

# *The Tyranny of Liberalism*

*James Kalb*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For readers who wish to make distinct critical connections the following essay by Mr. James Kalb merits study in relation to essays found in the Special Millennium Issue of *Modern Age* (Winter 2000), "The Conservative Scholar in the Twenty-First Century"—for example, George W. Carey's "The Conservative Mission and Progressive Ideology," Alfred Thomas's "The Ethical Challenge of the Twenty-First Century," Emmet Kennedy's "The Tangled History of Secularism." Kalb's insights into the fallacies of liberalism should alert a reader to the conditions and to the consequences of a liberalism shaping American society and culture and, in effect, the whole of public morality. Above all what the ruling elites of liberalism are striving to bring about is a socio-political New Order radically secularist and antiparticularist in character and in policy.

In his diagnosis Kalb shows how liberalism seeks to resolve fundamental human problems through "neutral principles that take no position in the content of the good life." The control of public opinion, the growing centralization of intellectual life, the rejection of higher standards, the manipulation of the rule of law, the creation of a civil religion: these are some of the most ambitious objectives of the ruling liberal elites in an ongoing effort to reconstruct American polity and life. This effort is not only tyrannical but also totalitarian in its intention and in its effects.

"In the name of giving us what we want," Kalb writes, "liberalism denies us everything worth having." It denies, in short, the Permanent Things. In this denial liberalism unmasks its true nature, as well as its defects, its intellectual flaws, in which the seeds of its own future breakdown reside. The arbitrariness, the irrationality, the closed moral system, the confusion of principles and of universal moral truths and traditions, the dismissal of "our immortal reason," in Edward Gibbon's phrase, are ingredients that inevitably lead to the decay and the destruction of totalitarian schemes and dreams, whether liberal or Communist, Fascist or Nazi, as Kalb reminds us. To be sure, he measures the progress of liberalism in all of its reality, but he also measures the elemental weaknesses of liberalism that in time promote its dissolution.

Certainly, Kalb does not underestimate the power and dominion of liberalism. Nor does he overestimate the kind of opposition to liberalism now found in the hands of mainstream and of moderate conservatives who for Kalb lack any credible "style of argument different from that of their opponents." In this respect, he echoes the selfsame doubts raised by Professor Stephen Tonsor in his commentary on "Elites, Community, and the Truth," which also appears in this issue. Tonsor's integral contention, that "The Weberian transition from the realm of ideas to the realm of power has very important consequences for the conservative movement and these must be recognized and confronted," is one that can no longer be sidestepped.

Throughout his essay, Kalb discloses a calm but firm critical tone, at once patient and disinterested in the best sense. He does not emit any sense of terror or of doom or of passionate anger, even as he describes the spectacle of the tyranny of liberalism in America. He does not resort to specifying an agenda of things that must be done (or else!), of matters of practice, of issuing ultimatums—or of shouting orders upon crossing the Rubicon and, at long last, in the conflict of conflicts, “to engage the beast *hand to hand*.”

Indeed, what gives Kalb’s essay its integrity and makes his testimony trustworthy is that everything he says here emerges not from the *agenda* of conservative passions and manifestos, but from the *credenda* of conservative beliefs and principles. And this is precisely what makes a telling difference in the sanity and the relevance of his essay, and what distinguishes it from the alarms and excursions of so much of what passes for conservative writing these days, and what in the end makes such writing mere scribble. An intensifying historical sense reinforced by a moral sense empowers Kalb’s critical *exempla*.

Especially for younger conservatives Kalb’s essay should serve as a model of thought and discrimination. Its critical intelligence and bearings bring to mind Irving Babbitt’s writings and ideas, and are in fact grounded in what Babbitt has to say at the beginning of *Democracy and Leadership* (1924); both the passage and the book are all too frequently neglected by or unknown to too many conservatives: “When studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem.” Babbitt’s words, which cannot be cited often enough, are worthy of respect and attention, and, as Kalb shows so centrally in his essay, should hold a paramount place in ordered and humane conservative disquisition. Until Babbitt’s words are learned and practiced, no genuine conservative position can be conclusively enunciated.

