

## **Understanding Liberalism as a Frame of Reference or Set of First Principles: How or Why does it exist within our Culture?**

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To date, we are currently living within the wake of the 2020 US presidential electoral campaign and we are trying to find how best to respond and act: how better to understand it and how better to make wise decisions about what we should do and how we should think and imagine. Ideally, with Socrates, we would want our doing to follow from our grasping and knowing. Best begin then with the challenge of understanding. The enormous divisions dividing persons and groups from each other imply that something is gravely amiss within the life of our currently existing American political culture although, admittedly, the American situation is not entirely unique. All western nations allegedly exist as liberal democracies or they are said so to exist. A liberal political mentality allegedly reflects or it points to a liberal economic mentality (if not other specifications of mind and sense). The uniqueness of the American experience however points to a priority which it has had as a revolt against old world notions of just rule and government which had led to a string of controversies, developments in argument, and extensions and expansions of belief which have served to inspire other would be revolutionaries in other parts of the world, the makers of the French Revolution most especially. So pivotal became the American contribution and so pressing now is our current need to come to a better understanding of it that we feel as if we are now being driven to stand back and, with Socrates, to ask questions that would turn to simple but difficult subjects. What is justice? What is the good? What is the purpose and function of a political order? So too, what is the purpose and function of an economic order? If, in the US, a liberal democracy exists, then what is this purported liberalism? Where does it come from? What are its roots? Can we move toward a better understanding of ourselves within our current human context? How can things improve in some way or other? To whom or to what do we move and intend? If liberalism exists as a kind of genus, political and economic liberalism would seem to exist as distinct species although, in terms of our struggle for understanding, our inquiry can do without an excursus which moves into a third species of liberalism which would exist as philosophic liberalism and some kind of stance that is taken about the being and nature of existing things and how we are to relate to the being of existing things (cognition, epistemology, metaphysics). The thoughts and thinking of many persons effects changes within a symbolic order of things as these changes in turn lead us back toward other, possible changes in our thinking and understanding in ways that touch on our human praxis.

As an initial point of departure then, let us note that liberalism does not exist as a theory that has been thought out and then put into some form of technical expression. In contrast, Marxism exists more or less as a unified theory and, if we are to understand it, we can turn to a number of authoritative texts as these come to us from the likes of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. As honorable mentions, can we refer to Leon Trotsky and Mao Zedong? But, on the other hand however, liberalism exists as a more ambiguous, slippery kind of thing and no one set of texts will necessarily satisfy our wants and needs. To initiate some kind of inquiry, we begin then with a somewhat arbitrary point of departure in terms of an historical context that we can perhaps identify with.

For all intents and purposes, *à la* the kind of analysis that comes to us from Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of interpretation as this comes to us from his major work entitled *Truth and Method*, we begin with our alleged historicity: with our inherited prejudices and biases since these join us to a world which is distinct and other than ourselves. We want to find roots and points of origin which

predate liberalism in terms of its major proponents if, here, we should think about the kind of political philosophy which had arisen in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and the several contributions of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. We start from something that is more or less familiar to us and we move toward some kind of higher viewpoint which can place liberalism within a wider context and perspective, the better to distinguish its strengths and weaknesses. We recall advice that comes to us from two credible albeit ancient sources: Alcamaeon of Croton, “we move from traces and signs that we see and we move toward a world that we can never see,” and St. Augustine, by “pillaging the Egyptians,” we look at the material and the cultural resources which exist in our world and we try to discern therein what is good and not so good and then bring what is good into the context of our personal human lives.

Hence, as our biased point of departure, we begin with Christopher Dawson's *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry* since it gives to us an initial sense of things as this was understood (by him and others circa 1929) prior to the advent of the Second World War. On the one hand, one notion or one manifestation of progress exists within the order of our human history if we refer to religious roots which recall the rise and call of Israel in a tradition that was then carried over into the belief and practice of Christianity. However, the origins of a secular or of a materialistic notion of progress within the stuff of our human history points to a new point of view which exists as the basis of today's modern liberalism: liberalism, here as we experience it, as the progressive secularization of our western European culture. Its ground is belief in the workings of a mysterious, mechanical, automatic law of progress that is somehow always operative in our lives. Our human good is achieved with every kind of advance which occurs within the order of business, technology, and economics. Quantifiable material well being implies every other kind of human well being. Achieve the first and everything else will follow. More currently, Adrian Pabst's *Demons of Liberal Democracy* identifies difficulties which we are experiencing: inner contradictions which need to be understood and evaluated if better judgments are to be made about the scope and the viability of liberalism as both a philosophical outlook and as a praxis or practice of human freedom in the choices that we must corporately and individually make. For something that is a bit more specific, Ryszard Legutko's *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* adverts to an unexpected, strange kind of authoritarianism that could be found within liberal democracies as we find them within the government of our world today. Can it be argued that the precondition of Marxist analysis is a species of liberalism which is grounded in the sufficiency of a utilitarian understanding of human life?

