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The Liberal Spirit in America and Its Paradoxes

PETER BERKOWITZ

Notwithstanding the challenges of the post-September 11 world, never has a people enjoyed a greater range of individual rights, or been more jealous of its freedoms, or been more convinced that the liberty it prizes is good not only for itself but for other peoples than do we in the United States today. This nation, in most respects the freest one the world has ever seen, has produced the world's most diverse society; the world's best army; the world's most organized, industrious, and productive economy; and a political order that to a remarkable degree contains the factions and divisions that have prevented so many other countries from innovating and solving collective problems. This achievement represents the triumph in America of liberalism, a tradition of thought and politics stretching back at least to seventeenth-century England, whose fundamental moral premise is the natural freedom and equality of all and whose governing aim is to secure equal freedom in political life.

Yet cause for anxiety comes from many quarters. Freedom in America has produced or permitted massive income inequalities. It has given rise to a popular culture that frequently and increasingly descends into the cheap and salacious. It maintains a public school system that fails to teach many students the basics of reading and writing and arithmetic; and at higher levels of education, it breeds an academic culture that

preaches the relativity of values and that cannot reach agreement on what students ought to have learned by graduation to qualify as well-educated citizens. This freedom has contributed to the erosion of the old rules, written and unwritten, that governed, and once stabilized, dating, sex, love, marriage, and family. It has fostered among opinion makers and intellectual elites a distrust of religious belief that borders on contempt. And it has fortified among the highly educated an uncritical faith in the coincidence of progress in the arts and sciences and moral progress.

To clarify the challenge of conserving liberalism's achievements and pressing forward with its promises, it is first necessary to correct an unfortunate confusion of terms. In the United States, *liberal* commonly denotes the left wing of the Democratic Party. To be sure, as a result of bruising post-1960s political battles, many on the Left have disavowed the term *liberal*, choosing instead the label *progressive*, which is in fact a more apt designation of their outlook. Nevertheless, the term *liberal* retains a distinctive meaning, indeed a progressive one, in our political lexicon.

It was not foreordained that *liberal* would become synonymous with progressive politics as it has in the United States. In Europe, for example, the term has come to designate something much closer to libertarianism. Yet neither is the equation of liberalism with progressivism an accident, for the liberal tradition has a powerful progressive thrust. When the idea arose in the seventeenth century, before it acquired its name, liberalism, particularly John Locke's version, sought to limit the claims of religious authorities in politics and the claims of political authorities in religious matters. As these ideas took root, as religion receded from the center of politics (and as science and industry developed and markets spread), individual freedom acquired more space, more individuals began to enjoy its blessings, and power shifted to those who had long been denied it. When liberalism came into its own in the nineteenth century, it, particularly that of Mill, sought to limit the role in politics of status, wealth, and sex by making the state responsible for assuring formal equality or equality before the law. The result was to accelerate the pace at which power shifted to the people and to spread the blessings of freedom more equally. And when, in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century, liberalism became synonymous with the left wing of the Democratic Party, it aggressively sought to limit the role in politics, and in society, of poverty, race, sex, old age, illness, and disability by guaranteeing all individuals a minimum level of material goods and

moral standing. As this outlook merged in the United States with the conventional wisdom, the press for freedom became indistinguishable in many minds from the improvement of social life through greater equality in all realms and in all ways.

Yet the defense of freedom requires more than progress in equality, as John Stuart Mill pointed out in *On Liberty* (1859) and in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). Because moving ahead requires holding some things still, because freedoms won must be preserved, and because both the improvement and preservation of a free society depend upon citizens with particular skills, knowledge, and qualities of mind and character, liberal democracy always requires a party of order as well as a party of progress. Hence, conservatives, who take a special interest in freedom's limits and its material and moral preconditions, are properly seen as belonging to the liberal tradition and in fact play an essential role in maintaining the liberal state. In American politics today, the Right generally differs from the Left not in the primacy it assigns to personal freedom but in the primacy it assigns to competing policies—in particular, the care for which goods, those related to order or those related to progress, freedom most urgently requires.

And the differences about competing policies stem from a more fundamental disagreement between the Left and the Right about which factors pose the greatest threat to freedom. Progressive liberals see inequality as the chief menace to freedom and government as an essential part of the solution. For libertarian liberals, who, like progressives, think that freedom yields progress and who, like conservatives, stress the order on which freedom depends, government is the chief menace to freedom, and the restraint of government is freedom's essential safeguard. And for conservative liberals, of both the traditional and neoconservative varieties, the excess of freedom and equality poses the biggest threat to freedom, and government is both a friend and a foe in the battle to limit freedom and equality on behalf of freedom and equality.