Still another, no less significant value of Kalb’s essay is that it illustrates the generalist function of a conservative scholarly review like *Modern Age*. That function is a transcendent one independent of clarion calls to political action in the public square. After all, the political concern of this journal is only one among other equally basic humanistic concerns. *Modern Age* must be read with this fact always in mind, if misinterpretation of its purpose and misrepresentation of the conservative vision it seeks to convey are to be shunned. It is imperative to discern the transdisciplinary editorial task of *Modern Age* according to the criteria and the definitions this journal chooses to honor. But even within a liminary area of operation, the task of *Modern Age* is one of considerable range and complexity, and has incalculable resonances and influences that go beyond an immediate situation, and certainly beyond the anguished calls of some conservatives who believe that the time has come “to engage the beast *hand to hand*,” to repeat the exhortation of one reader.

*Modern Age* will continue its labors to fulfill with all of the courage and honesty it can muster those essential needs that Allen Tate outlines in his essay on “The Function of the Critical Quarterly” (1936), included in *Essays of Four Decades* (1968; 1999). His words help to exemplify the axiomatic precepts of the mission and the ethos of *Modern Age* as a conservative review: “[T]he ideal task of the critical quarterly is not to give the public what it wants, but what...it ought to have.... The way to give the public what it resentfully needs is to discredit the inferior ideas of the age by exposing them to the criticism of the superior ideas.”

—George A. Panichas

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF the radical left is a sign that in principle it has reached its attainable goals. While no one admits it, what we see around us is the victory of the Revolution.

Politics today is radically secularist and antiparticularist. It aims to dissolve what is left of traditional society and construct a universal form of human association that will constitute a technically rational system for the equal satisfaction of desire. Religion is to be banished from public life, ethnic and gender distinctions abolished, and a worldwide order established, based on world markets and trans-national bureaucracies, that is to override local differences in the name of human rights, international economic development, and collective security.

Contemporary liberalism expresses and supports that new order. Not all members of our ruling elites adhere to liberalism, and it draws support from outsiders as well. However, our elites determine its content, and it promotes their interests. It sets the terms of discussion, defines what is considered progress, and establishes the general principles of cooperation upon which our elites base their claim to rule.

Supporters of the new order see it as historically and morally necessary, and thus as compulsory regardless of established views and habits. Since modern governments claim to base themselves on consent, the public must be brought to accept it. Managing opinion and keeping perspectives that oppose fundamental public policies out of mainstream discussion have therefore become basic to statecraft.

Genuine opposition comes not from the left but from reactionary and

restorationist groups that exclude themselves from respectable politics by rejecting liberalism and the left. Today's dissidents are particularist—traditionalist, fundamentalist, populist, or nationalist. Beyond that, they are antiseccularist and antihedonist. They reject a system of politics that bases social order on human desire, because they reject the view that lies behind it, that men make morality for their own purposes.

Today all things are justified on the grounds that they help men get what they want. Those who recognize an authority superior to human purposes are seen as dangerous bigots who want to oppress others in the name of some sect or arbitrary principle. As a consequence, fundamental political discussion no longer exists. Politics today is divided between an outlook that presents itself as rational and this-worldly, and absolutely dominates public discussion, and a variety of dissident views that speak for goods higher than human desire but are unable to make effective their substantial underlying support. The conflict is never discussed seriously since it is considered resolved; the ruling liberal view is accepted as indisputable, while dissent is considered confused or worse.

The dominant outlook believes itself peculiarly tolerant and all-inclusive. It is not. The error results from a misconception of politics and morality that is essential to liberalism. Liberalism claims to leave religious and moral issues, at least those it identifies as personal, to individual judgment. The theoretical ground for doing so is neutrality as to ultimate commitments. As the Supreme Court has put the matter, "[a]t 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." (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 1992, 505 U.S. 833, 851.)