Moving to a second stage of analysis which could possibly add to our understanding, Sir Larry Alan Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* looks at premodern points of origin in terms of the influence of one key variable. While many interpretations of liberalism point to 16<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Reformation roots, a history of individualism traces from Christian origins that come from the apostolic preaching of St. Paul and the proclaiming of a saving message that was intended for all persons, irrespective of any social and cultural differences. As God's children, all persons exist as brothers and sisters, one to another. By postulating a fundamental form of equality that exists among all human persons who stand before God, the human individual emerges as a primary unit within first the order of religion and then, later, within the order of society and civic life. Each person, as human, possesses a commonly shared nature which in turn explains why each person must possess an identical set of fundamental rights which all must respect if each person is to live a truly human life, in each their own way. As a development that comes to us from the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century (circa 1160) within an emerging tradition of interpretation amongst canonists in their study of the Church's canon law: beyond that which is commanded or forbidden us *by nature* (given the normativity and the

demands of our commonly shared humanity: how we exist and how we have been created as human beings), within this same nature a subjective element is also to be found. Quite rightly and properly, as human subjects, we can choose to do what we would like to do after deciding what we can or should do within a given human situation. A degree of personal freedom exists within us in a way which points to a permissive order of law where, from an understanding of natural law as this applies to us as human beings, we can move toward an understanding of our natural rights. The givenness of nature as law also points to the givenness of nature as rights, the law of nature allegedly revealing the rights of nature in a way which should indicate how best we are to know about the identity of our proper, human rights. One leads to the other.

Lastly although not finally or definitively, Michael Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity* engages in an analysis which points to two related changes which existed as a species of revolution: how firstly for instance, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, philosophical developments within a theological context created a new, larger context which emerged when the primacy of our human acts of reasoning was preempted and replaced by an alleged primacy that belongs to our human acts of willing. Willing trumps understanding. If Aquinas, in the middle of the *Summa Theologiae*, begins to articulate a distinct philosophy of the human will in a break with more traditional ways of thinking which had assumed that our human acts of willing exist as a function of our human acts of understanding and knowledge, later within the same century, Duns Scotus effects a shift in now speaking about the primacy of our acts of human willing, over and against an alleged primacy that had belonged to our human acts of understanding and judgment. The result was a multitude or sequence of changes as a growing emphasis on the power and scope of our acts of willing led to a different theology of God, a different understanding of our salvation as this comes to us from God, and a different understanding about what it means to be and to exist as a human person. If, for instance, God's divine freedom is not conditioned by how God exists as an unrestricted act of understanding, our created human freedom emerges with an absoluteness of its own. We understand ourselves in a different way if our freedom emerges as a new first principle: as it reorders our subsequent human actions in a way which can be divorced from the kind of demands or requirements which belong to our acts of human cognition. Do we grow in knowledge and understanding by merely willing our acts of cognition? Not to be forgotten, however, in the same context is a related, second change which, perhaps, was more fundamental: an understanding of human cognition which favors our acts of sensing over our acts of understanding, or which interprets our acts of understanding in terms which more properly belong to the kind of act which exists in our human acts of sensing. How do we move toward a knowledge of real things? What should we suppose? Is the real something which exists as primarily an individual item or individual thing or is it some other kind of unity? A nominalist understanding of human cognition differs from realist understandings which reject the simplicity of nominalist assumptions. Is a truncated understanding of human cognition to be associated with an overly simplistic take about how we are to think about our human acts of willing and the volition which exists within our willing?