To maintain that liberalism constitutes our dominant moral and political tradition is not to deny the presence in America of competing traditions. Biblical faith, for example, remains a powerful force in the lives of many Americans. And even for the larger numbers who no longer organize their lives around sacred scripture and worship, biblical faith, through the impact it has had over the centuries on our moral concepts and categories, influences the scope and direction of our imagination and informs practical judgments, often in ways that rein in freedom's most ambitious and reckless claims. Moreover, anger, pride, envy, ambition,

honor, love, and a host of other passions that dwell within us are inflected by, but resist reduction to, our love of freedom.

Nor does the suggestion that many of today's progressives and conservatives are equally members of the liberal tradition and pillars of the liberal state mean that if everybody were to sit down together, talk things over civilly, and sort through the issues reasonably, we would discover universal agreement on all the important questions. This is a popular conceit among professors, who can't bear the thought that the problems of politics are not amenable to conclusive resolution through rigorous reasoning (by them) and rational discourse (under their direction). Yet examination of the liberalism that we share suggests that the professors who dream of disinterested deliberations (grounded in self-evident premises and governed by objective and necessary rules) that yield unassailable public-policy choices may have drawn exactly the wrong conclusion.

To be sure, agreement on basic liberal political institutions is as broad as is agreement on liberalism's fundamental moral premise: the natural freedom and equality of all. Who opposes representative institutions, separated powers, an independent judiciary, a free press, and legal guarantees of freedom of speech, belief, and association? However, the very scope of partisans' agreement about the lineaments of self-government brings home the permanence of disagreement in the politics of a free people. Theory teaches both that a balance must be struck between the claims of order and the claims of progress and that theory itself cannot specify the proper balance that we Americans, in our peculiar circumstances, ought to strike. For one thing, theory does not determine the weight to be given to the competing goods that the party of order and the party of balance promote. That job falls to flesh-and-blood individuals, who are given to self-seeking and ambition. Nor can theory, once the balance has been struck, replace the need for these imperfect individuals to cooperate in maintaining it.

The liberal spirit supports free institutions. Such a spirit is tolerant of opposing opinions and choices, which means that it is prepared to respect the rights of individuals with whom it disagrees and of whose conduct it disapproves. It is generous, both in seeking to understand what is true in other people's beliefs and in looking for the shared humanity in people's diverse and divergent strivings. It is reasonable, which means that it is both proud of thinking for itself and humble in the face of reason's limits. And it is capable of restraining immediate desire in the interest of satisfying higher or more comprehensive desires. The exercise

of these virtues enables citizens to ease the friction, take advantage of the opportunities, and handle the responsibilities that arise, amid frenetic motion, in a free society.

Where do the virtues that compose such a spirit come from? Will free societies always have a sufficient supply of this spirit? Thinkers on the left, particularly those influenced by Kant, such as John Rawls and Judith Shklar, have argued that free societies are, to a significant extent, self-sustaining: The experience of living under free institutions fosters in citizens a liberal character. Thinkers on the right, especially those who take their bearings from Tocqueville and Aristotle, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Harvey Mansfield, warn that free societies contain the seeds of their own destruction: The experience of freedom, if left to its own devices, leads to an insatiable desire for more of it, steadily severing individuals' attachment to family and faith, which these thinkers contend are the most reliable sources of the liberal spirit's virtues.

In fact, when properly formulated, these two opinions reflecting the optimism of the Left and the pessimism of the Right should be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. Free institutions do tend to teach toleration, generosity in the understanding of others, an appreciation of reason's limits, and self-restraint in the short term for the sake of long-term self-interest. But if undisciplined and unbalanced by other principles, freedom eventually causes toleration to morph into rigid neutrality between competing goods. It transforms generosity in the understanding of others into the presumptuous conviction that one understands other people's beliefs and needs better than they do and that one therefore should legislate to bring their conduct in line with their true interests. It fosters a desire for freedom from reason and its limits. And it opens the door to an excessive focus on calculating the best means for the satisfaction of desire, which soon crowds out calculations of the satisfactions in fulfilling one's duty and eventually renders invisible the claims of duty that transcend calculation.

Why does the liberal spirit overreach? In part, it does so because to overreach is human. In part, it believes that freedom is made more secure by acquiring more of it. In part, it overreaches because the enjoyment of freedom pushes against and wears down not just the claims of this or that authority but the claims of all authority, save for that of the freely choosing individual. We must not assume, however, that we are at the mercy of freedom's overreaching. In a free society, freedom creates the conditions under which we can bring our passion for freedom under control and discipline it to serve our purposes. Such an undertaking depends

upon the awareness that our liberalism never fully embraces or exhausts our humanity. It also depends upon emancipating our understanding of the liberal tradition from a variety of misconceptions with which it has become encrusted and then grasping the temptations to which the liberal spirit is perennially prey. Such an undertaking is a preliminary to crafting policies, consistent with the principles of a free society, that safeguard the best interests of the liberal spirit—but, especially in the current clamor and confusion, it is an indispensable preliminary.