Liberals assert that widespread religious and moral disagreement today

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makes such neutrality the only possible approach to public life. While they sometimes speak of common values, when pressed liberals return to the necessity of letting people choose for themselves. All that is needed, liberals say, are a few formal principles, such as equality and self-ownership, required for differing purposes to co-exist.

Liberalism draws enormous strength from its ability to get such claims accepted. They are nonetheless false. Few societies have been liberal, while moral disagreement is common to all societies of any size and complexity. Moreover, contemporary liberalism no more accepts disagreement than other views do. To the contrary, it is based on a particular understanding of morality with pervasive implications for the whole of life that it enforces against other more reasonable understandings.

What makes liberal claims seem plausible is not any inability of current moral views to achieve dominance but changes in the way in which dominance is established and maintained. Liberalism is at home in today's world. Its strength is its ability to use new methods of dominion that rely less on physical repression than on homogenization and centralization of social life, destruction of independent institutions and moral habits, and maintenance of the illusion of open inquiry and popular rule.

The fact is that modern conditions make neutrality among moral views less important. When our rulers today do battle with the religious and moral habits of the people, our rulers win. "Political correctness" shows that it is now possible to establish as authoritative moral views that are profoundly at odds with long-established understandings, as long as those who dominate public discussion are committed to them.

The present situation results in part from the enormous power that mass communications media put in the hands

of a small elite that can flood the world with the opinions of chosen experts and swamp critical thought with trivia and soundbites. That power makes molders of opinion—media people, entertainers, experts, educators—integral to government; our rulers control opinion because those who control opinion are among them.

The influence of a small class over opinion is aided by growing centralization of intellectual life. The republic of letters has become less republican; thought and what counts as knowledge are no longer left to chance or individual initiative. Intellectual life is now carried on by a largely state-supported bureaucracy comprising academics, foundations, think tanks, arts officials and so on. News reporting and analysis are in the hands of professionals employed by a few large organizations. The young are reared largely by mass-market entertainers and an increasingly unified state education system. The effect has been to do away with intellectual independence and make dissident views seem provincial, ignorant, or insane. The few places dissent exists freely, such as talk radio and the Internet, are socially marginal, lack discipline and coherence, and are portrayed as centers of "hate" that threaten everything decent.

Beyond the support it receives from those who control publicity, the strength of liberalism in an age of publicity is its "stealth" quality. What the neutrality of liberalism amounts to is its ability to keep the substantive moral views it enforces invisible, thus removing moral disputes from politics and so preventing challenges to its own positions from even being raised. That quality gives liberalism an advantage in public discussion that has so far been insuperable.

Moral decisions are unavoidable in politics, and a government that claims to leave them up to the individual is engaged in deception. Man is a social ani-

mal who needs government because voluntary cooperation is not enough for common goods. Views vary on the goods government should support; since differences mean conflict, the law must decide among them. Between the choices abortionists provide and the lives Operation Rescue defends neutrality is impossible.

To enforce a definite view of the matter, as government must if it is to act coherently, is to enforce a particular understanding of morality. Enforcing morality is difficult, and every government looks for alternatives to force in dealing with moral disagreement. Different governments stress different means. Traditionalist states stress common adherence to what has long been settled; theocracies and ideological regimes stress persuasion by authority; republics stress mutual persuasion among the citizens. All these are ways of reducing the number and the intensity of disagreements by dealing with their substance, a process that is difficult but necessary if government is to promote goods held in common. Liberal governments assert they can do without such a process because they keep moral disputes out of politics while leaving their substance untouched. They claim allegiance not because they promote common goods but because they permit one to pursue one's own preferences without interference.

Looking for ways to let each man go his own way might amount only to recognition of the difficulty of moral agreement and the importance of arrangements that ease cooperation when agreement is minimal. When so understood, liberal views are an aspect of practical wisdom consistent with almost any reasonable understanding of the goals of politics. A sacred monarchy with an established church would, on this view, be liberal if when possible it preferred accommodation to force.

