freedom ... [is] to follow my own will in all things where the rule prescribes not, and not to be subject to the ... arbitrary will of another man» (*Second Treatise*, §22).

«The end of law is ... to preserve *and enlarge* freedom; .... For liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others» (*Second Treatise*, §57; my emphasis).

1. ARISTOTLE, *EN*, 1097b12, 1098a16-18, 1099b20-25, 1178a5.

Consider the analogy of the fence in John Locke. The fence surrounds and protects my private space, my property. Property protected by the fence of law is a good metaphor for freedom in the Lockean sense. On my protected property, in my protected space, I can do whatever I will, consistent with my neighbor's right to his or her own protected space. Law here limits the action of others against me — especially the action of those who hold power — leaving me free from coercion in my own space. Thus protected, I form associations of family, community, church, school, profession, interest and enterprise, all uncoerced by the state. Here we have politically free society, society ordered but not impeded by the state. Every individual is thus free to prosper in varying degree according to his or her given capacities and situation. This is classical liberalism.

But note that the purpose of law is, as Locke says, not only to preserve but also to enlarge freedom. Indeed the fence both protects and constrains me. And even inside my fence, or rather *especially* inside my fence, I am still subject to many constraints, arising from my natural capacities and limitations, and from my social and historical situation. So what does the enlargement of freedom mean? Does it mean to increase my possibilities by earning more money through my own hard work? I can buy more property then, so the fence moves further away. This was probably Locke's intention. And a rising tide, a productive economy, that is, lifts all boats. But in the theory of classical liberalism, I cannot petition government for rights to ignore my life, my health, my temperament, my gender, my family, my social relations and class. I can only claim rights against — thus claim state protection from — what lies beyond the fence around my property. Therefore, unless I get rich, there is much that I must suffer, much from which I cannot be liberated. And so it is not surprising that the enlargement of freedom has come to mean the progressive removal of all perceived constraints, whether natural or historical, on the choices of individuals. This idea is less well defined yet more powerfully attractive and immediately gratifying than the classical liberal vision of industriousness, self-discipline, and free market rationality.

The transformation of freedom is strikingly exemplified in reasoning of the United States Supreme Court: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life<sup>2</sup>. Here, to be a person is to be a sovereign, autonomous Self, unconstrained by the nature of life, of the universe, of existence, because these things possess no intrinsic meanings, meanings that are given prior to all human making and choosing. Intrinsic meanings would make a claim on us and on our choices. Intrinsic meanings of life, the universe, existence would constitute ends prior to choice. There would then be forms that could not be transformed without jeopardizing our humanity.

Our present concept of freedom is powerfully attractive, and a serious problem. It is a problem not only because of the obvious conflict over who will enjoy unconstrained satisfaction and who will have to pay for it, but also and especially because our concept of freedom undermines its own moral preconditions, namely, individuals able to govern themselves so that they do not have to be controlled by the state. Crime in America is the most visible symptom of the problem.

All of this is being addressed in the current communitarian debates on the conflict between the autonomous individual and the political community. But the moral-political notion of the autonomous Self arises conjointly with the early modern account of physical nature. To state this in more technical language: the transition from *soul* (a natural principle) to *self* (a transnatural principle) is concomitant with the transition from the teleological to the non-teleological conception of nature. I believe it is worthwhile to see how that conception of nature sharpens the meaning, and adds to the force of liberalism.

2. KENNEDY, SOUTER, O'CONNOR, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 29 June 1992.

## Nature

The crux of my argument is that the heart of the early-modern, nonteleological conception of nature is *transformism*: the belief in the unlimited malleability of all natural form. In view of this belief, any natural form, for example, the form of my human body, that has in the past been a barrier to, or constraint on, my choices and satisfactions can in the future be changed or transformed so that the constraint is removed, and my freedom of choice enlarged. To the early-modern idea of the malleability of all natural forms is added through Rousseau and German philosophy the idea of the malleability of all cultural forms. Thereby freedom — the absence of constraints on choice — is armed with the belief that there are no reasonable limits to human will, desire, and satisfaction. Let me apologize for the following severe but unavoidable simplification in presenting my basic point, namely, transformism in early modern philosophy.