In our day, professors, largely representing the progressive wing of the liberal tradition, have taken the lead in promulgating a variety of misconceptions about the liberal tradition. These misconceptions obscure or simplify into nonexistence the tensions that flow from liberalism's fundamental premise, the natural freedom and equality of all. Although scholars sometimes sense the complexity, they prefer to devise stratagems to evade the conflicts among principles and goods that constitute the liberalism of our moral and political life. Their evasions, however, may prove costly, because the principles and goods that support freedom do not balance themselves, and we will not balance them wisely if we are lulled into disregarding the many and varied conflicts among them.

To move beyond the common simplifications, we must rejuvenate the distinctions that the professors have sought to collapse and reconstruct the working relations between rival principles and goods that they place in stark opposition. First, liberalism is not, as many scholars assert, the same as democracy. Many thinkers wish to erase the distinction between the two by incorporating into the idea of democracy standards of freedom, efficiency, fairness, security—indeed, all good things. They would make the term *liberal democracy* a redundancy. It is, however, not a matter of semantics to insist that liberalism adds something important to liberal democracy, awareness of which is diminished by dropping *liberal* from the name. That added something is the primacy of freedom, and that diminished awareness is of the ever-present potential for, and common reality of, conflict between popular will and individual rights. Scholars who fold their liberalism into their democracy contend that their progressive policy preferences are necessary to the full flowering of individual freedom and *therefore* are an expression of popular will, even when majorities to support the policies are nowhere to be found. Call this view the fallacy of the general will.

In fact, liberalism and democracy stand for competing, if related, principles. In contrast to liberalism, which puts freedom first, democracy puts equality first. Whereas liberalism is a doctrine about the limits that government must respect to ensure freedom, democracy proclaims that the people, with no particular limits, should rule.

Certainly, liberalism and democracy do have a critical affinity: Liberalism tends to think of freedom in terms of rights that are shared equally by all, whereas democracy tends to conceive of equality in terms of freedom to live as one pleases. Moreover, the experience of the past two hundred fifty years strongly suggests that freedom is best protected democratically and that self-government is more just when constrained by liberal guarantees of individual freedom. But the individual rights of the liberal tradition impose a defining limitation on the people's, or popular, will, proclaiming as a matter of fundamental law that majorities, however strongly they may feel and however convinced they may be, may not enact certain policies and programs. Precisely where those limits fall must remain a permanent bone of contention, to be hashed out again and again as circumstances change, but both the permanence and the propriety of the debate are obscured if one equates liberalism and democracy.

Second, liberalism does not deny the claims of community. Nevertheless, an array of scholars have written as if freedom and community—or, more broadly, freedom and association—were thoroughly antagonistic and hopelessly irreconcilable. On the one side, in the name of liberalism, scholars argue that individuals are constituted by their capacity for free rational choice and that community is an external source of authority to which the individual's reason forbids him to submit. On the other side, in the name of communitarianism or civic republicanism—schools of academic political theory that arose specifically to challenge liberalism—scholars maintain that the free and rationally choosing agent is a fantasy, because all individuals are partly constituted by duties and attachments that are given and not chosen and because freedom is achieved not through individuals' private choices about how to conduct their lives but through the choices that citizens make in public through deliberation with their fellow citizens about government and public policy. The two sides collude in fortifying a false dichotomy between individual freedom and association. The collusion serves the interests of the liberal theorists who believe that freedom is not merely the supreme good for politics but the sole good. It also advances the ambitions of the communitarian and civic republican theorists who wish to establish a similar monopoly for their favored good.

The interests of the liberal spirit, however, are better served by understanding that a genuine tension exists between the claims of freedom and those of community and association, but not one so thoroughgoing that it precludes giving substantial recognition to the claims of both. To recognize that we are partly constituted by attachments and duties we do not choose is not to concede that individuals are incapable of reasonably questioning these attachments and duties or of rejecting them or placing them on a different, more considered, footing. Nor is it to deny that political deliberation is a good—indeed, that cooperating with fellow citizens to choose public policy and the laws of the land is an important aspect of individual freedom. Moreover, putting individual freedom first is not the same as proclaiming freedom to be the sole and self-sufficient good, in politics or beyond. Indeed, freedom and community or association can be mutually supportive. For example, individuals acquire the capacity for freedom, according to the makers of modern liberalism, in association. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1689), John Locke gives an intricate account of the role of education in inculcating the moral and intellectual virtues that equip individuals for a life of liberty; and in Locke's view, parents, within the confines of the fundamental association of the family, are responsible for ensuring that children receive this education. John Stuart Mill contends that flourishing voluntary associations through which men and women meet and learn to cooperate for mutual advantage render individuals more independent and liberty more secure. Even John Rawls, in the neglected third part of his masterwork *A Theory of Justice* (1971), argues at length that the family and the voluntary associations of civil society instill qualities of mind and character presupposed by a well-ordered liberal society.