Contemporary liberalism is not so limited a view. It is a comprehensive governing philosophy that determines the whole of public morality. While it sounds permissive, comprehensive solutions are usually intolerant in practice and liberalism is no exception. Contemporary liberalism sets forth categorical demands it calls "rights," and rejects balancing principles such as respect for natural tendencies and settled understandings. When there are no balancing principles, abstract demands expand without limit. As a result, liberal standards have become all-embracing to the point of tyranny. Liberal neutrality, which began as a patchwork of limitations on government power, has become applicable to social practices generally and thereby oppressive. If to be liberal is to be willing to accommodate other views, contemporary liberalism is no longer liberal.

Accommodating other views involves relating them to larger shared truths. Liberalism cannot do so because it establishes a closed moral system. The social contract with which liberal thought begins makes morality a self-contained system defined by logic and human will. Man is the master, the good is what men choose, and social institutions are arrangements set up for men's purposes. There is no larger truth in which all participate, only an open-ended and never-ending process of social transformation on behalf of changing desires.

That process overrides all other things and makes liberalism as peremptory and unreasonable as desire itself. Liberalism today denounces deviations from its principles as oppressive, no matter how long-established and widely-accepted, and insists that they be eradicated. The result is enormous expansion of government, weakening of principles like local community that are needed to keep government accountable, and huge destruction from uprooting fundamental social practices, for example those relating to

the relations between the sexes.

In spite of claims of neutrality, liberalism establishes an enforceable official morality that supports a definite way of life. It makes demands for moral reconstruction that are necessarily intolerant. Civil rights law, with its determination to eradicate "stereotypes"—habitual ways of thinking—is intrusively moralistic and ends in incessant re-education campaigns. Antiharassment rules aim to control the thoughts expressed in every public place. Public education is non-stop moral propaganda. Even health and safety have become crusades involving extensive regulation of daily life. Where there were once religious tests, Sunday closing laws, and laws against blasphemy, there are now diversity programs, the Martin Luther King holiday, and speech codes. The advance in tolerance is hard to discern.

The development of liberalism has reversed its original principles. Rather than let society control the state, a more ambitious liberalism now makes the state control society. Freedom of speech and opinion has therefore become suspect. Religious people are felt to be a threat, because ways of life have public implications and public action that relies on nonliberal moral understandings violates neutrality. Simple assertion of traditional sexual morality is treated as oppressive because it creates informal obstacles, if only the force of opinion, to the satisfaction of personal tastes. To refuse to rent an apartment to an unmarried couple is illegal even though it is only refusal to facilitate an arrangement one believes wrong. Even Christmas greetings are an affront.

The actual function of the liberal insistence on neutrality is to stifle debate. To the extent they have concrete implications, moral objections to liberalism are rejected out of hand as intolerant and divisive, so that resistance becomes impossible. Distortion of language comple-

ments suppression of speech. "Hatred" and "intolerance" now include all serious opposition to liberalism. "Inclusiveness" insists that others be tolerant to the point of abandoning their principles and even identity while rejecting accommodation in its own case. "Diversity and tolerance" now mean thought control; "human rights" mean aggressive war; "openness" means shutting the door to recognition of differences; while "getting government out of our bedrooms" means training children to use condoms. Stifling debate stifles moderating principles. The ultimate consequences are likely to be overreaching and the collapse of liberalism, but in the meantime its triumph is unlimited.

Mere conservatism—caution and good sense regarding changes—is no longer a restraint. Simple mainstream conservatism is the view of reasonable men attached to what is established but willing to accommodate new developments. It has much in common with liberalism, and is well-suited to moderate it if anything is. Both are this-worldly views that distrust absolutes and value reason and experience. The basic difference is that simple conservatism accepts settled habits and expectations as a guide to what is reasonable, while liberalism tends toward something more abstract. That difference leads to others. Conservatism accepts social habits that carry forward nonliberal understandings; if dogmatic religion and authoritative aspects of family life are socially accepted it tends to support them. However, simply as conservatism it is indifferent to truth, and in the end treats religion and moral tradition as negotiable interests.