*The Premodern Account: Nature as form and normative limit.*

Let us begin with the contrasting premodern position deriving from Aristotle, cryptically but incisively summarized by Thomas Aquinas:

«The soul and other natural forms are not *per se* subject to motion ... they are, moreover, the perfections of mutable things» (*In de trinitate*, q 5, a 2, ad 6).

Here, soul is a natural form and natural forms are essentially unchangeable. The potentials determined to form (*Meta.* 1015a12) may be realized in the well working of the informed substance (*Meta.* 1032a19) or they may be frustrated (*Phys.* 199b5), but there can be no radical transformation of an informed substance (*Meta.* 1033b5-7); dogs will always mate with dogs and have puppies, not kittens (*Phys.* 193b7-19), and they ought to. Thus form is both norm and limit — limit to human thinking and making (*Meta.* 1022a9-11, 1030a12-14, 1032b2).

In the crucial case of the human being, natural form informs the political animal possessing reason and speech (*Pol.* 1253a7-9). My nature as animal, as political, and as rational thus includes my reason, my speech and action among others, my living body with its physical condition, chemistry, gender, perceptions, desires and aversions, pleasures and pains. All of this is included in my human nature, which is aimed at the specifically human perfection or *telos* consisting in the rule of reason.

This is the teleological understanding (severely simplified) of nature and human nature. In this account, the presumption is that, unless I am physically compelled or coerced by others to an action, I am responsible for what I do (*EN* 1110a16-17). In particular, I am responsible for controlling my own feelings, or passions, because they belong to my human animate nature just as much as my reason (*EN* 1111b1-3). And so, freedom from coercion by others — the noble purpose of Locke's fence — still leaves me subject, as noted above, to many responsibilities and constraints arising from my composite nature as rationally ensouled body (*EN* 1177b27-28, 1178a21-23).

The question now is, what happens to my freedom if the traditional understanding of nature as matter directed to form (i.e., an ensouled body) is rejected? Note that, once we say that freedom is absence of external constraints on choice, the central question becomes, What is the boundary between external and internal?

*The Modern Account: Nature as transformable without limit.*

In Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses the power of fortune in human affairs. He compares fortune or chance to a river. He says:

I liken [fortune] to one of those violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and buildings, lift earth from this part, drop it in another; each person flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any regard. And although they are

like this, it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging (Mansfield trans., p. 98).

Permit me to assert that Machiavelli's river is a metaphor for nature and causality in human beings. Specifically, the impetus or force of the river represents the human desires for self-preservation, wealth, and glory, that, for Machiavelli, motivate all human behavior. To understand how human beings behave we must understand not the traditional account of matter directed to form, and the normative structure of rational soul. Rather, we must think about how the river is caused to move. Thus enlightened, we realize that the river is moved according to (1) optimal flow rate at the lowest level, and (2) the shape of the river bed, i.e., the external conditions that determine the direction of the water. The crucial point is this: the river does not possess an intrinsic directedness to one particular pattern or form of motion as perfective of its nature, as opposed to other, deficient forms of motion. And precisely for this reason — the natural indifference of the river — its flow pattern or trajectory can be shaped, reshaped, *transformed* from one of devastation to one of cultivation by the will of the engineers, who simply impose the right external conditions, the dikes and canals, on otherwise blind natural forces. If human nature is understood in this way, then, not the rule of reason in moral self-control, but the clever configuration of selfish passions provides the method of successful politics. Private vice becomes public virtue. By the right technique, a good form of government can be imposed on any human matter. In general, good engineering — working artfully on malleable material — becomes the key to solving human problems.

Machiavelli's conception of human nature as selfish, predictable, and controllable will always be controversial, if only because most of us continue to admire spontaneously the traditional human virtues of courage, moderation, justice and wisdom. But remarkably, the nonteleological account of nature has been, and continues to be, corroborated in various

classes of nonhuman phenomena, from classical physics to (at least parts of) modern genetics. Particular or partial successes of science are often philosophically generalized to fuel the spirit of transformism — the belief in the malleability of *all* natural form. Transformism can be seen in the following quotations from major founders of modern science and philosophy.