Third, liberalism does not reject virtue. However, many scholars, both in the defense of liberalism and in the attack on it, parallel the common arguments that seek to drive a wedge between liberalism and community by insisting that the liberal tradition has little patience or place for virtue and that virtue has little patience or place for individual freedom. After all, liberalism was born in the revolt against the authority of the church and Aristotle, and the virtues were thought to revolve around the church's doctrine of human salvation and Aristotle's account of human excellence. So mustn't those who embrace individual freedom reject virtue, and mustn't those who cling to the virtues repudiate the type of political life that rejected the authorities who established the underpinnings of the moral life?

Something similar to what was said about the tension between freedom

and community should be said about the tension between freedom and virtue: It is genuine, but rightly understood, it reflects a complicated relationship not an insuperable opposition. As I have suggested, the liberal spirit is characterized by specific virtues, and the liberal tradition provides a compelling account of the virtues on which a free society depends. Moreover, in rejecting the political *authority* of religious faith and of Aristotle (and of other so-called perfectionist conceptions of man), one need not reject their truth or their capacity to instruct. For, to understate matters considerably, not every respectable understanding of faith requires religion to promote salvation through politics. And, to again understate matters, not every respectable account of Aristotle or of perfectionist ethics in general requires that the state inculcate the ethics that perfect man. The liberal constraints on the state's legislation of particular conceptions of human salvation or human perfection are even compatible with the conclusion that some virtues on which the liberal state depends are better grasped by religious faith or the Aristotelian tradition of ethics.

Fourth, and closely connected, liberalism is not based on skepticism. That liberalism is so based is often put forward proudly by academic liberals and advanced contemptuously by their critics. Academic liberals think that skepticism about the human good is good for liberalism because it frees the doctrine from dependence on controversial opinions about human nature and the content of a good life. They suggest that a foundation in skepticism provides a built-in safeguard against attempts to legislate morals: if liberalism is based on skepticism, how can it possibly promote one conception of the good life over another? Critics retort that because it is grounded in skepticism, liberalism cannot begin to do justice to the full range of human emotions, passions, and moral judgments, which necessarily reflect opinions about what is right, proper, and fitting for a human being.

In fact, liberalism is firmly grounded in the belief in the natural freedom and equality of all human beings. This fundamental moral premise is at once descriptive and normative. Whether this premise is demonstrable by reason, it is liberalism's most basic affirmation, its first principle, and its nonnegotiable starting point. It colors all that we say and think and do. The element that is erroneously interpreted as the liberal tradition's fundamental skepticism is in fact the tolerant, generous, and reasonable stance toward alternative conceptions of the good life that grows out of liberalism's fundamental premise. The liberal spirit tolerates differences of opinion about matters of ultimate importance because it believes in the equal freedom of all to make such judgments.

Fifth, liberalism is not an obstacle to securing the rights of minorities and women. Critics are keen to point out liberalism's various compromises with oppression and discrimination throughout American history and quick to conclude that liberalism has been the principal cause of the denial of property, power, and status to women and minorities. In the United States, the paradigmatic case is that of African Americans. They have had to overcome the Constitution's legal protection of slavery; the Supreme Court's pre–Civil War decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) holding that blacks were property; the Court's post–Civil War decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that affirmed that states could maintain separate but equal public facilities for whites and blacks; Jim Crow laws; and today, the excruciating challenge of inner-city poverty, which itself has roots in the legacy of American slavery and discrimination. Women, too, have had to struggle to attain equal rights. They lacked the right to vote until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920; throughout American history, they suffered legal disabilities such as the lack of the rights to make contracts and to hold jobs; and public opinion conspired with law to deny them standing, access, and opportunities. Because liberal institutions have harbored bigotry and have been enlisted in schemes of oppression, some conclude that liberalism is irredeemably tainted and must be overthrown.

Yet in the fight to attain equal rights, liberalism, far from being an obstacle, has been minorities' and women's most reliable ally. Discrimination on the basis of race and sex predates the advent of liberalism, and these injustices persisted in the United States long after the rise of liberalism—despite, not because of, liberal principles. Indeed, at every step in the battle to overcome legally enforced discrimination, minorities, women, and their friends have enjoyed their greatest successes when they appealed to liberal principles. And even when opponents of discrimination have appealed to nonliberal principles or, indeed, when they have poured scorn on liberalism—as have the student movement of the 1960s, postmodern theorists, and radical feminists—their appeal could gain a respectful and sympathetic hearing because of most citizens' liberal conscience.