Those put off by the hedonism implicit in liberal neutrality but unable fundamentally to break with it become conservatives, because conservatism seems to leave room for transcendent attachments. The refuge has proved temporary. Simple mainstream conservatism

treats social practices and understandings as final authority, and cannot take transcendent claims seriously. It therefore reduces religion to a combination of traditional observances and optional private belief. In the end, religious belief that must stay private evaporates, because it can apply to nothing, and traditional observances become socially unacceptable because they have a public element that comes to seem a violation of the equal standing of irreligion. What remains is an aggressively secular public order in the construction of which conservatism has cooperated.

In time liberalism remakes conservatism in its own image by forcing it to give up everything distinctive for the sake of consensus. Simple conservatism must rely on things that are not seriously in dispute, and it cannot defend those things against attack because the fact of their being attacked makes them useless to it. Liberals will not stop attacking whatever is nonliberal. The triumph of increasingly radical forms of liberalism was therefore inevitable, a triumph that reached its climax in the 1960s.

The triumph was not over conservative doctrine, which had always been weak in public life, but over conservative habits that prevented liberalism from realizing its inner logic. Key events included the school prayer decisions, the civil rights laws, and the sexual revolution. The first made the social order utterly this-worldly, the second abolished historical in favor of constructed community, and the third made family life a purely voluntary and private affair. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) marked the new status of liberalism as a comprehensive rational system, and the end of any need to take non-liberal attitudes and practices seriously except as injustices to be eradicated. Since then to say something is a "deeply rooted social stereotype" has been to discredit it. So decisive has the triumph of radical liberalism

been that no attempt to reverse the prayer decisions, civil rights laws, or sexual revolution has had the slightest chance of success. To take such attempts seriously has been to put one's self outside serious public discourse.

The triumph of radical liberalism has made moderate conservatism, which assumes a social order defined in fundamental ways by non-liberal attitudes and practices, an empty position. A desire to seem thoughtful and aspirations toward something less thin than liberal ideology may lead public men to use the language of conservatism, but the substance is gone. Mainstream conservatism grumbles, drags its feet, and tries to moderate the disruption caused by implementing liberal demands, but it cannot deny the justice of those demands or deprive them of ultimate victory. It cannot even talk about them in language very different from that of triumphant liberalism.

Not only moderate conservatism but all serious public opposition to liberalism has vanished. Opposing stances can find no footing. What opposition from the left remains tends toward irrationalism. Communitarianism proposes a centrally managed nondiscriminatory particularism that is hard even to imagine. Popular conservatism and the religious right cannot think or act coherently, in part because they cannot sustain a style of argument different from that of their opponents. Neoconservatives note that liberalism rejects the loyalties to God, country, and family needed to sustain a free society, but tend to view such things as a sort of noble lie to be kept firmly subordinate to the liberal order; the effect of their activities is to integrate dissidents into that order, thus taming anti-liberal impulses.

Nor can libertarians effectively resist liberalism. Libertarianism is less intrusive than managerial liberalism but cannot offer a real alternative. Like liberals, libertarians deny transcendent author-

ity and demand social reconstruction on rational hedonistic lines. The moral subjectivism of their movement makes its opposition to government intervention a matter of preference rather than principle. Its treatment of property as morally fundamental is inconsistent with subjectivist treatment of social institutions as constructions for human ends, and when put forward as an objective moral principle seems arbitrary. Libertarianism is therefore likely to remain the special cause of a small but vocal minority, although retaining influence as part of the shifting and unprincipled compromises that constitute contemporary liberalism.