On another but somewhat contrary track, Andrew Jones's *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* gives a clearer understanding or a clearer perception of liberalism to the degree that it attempts to speak about a pre-liberal context when speaks about a distinct ordering of meaning (an *episteme*) which characterizes another world of human believing, feeling, thinking, and understanding. What kind of human world exists as, allegedly, a pre-modern or a pre-liberal type of world? If, in our contemporary understanding of the relation which exists between society and state, it is commonly believed that human conflict exists as a fundamental problem and point of departure in how human beings live and exist and if it is believed that only the state has the

right to use force in order to solve human problems (in order to suppress the violence of other parties and groups), a different perspective emerges if we allude to how, before Luther and Hobbes, a different way of thinking had existed which supposes that peace exists as a more fundamental point of departure. Conflicts inevitably arise later and in trying to deal with difficult human problems in any conflicts that have arisen, we best function if we can try to return things to an original or a prior condition of peace and concord; we try to determine the customs and traditions which had regulated how persons and groups had amicably lived and co-existed with each other. Church and State exist together. They work together to determine the relevant customs and traditions which have existed where each relies on the other in a way that the other respects, desires, and honors. Friendship, on the basis of a common shared horizon, brings and holds different persons together and it exists as an essentially needed requirement if difficult human problems are to be successfully understood, addressed, and resolved.

Lastly, in conclusion, how can liberalism be understood within a larger, transcendental perspective: within a widest, possible order of meaning and being which then acts as a base, catalyst, or solvent for effecting considerations and changes that can add to the good of things which already exists within current liberal practice? Always, in its distinctiveness, liberalism is best understood if other points of view can be determined and identified in terms of other variables that can be known and appreciated in each their own way. To illustrate a bit: in two early essays, in his “Essay in Fundamental Sociology – Philosophy of History” and in his “*Pantōn Anakephalaiōsis: A Theory of Human Solidarity*,” *Archival Material: Early Papers on History*, Bernard Lonergan notes that our human story is filled with many contradictions and conflicts. Some things get better while other things get worse. Our history is filled with many ambiguous changes. Hence, how to differentiate; how to discern? If the birth of philosophy is taken as a kind of bench mark (and this birth refers to a discovery which now knows about the authority and the powers of our human reason), we can distinguish between a dialectics of fact and a dialectics of thought. Three phases or elements exist within each. In terms of fact, a law of progress exists when we look at how developments within the order of our human technology had led to changes within the order of economics and politics. A human society grows in the degree of its organization. But, as a second variable, the good which is achieved is undermined by how evil exists as a mysterious, vitiating force (as a kind of undertow which corrupts the life of a given society). The good and the evil grow together (the wheat and the weeds) but in a manner which can be challenged by a third variable: by religious claims which refer to events that have come to exist within our world as intrusions: as instructions which are said to be divinely revealed.

In terms of thought however (within this species of order), a law of progress exists if, as a first variable or premiss, we move into critical forms of understanding and cognition which exist as the emergence of philosophy and science (the two initially existing together). We are less tempted to think in terms of short term solutions that would be adequate for solving our human problems. However, as a second variable, the progress which exists within our understanding is interrupted and complicated if, in rationalism or in the kind of rationalization which exists in rationalism, our understanding is separated from the good of belief which exists within the order of transcendence and religion: if our understanding is turned into something which exists on its own, independently and apart from anything else. Liberalism, the kind of liberalism that we commonly experience in our world, tends to exist within a perspective that values this autonomy and independence. Our understanding is seen to exist as if it exists as a self-sufficient kind of thing. We can solve our own problems! A concluding term or variable, however, is the possibility of faith as this exists within us as an effective, subjective response. The good of our reasoning and understanding is restored and it is raised to new heights through an openness which can begin to turn our insoluble human problems into means and instruments which

convert or which turn an existing evil into a good through a mysterious form of agency which exists as a species of external cause, relative to ourselves: hence, as an order or species of conditioning, active promotion which is supernatural and not natural though we can participate in it if we are open to it, receptive and cooperative. A form of higher unity can begin to join us as human beings into a new form of solidarity that, by ourselves, we cannot effect, create, or engineer.

As much then as we urgently need to move toward an understanding of liberalism that can answer some of our questions, we find, however, an even larger number of more difficult questions to answer and so the necessity of a form of self-scrutiny which challenges us to find some other, new, possible point of departure. The foundations of liberalism, as they become known to us, appear to be less sure and certain. They emerge with a questionableness which recalls the quandaries and challenges which had confronted Socrates and so, for us, the hazards of possibly returning or entering into some form of metaphysical analysis if our rights and prerogatives as human beings are to exist in a way which is not to be solely determined or conditioned by our acts of willing and the desiring and wanting which exists in willing. Have we an endless number of rights or does a right exist because of reasons which transcend ourselves and any claims that we would want to make about their point and identity? An understanding of liberalism reiteratively exists for us as an urgent need although, in discovering its here and there lack of coherence (hence, its insufficiency), we find that we need to turn ourselves toward the being of other realities in a way which attends to how we might grow in our knowledge and understanding of them.