Sixth, liberalism does not falsely promise to remain neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. This canard has its origins in the misguided effort by academic liberals, which had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s but is still going strong in many precincts, to show that maintaining neutrality toward different ways of life lay at the heart of liber-

alism. On behalf of this claim, they devised elaborate thought experiments to show how state neutrality is possible—and why it is necessary for the state to aggressively redistribute goods or, to the contrary, why it is mandatory for the state to scrupulously avoid redistribution in order to honor neutrality. Their critics delighted in demonstrating that every such thought experiment, no matter how ingenious, presupposed the good of autonomy, or a life organized around the principle that individuals should live in accordance with ends that they have chosen for themselves. In other words, contended the critics, academic liberals posited neutrality as the primary principle for government because it serves the interests of the autonomous life.

The debate about liberalism's neutrality, however, has been poorly conceived. The critics are right that the doctrine of neutrality presupposes the goodness of freedom, but they are wrong to think that the liberal tradition is somehow at fault for not coming clean or for breaking its promise. In fact, the doctrine of neutrality is the invention of Anglo-American post-1960s academic liberalism, and the larger liberal tradition makes no such representations or promises. It sees the determination to promote a single conception of human perfection or vision of religious salvation through the force of law as a major threat to freedom. It fully expects that a political society grounded in the natural freedom and equality of all will be distinguished by its openness to human diversity and by the value it places—both to the individual and to the wider society—on “experiments in life,” in John Stuart Mill’s phrase. Although this stance may look like neutrality, it isn’t. Individuals whose fundamental beliefs give less primacy to individual choice, to say nothing of those who see celebration of individual choice as a revolt against God or a betrayal of the nation and those who long for theocracy or despotism, will certainly be at a disadvantage in a free society. For this situation, liberalism need offer no apology. Although liberalism cannot and does not require neutrality, liberal respect for individual choice does counsel toleration. Toleration calls upon individuals to live with and respect the rights of others, including the rights of those who embrace ways of life of which one might disapprove, so long as these individuals are willing to respect the rights of others. Laws that put toleration into practice will, by design, certainly make life harder for individuals whose way of life requires them to enshrine in public law their religious ideals or conceptions of moral perfection.

Seventh, along the same lines, liberalism does not invest the state with

responsibility to make individuals autonomous or give it authority to perfect citizens' powers to make rational choices about moral and political life. The idea that the state has such responsibility has been advanced by so-called perfectionist liberals. They criticize the idea of liberal neutrality but do so on behalf of the liberal state's supposed affirmative responsibility to emancipate individuals, through thoroughgoing public education, from the dead weight of religion, tradition, parental authority, and the accidents of personal experience. They do not go so far as to argue that individuals must be forced to be free, but they do sometimes envisage a contest over children's souls between parents and a secular and secularizing state. Without such state intervention, argue perfectionist liberals, citizens cannot fully enjoy their liberties, or deliberate reasonably about public affairs, or effectively maintain the political institutions characteristic of a free people.

The liberal tradition, however, does not suppose that all individuals are cut from the same cloth, nor does it require that state education make all individuals in the same mold. To the contrary, it counsels that the state lacks the authority and the competence to promote human perfection, including the liberal interpretation of perfection. The state is not prohibited from imposing educational requirements on children. There are jobs to be done in a liberal state, and an educated citizenry is needed to perform them. To maintain a liberal state, however, it is not necessary that every citizen be a virtuoso of enlightenment sentiment and critical reasoning. Indeed, that way lies a state-induced conformism. It is enough—it is in fact a great good—for the liberal state to secure sufficient freedom for individuals, with the help of others, beginning with one's parents, to perfect themselves.

Every misconception that encrusts the liberal tradition represents an effort to overlook the interplay of competing principles and goods. To be sure, we would have fewer sources of confusion and instability if liberalism and democracy were one and the same, if the claims of liberalism and those of community were entirely irreconcilable, if liberalism and virtue were utterly antagonistic, if liberals by definition couldn't legislate morals because their fundamental moral and political beliefs were devoid of moral content, if liberalism could be advanced as a principal source of the oppression and discrimination suffered by minorities and women, if liberalism could be applauded for its commitment to the doctrine of neutrality or condemned for its betrayal of it, and if the autonomous individual were the only individual liberalism could respect. But the suppression of crucial distinctions and the promulgation of false

dichotomies, often under the initiative of liberals themselves, is for contemporary liberalism a still greater source of confusion and instability.



The greatest source of instability in the liberal spirit is the momentum that freedom develops in a free society. Public opinion and popular culture sing freedom's praise. Social and political institutions absorb its imperatives and give voice to its demands. Private life is permeated by it. Progress in freedom gives new meaning to the virtues that epitomize the liberal spirit: It dissolves toleration into indifference or neutrality; it dissipates generosity into busybodiness or bossiness; it unravels reason and leaves in its place creativity and self-assertion; and it collapses enlightened self-interest into petty selfishness. By placing the individual at the center, freedom also creates fertile ground for the growth of age-old vices, particularly narcissism, vanity, and sanctimoniousness. At every turn, the spread of freedom emboldens the liberal spirit's inclination to expose and overthrow the claims of arbitrary authority. However, as the claims of freedom themselves acquire authority in a free society, the liberal spirit has difficulty limiting its campaign against authority to that which is arbitrary. Or rather, with each new success, the liberal spirit comes closer to viewing all authority as arbitrary. Eventually, the liberal spirit turns upon the authority of freedom itself, attacking the very source of its moral standing. Thus does postmodernism arise out of the sources of liberalism.