The dominance of liberalism, the apparent impossibility of reforming it, and the absence of credible opposition have led some to say openly—and many to assume implicitly—that we have reached the end of history, that since liberalism is utterly dominant and cannot essentially change it has won forever. That conclusion mistakes the imaginative limits of liberals for the limits of reality. Until quite recently the advance of liberalism did seem inevitable. It alone seemed able to maintain the voluntary coöperation needed for social peace and efficiency. Once an issue had been raised any non-liberal resolution seemed irrational. All liberals had to do was dramatize what they considered oppression and victory was assured. In the absence of public transcendental principle, “let them do what they want”—the basic liberal principle—seemed the only way to avoid implicit or open civil war.

That has changed with the triumph of liberalism as a ruling rather than critical philosophy. Victory is its downfall, because it must now give answers rather than criticize those others give, and that it cannot do. “Let them do what they want” cannot be a governing philosophy, so in order to govern liberalism is forced to tyrannize and lie. Lack of moderating

principles means that it cannot help but overreach, eventually catastrophically.

Analysis suggests that the vices of liberalism are intrinsic and irremediable. Conceptual arguments are often shrugged off in politics on the grounds that life is complex and in practice particular circumstances matter more than abstract implications. The objection is weak in the case of contemporary liberalism. Modern conditions tend to simplify human society and turn it more and more into a formless aggregate, without race, sex, class, or nation. Liberalism encourages that process, and tells bureaucrats and judges to govern the resulting fine-grained chaos by universal principles. Formal rules and institutions thus become the leading principles of order in an otherwise incoherent situation; in such a setting conceptual problems become practical very quickly.

Such has been the case with liberalism. One defect in principle that has caused far-reaching practical problems is the inability of liberalism to deal with conflict in a principled way. Politics cannot be based simply on human goals, because human goals do not tell us what to do when they clash. A resolution based on what particular men want is merely the triumph of one will over another. Even a resolution based on balancing desires or following those that are strongest only subordinates some desires to others unless the method of resolution expresses a moral truth that transcends desire itself.

Liberalism proposes formal principles such as “to each his own” or maximizing total satisfaction. It is hard to see how such principles, even if universally acceptable, could give answers that are definite enough to live by. How, for example, can all possible satisfactions—Plato, Chinese checkers, pornography—be added and compared when they differ so enormously? And how can it be determined what is “one’s own”? Whether it is

an imperial throne or a property in one's body, a thing is one's own only if others recognize it as such, a necessity that shows that property is not a simple pre-social conception.

Arbitrariness in resolving disputes is thus intrinsic to liberalism. Nor is arbitrariness the only problem. The good is the substantive principle of morality, and a fatal flaw in liberalism is its defective theory of the good. The need for a particular definition of the good cannot be sidestepped by ignoring goods in favor of wants. "Goods" are simply possible objects of rational action, and "the good" is whatever general quality it is that makes something worth pursuing. To treat desire as the thing that determines rational action is to identify the good with what is desired. The liberal theory of the good is thus hedonism.

Hedonism is a bad theory, even if it can be made to yield determinate results, because we are not at bottom hedonists. By giving us "whatever we want" liberalism fails precisely to give us what we want. Our good, and for that matter the things we desire most deeply, depends on what we are, and we are rational and social. Man does not desire to get what he wants simply as such; he wants what he wants, but also wants to recognize it as good, as desirable because it contributes to a scheme of life the validity of which does not depend on his desires alone.

As rational beings, we are not satisfied unless our lives are based on an understanding of what goals are right that rests on something that gives it enduring validity. Nor, as social beings, can we be satisfied unless that understanding is shared. The problem is not merely theoretical. If goods other than pursuit of individual pleasure are understood as purely individual goals, with no right to social support, they wither. Marriage is not simply what two people choose to do privately. It involves objective duties and

thus social definitions; to define it as the chance parallelism of two wills, each with its own purposes, is to destroy it. Even disinterested love of truth and beauty needs common support to become more than the fragmentary possession of isolated visionaries. Liberalism disrupts that support by denying public recognition to any good but satisfaction of desire. A conceptual problem in liberalism, its inability to prefer one goal to another, thus leads naturally to family breakdown and sordidness in public life.