Descartes:

I took pains to make everything belonging to the nature of fire very clearly understandable .... Thus I made clear how it is formed and fueled, how sometimes it possesses only heat without light, and sometimes light without heat; how it can produce different colors and various other qualities in different bodies; how it melts some bodies and hardens others; how it can consume almost all bodies, or turn them into ashes and smoke; and finally how it can, by the mere violence of its action, form glass from these ashes—something I took particular pleasure in describing since *it seems to me as wonderful a transmutation as any that takes place in nature* (*Discourse on Method*, Part V, AT VI 44-45; emphasis added).

Spinoza:

Nothing comes to pass in nature, which can be set down to a flaw therein [cf. *Phys.* 199b4]; for nature is always the same, and everywhere one and the same in her efficacy and power of action; that is, nature's laws and ordinances, whereby *all things come to pass and change from one form to another*, are everywhere and always the same; so that there should be one and the same understanding of the nature of all things whatsoever, namely, through nature's universal laws and rules (*Ethics* III, Introduction; emphasis added).

Newton:

Nature is exceedingly simple and conformable to herself. Whatever reasoning holds for greater motions [e.g., bodies moved under gravitational force] should hold for lesser ones [of hypothetical microscopic particles] as well (‘Unpublished Conclusion of the *Principia*’, in A. R. and M. B. Hall, *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton*, 333).

I derive from the celestial phenomena the forces of gravity with which bodies tend to the sun and the several planets. Then from these forces ... I deduce the motions of the planets, the comets, the moon, and the sea. *I wish we could derive the rest of the phenomena of Nature by the same kind of reasoning from mechanical principles, for I am induced by many reasons to suspect that they may all (!) depend upon certain forces by which the particles of bodies, by some causes hitherto unknown, are either mutually impelled towards one another, and cohere ... or are repelled and recede ....* These forces being unknown, philosophers have hitherto attempted the search of Nature in vain.... (*Principia*, First [1686] Preface; emphasis added).

*Every body can be transformed into another, of whatever kind, and all the intermediary degrees of qualities can be successively induced in it* (*Principia*, First Edition, Hypothesis III; emphasis added).

*Commentary:*

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part V: Descartes is fascinated not with form but with transformations in nature. In *Passions of the Soul*, Art. 47, Descartes says that my body — not some unruly part of my soul as Aristotle and Aquinas taught — is the source of all that opposes my reason. But my body is merely a part of the general mechanism of nature; it does not belong to me in the way that my mind and will belong to me. (That my body is a continuous part of the general mechanism of nature is evident in *Passions of the Soul*, Art. 33.) According to Descartes, the only region of the universe into which my soul penetrates is my pineal gland. The anatomy is outmoded, but the philosophical concept remains potent today: my body is almost wholly *external* to my will or true Self; my body is not internal to my embodied soul. As external, I can demand liberation from my body if it happens to be a constraint on my choices.

Spinoza, *Ethics* III, Introduction: Nature is unified not by principles of form and matter, but by universal laws of nature. Under the aegis of these laws, bodies change from one form to another.

Newton, *Principia*, First Preface: The general mechanism of nature is concretized in the particles-and-forces model of all physical phenomena, by analogy to the gravitational theory. A crucial result of the gravitational theory is that, to a great extent, the trajectories of bodies can be shaped, reshaped, transformed by human control of initial position and velocity, and by calculated impulses during the course of motion. We do this with rockets for the exploration of space. But Newton's reasoning here is more radical. For if the motions, the trajectories, of the tiny particles that are assumed to compose any body can be similarly reshaped by future scientists, then, *in principle*, «Every body can be transformed into another, of whatever kind ....». There is nothing in the nature of things to stand in the way of transformative control of all natural process. Natural form is not a normative limit as Aristotle and Aquinas mistakenly believed. Rather, nature is to be transcended by transnatural human will.

## Conclusion

Nature is material to work on; human will and its calculating reason are «disembodied». There is no reason why I —meaning my transnatural Self— cannot become free of constraints arising from my bodily nature. Because all of nature is now in principle subject to the transformative control of those who possess enlightenment or science. In view of this possibility, there is no reason why law and political right should remain bound to our bodily nature. Law and right should be separated from nature. Accordingly, my own freedom should no longer be constrained by my living body with its physical condition, chemistry, gender, desires and aversions, pleasures and pains. I did not choose my physical nature, and in view of the new meaning of nature, I should have the right to transcend any limitations arising from mere nature. And the state should secure this right.