We can see freedom's momentum in the unfolding of the liberal tradition. Early on, the liberal spirit, as exemplified by Locke, rebelled against arbitrariness in the exercise of political authority, the authority exercised by the state over the individual. Later, in Mill's age, as liberalism attained maturity, the liberal spirit increasingly chafed at authority in the moral realm as well, targeting more directly the claims of public opinion, clergy, and parents to issue authoritative judgments about how others should live. In our day, as liberalism has grown both more aggressive and more complacent, the liberal spirit not only has found threats to freedom lurking everywhere but also has demanded that the state rather than the individual take responsibility for rooting them out. The next frontier is the constraint imposed by our biology. Astounding developments in the realm of biotechnology are encouraging the liberal spirit to see natural constraints on human life as arbitrary and capable of being overcome, if individuals so desire, by drugs, surgery, gene therapy, and genetic engineering.

There is reason to worry, however, that the relentless breaking down of barriers in the political, moral, and natural realms poses a threat to freedom by destroying the conditions for its humanly satisfying exercise. For freedom has roots in our nature, depends on the maintenance of order in our affairs, and receives its highest justification in the ends it enables us to pursue. Yet the advance of freedom can also subvert our understanding of our natures, our respect for the imperatives of order, and our willingness to view any ends as authoritative.

Freedom's self-subverting tendencies create a paradox: Freedom depends upon a variety of beliefs, practices, and institutions that are weakened by the increasingly forceful reverberations of freedom throughout all facets of moral and political life. Some more traditional conservatives say that such weakening is the baleful and inevitable consequence of modern freedom. Some more radical progressives contend that this so-called baleful weakening is really a long-overdue liberation. But both the traditional conservatives and the radical progressives see only what they want to see. Freedom's self-subverting tendencies are real, but they are not the whole story. They are inseparable from progress in freedom and, indeed, are inseparable from freedom's self-correcting powers. The freedom that brings traditional authorities and institutions into question creates an opportunity to reconsider their function and foundation. Indeed, freedom's self-subverting tendencies are the objects on which the liberal spirit currently needs to focus its self-correcting powers—capitalizing on its ability to stand back, take a fresh look, discipline passions, ferret out prejudice, and assess its situation reasonably.

Consider first the realm of education. Education is indispensable to preparing citizens for the rights and responsibilities of freedom. Instilling in children a sense of good and bad, forming their principles, and generally directing their education is itself an expression of parents' freedom (limited by the rights of children, which are enforceable by the liberal state). The state also has its responsibilities. In the United States, all children must attend school through their mid- to late-teenage years. At the elementary level, basic education focuses on reading, writing, and arithmetic. As students move from grade school through junior high and high school, the mission generally expands to include instruction in the history and ideas that form the basis of the students' political society. In the United States, because of its universal principles, schools also seek to educate students in the history and ideas of other peoples and places. As an obligation that falls equally upon all young people, schooling helps form manners and moral sensibility, or mores. At higher levels, a liberal

education—the general study of history, literature, art, philosophy, the social sciences, and the natural sciences—enlarges the perspective, refines the moral sensibility, and deepens the understanding. This focus makes for more responsible individuals, capable of bringing under their control a wider range of decisions that affect the kind of lives they live and the kinds of people they will become.

But freedom's progress also hollows out education. It undermines parental authority, treating parents' efforts to pass on their way of life as attempts to bind their children to the past. Increasingly, the liberal spirit comes to see education as itself an arbitrary authority, intruding impermissibly on the self's right to live and interpret the world as it sees fit. Educators respond by adopting a progressive thrust for schools. No longer will schools teach truths; instead, they will prepare students to decide for themselves what is true, despite the fact that basic literacy and general knowledge of the world are preconditions for evaluating rival truth claims. Eventually, this approach turns schools into forums in which students are invited to make and express their own truths. The result is the opposite of a liberal arts education, for an educational system devoted to making each student the highest authority on truth locks in ignorance and shelters inherited ways of viewing the world. Moreover, by affirming that the writings and thoughts of the past are less important than individuals' feelings in the present, schools cut students off from the history of human political and intellectual achievement.

In a free society, work, or wage labor, provides the material means by which individuals make themselves self-sustaining. Work is driven by necessity: We must put bread on the table and maintain a roof over our heads. But under the auspices of freedom, work becomes a badge of honor. For most of us, jobs are the most sustained activity in public life: They serve as a conspicuous symbol of our personal independence and as a mark of our ability to care for ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives. Work channels ambition and competitiveness into undertakings that benefit society. It calls upon and fortifies necessary virtues such as discipline, industry, cooperation, and the calculation of long-term benefit. And for those employed in skilled labor or as professionals, mastery of craft in work provides a sense of pride and the pleasure of developing one's powers. Moreover, by opening the workplace to all regardless of class, race, or sex, the claims of freedom humanize the world of work.

But freedom becomes increasingly uncompromising, demanding that work be thoroughly rewarding so that we do not experience work as a

form of servitude. The effort to meet this uncompromising demand threatens the functioning of other parts of a free person's life. Especially as work becomes increasingly attractive and fulfilling, we allow it to consume more of our time and energy. It encourages the neglect of private and public affairs. It squeezes vital realms—friendship and family, community and the arts, charitable work and politics—into smaller and smaller compartments. Moreover, however attractive and fulfilling it may become, work is still an exchange of pay for labor; therefore, the more we work, the more we tend to equate reward and worth with financial remuneration. And by rightly opening the workplace wide to women, the ethos of freedom ensures that both sexes will imbibe large doses of the code of commercial conduct every working day and then willy-nilly bring back into the home greater quantities of the cold spirit of calculation.

Romantic love, in a liberal age, occupies a commanding position in the hearts of men and women. When one authoritative good after another loses its luster, romantic love offers the hope of a taste of the transcendent in the here and now. Romantic love has roots in the powerful push and pull of sexual desire and in the abiding human longing to be loved for who one truly is. It gains standing as freedom progresses. By releasing individuals from the obligation to marry a mate of somebody else's choosing, remain in an unhappy marriage, or for that matter, marry at all, freedom provides the opportunity to search the world as long as one has breath for one's one true love.

But freedom also undermines romantic love by imparting lessons of impermanence and by establishing systems of separateness. Aided by the invention of the birth-control pill, which for the first time in human history cheaply and effectively separated sex from reproduction, freedom teaches us to postpone permanent relations: Before we can know that we have found our one true love, we (women as well as men) must experiment vigorously. Otherwise, how will we know what we have missed or be sure of what we have found? Yet the dream of one true love depends upon the idea of exclusiveness, and how can affections that we widely share also be exclusive? Moreover, the more we pile up experiences in dating and mating, the more we build up systems of separateness and learn to think of ourselves as independent agents capable of entering and exiting relationships at will—and the more we cultivate exactly the opposite of the heart's orientation in love, which longs for forever. Having raised the stakes for romantic love, freedom also undercuts the conditions for its attainment.

Family offers a fixed point amid the turbulence and uncertainty of a free society. It serves as a haven in a heartless world. Whereas public life puts one endlessly to the test of merit, the family gives its members unconditional acceptance and love based not on what one has achieved but on who one is. It permits the domestication and maturing of romantic love. It is the fundamental social unit in which children first learn to love and be loved, receive protection during the long period in which they are unable to care for themselves, and acquire the emotional, social, moral, and intellectual training necessary to eventually take responsibility for themselves as fully functioning adults.

But freedom also frays the fabric of family. It loosens the ties among family members and across generations by inclining individuals to see their essential responsibility as to themselves. It suggests to men and women that they should put their work or their pleasure ahead of duties to family members, in part by reducing those duties to calculations about benefits, in part by instilling a preference for going it alone. It induces parents to regard children as investments, the caring for whom must be weighed against the time and energy they take from work and leisure. As people delay marriage to find themselves before they commit, and as they squeeze family commitments to conform to their professional aspirations, family size falls, depriving children of the education that comes from sibling solidarity as well as sibling rivalry. At the same time, the standard internal structure of the family—one mother and one father—increasingly comes to be a matter of private choice, paving the way for the normalization of families with one parent, two mothers or two fathers, or other combinations growing out of the routinization of divorce and increasing comfort with diverse sexual preferences. These developments, in turn, lend more support to the reduction of family's meaning to a matter of private choice. As mobility separates grandparents from grandchildren, more elderly people are deprived of the joy of children, and more children are deprived of grandparents' love.

Biblical faith lends support to the idea, central to the era of freedom, that each individual has special significance. One does not have to believe that liberalism represents a secular and political interpretation of biblical faith to appreciate that the moral premise of natural freedom and equality of all is fortified by a religion that proclaims that all men and all women are created in God's image and are holy because He is holy. Moreover, communities of worship that rest on biblical faith provide a critical source of the individual discipline and self-restraint necessary for free individuals to set wise limits so that they can live well together. And

such communities help choreograph life, endowing the routine of everyday with larger significance, allowing individuals to give and take solace, and honoring life's cycles and venerable turning points.

But freedom also puts faith on the defensive. God's will or law is primarily known through tradition and through the imperfect human beings who must preserve and transmit it. But of all forms of dependence, dependence on the will of other human beings sits most uneasily with the liberal spirit. It is one thing to submit to God; another, to submit to those who purport to interpret His will or law, especially in a world that daily furnishes rival and incompatible accounts of it. Emboldened by freedom, individuals endowed with the liberal spirit seek to go beyond the faith of their choice to create rituals and observances that better reflect their distinctive sensibility and understanding. However, as religion loses its ground in anything outside the individual's imagination, it loses the authority to discipline the soul and set boundaries for conduct. Some see this development as progress and even try to make a religion out of choice or, to use a popular formulation for the radicalization of choice, to engage in self-creation. This sanctification of individual will comes close to the temptation of idolatry that traditional religion warns against.

Modern science serves freedom by greatly expanding human powers. It enables us to draw energy from natural resources, produce and distribute vast amounts and a great variety of material goods, communicate at long distances, travel quickly and in comfort, cure disease and prevent illness, and in innumerable ways improve the quality of daily life. It is also an exhilarating exercise of man's rational faculty, in which progress depends on the determination to push the outside of the envelope and to constantly advance the limits of knowledge.

But freedom amplifies the core elements of the scientific sensibility: the determination to surpass limits and to achieve mastery over nature. This amplification puts science on a collision course with ethics, which is based on an appreciation of limits. Science teaches that no limit deserves respect, save perhaps the safety of individual scientists and their human subjects. But because science cannot explain in its own terms why even those limits are worth respecting—the natural freedom and equality of all cannot be verified experimentally—it slowly erodes respect for the individual. Scientists may want to produce results that benefit humanity, but the goal of benefiting humanity draws no support from the scientific point of view. Indeed, science's assumption that the world is strictly explicable by cause-and-effect relations tends to obscure the uniqueness of human beings and to reduce us to objects for study and manipulation.

Energized by freedom, science encourages individuals both to think of themselves as sovereign over all of nature and at the same time, to consider themselves subject to nature's unvarying laws, as are all other objects in the universe. But a free man is neither master nor slave.

The paradox of freedom at work in the realms of education, work, romantic love, family, faith, science, and elsewhere is not set in motion by some perversity or pathology that sneaks up behind and seizes upon the liberal spirit. Rather, it springs from the inherent instability of liberalism's fundamental moral premise. The naturally free and equal individual is sovereign, because his freedom signifies that he is his own highest authority. At the same time, the naturally free and equal individual is a subject, because his sovereignty rests on a premise that commands the recognition of the equal sovereignty of all others. Hence, a free society is composed entirely of sovereign individuals and entirely of subject individuals because each is always both. As a consequence, the liberal spirit is simultaneously radically aristocratic and radically egalitarian. This multiplicity can be extraordinarily fruitful, preparing the liberal spirit, for example, to appreciate the world's many-sidedness. It can also be a recipe for disaster, inclining the liberal spirit to divide sharply against itself.

Ours is the era of equality in freedom. Our freedom encourages us to cast aside arbitrary authority and topple unjust hierarchy, but it also undermines the just claims of political order and moral excellence. It allows for the severance of onerous bonds of association, but it also separates and isolates. It is the touchstone of our equality, yet it permits and indeed encourages competition, fair and unfair alike, which results in vast disparities in wealth, power, and glory. It gives us opportunities to develop our gifts, makes us responsible for ourselves, and infuses us with a sense of humanity and rights that we share with all people, while loosening the claims of honor, virtue, and duty. It encourages us to search for love while impairing our capacity to sustain it. And it eloquently exalts choice and then falls silent about the actions and ends that are choice worthy, opening the disconcerting possibility that choice is all.

The promise and the dangers of our era are indissolubly connected. The more freedom we have, the more we want. And the more we get, the greater the potential for weakening freedom's foundations in moral and political life. However, the circumstances that unleash freedom's self-subverting tendencies also create opportunities for the exercise of the liberal spirit's self-correcting powers, which primarily consist of the free mind's ability to understand its interests and devise measures to secure them.

When the free mind turns its attention to our present predicament, it is likely to conclude that the liberal spirit's best interest is to conserve something of its origins. Thus, we must reacquaint ourselves with the liberal tradition's teachings about freedom's foundation in our nature and freedom's material and moral preconditions. In returning to the roots of liberal tradition, we may well discover that we must go beyond the liberal tradition. In other words, we may find that to be bound to one tradition is contrary to the liberal spirit's own imperatives and realize that the liberal tradition, much as we owe it, cannot offer the last word on who we are and what we can and should become. Returning to the liberal tradition's roots and reaching beyond its horizons will enable us to think more comprehensively about the purpose of freedom and to formulate laws and policies that can sustain it.

Improving by conserving the liberal spirit is easier said than done. But the doing first requires the saying, and to say something useful, we must understand the challenge.