The problems go farther. Man is social, and community requires the common goods liberalism denies. If I say that I am American the claim is insignificant unless Americans are united by something that they recognize collectively as good. In liberal society, however, the only thing that can be recognized in common as a substantive good is the goal implicit in all individual desire, the ability to get what one wants. That ability is most readily recognized in the form of money, power, and success, and liberalism therefore turns society into an assortment of individuals related by those things. Under such conditions men lose substantive connection to others and with it their sense of who they are; personal identity becomes a matter of bank balances and shifting private fantasies, and the individual, for whose sake liberalism was invented, evaporates.

Identifying the good with the desired destroys the things that make freedom worth having. Liberalism frees children from parents, women from men, the poor from charity, inferiors from superiors, all so that each can do what he wants. By making our connections to others insubstantial, however, it deprives actions of effect and we end with the trivial freedom of irresponsibility and impotence. Freedom becomes indistinguishable from willfulness. We value liberty because it enables us to choose and realize

goods, but if no goods are objective it loses objective value and becomes just another personal taste. How can choice be so important, if what is chosen matters not at all? Or if it is choice itself that matters, why is willfulness not the greatest virtue? As anyone who deals with aimless teenagers will attest, such issues have practical consequences.

A further radical defect in liberalism is that while claiming rationality it makes rationality impossible. Rationality presupposes standards that transcend actual desires. If man has no standard higher than himself, he has nothing by which to judge his own conduct, and ethical thought disappears. Liberalism claims to let us create our own standards but might as well claim to let us flap our arms and fly. Our good is not something we make up. We can clarify our good but not choose it, act significantly within a moral world but not call it into existence. When liberalism tells us to create our own moral world it turns its back on the public moral world needed for choice to have meaning.

The cult of creativity, in moral life as elsewhere, comes from consciousness of a void that must be filled somehow, fraudulently if necessary. This void is at the center of liberalism. A parallel case is provided by art, in which a cult of creativity results from loss of confidence in goods like beauty that transcend the artist. Consequently art is empty of content, obsessed with technique, and dominated by the same forces, foreign to it, that dominate liberal society—money, success, and the politics of mindless aggression and rebellion.

The irrationality intrinsic to liberalism causes it continually to raise questions it cannot deal with and so must suppress. Examples are everywhere: if every society must be intolerant in defending its leading principles, how reasonable can it be to make intolerance the sole object of opprobrium? If govern-

ment is to give us what we want, do we really want hedonism? If I have a right to pursue my desires, and I desire to live in a society guided by traditional understandings, do I have the right to pursue that goal politically? If not, why is an environment free from racism and sexism a worthier goal than one free from atheism and from immorality as traditionally understood? Such questions cannot be avoided as a practical matter, and liberalism requires them to be resolved by neutral principles that take no position on the content of the good life.

The requirement cannot be met, although there have been a variety of proposals for meeting it. Some have claimed that liberalism grants freedom unless the action interferes with others in a concrete and particularized way. Hence, for example, the right of sexual expression overrides the right to an environment in which traditional standards prevail.

The response is inadequate, if only because liberalism does not accept it in its own case. For example, liberalism accepts land-use controls and laws against littering that protect only general aesthetic interests. Prohibitions against highway billboards go so far as to ban speech simply because it offends. One man's smuggling, or tax evasion, or use of leaded gasoline may benefit him a great deal without having a demonstrable effect on anyone else. And someone who does not want to work with blacks is likely to be affected far more profoundly by a requirement of nondiscrimination than a black man who might otherwise have to find a job elsewhere. Like other people, liberals recognize that law may forbid intangible injuries, and it may justly defend a beneficial system of conduct or suppress a harmful one, even when individual infractions do not cause identifiable concrete damage. These principles rationally allow legal support for traditional morality. Offense to moral sensibilities is an injury that tends to make

men morally callous and so weakens a social order based on self-government. Why is it worthy of less protection than other acts that injure both individuals and society?

Another response is that interference with conduct is particularly objectionable when the conduct is close to the heart of what makes us what we are. To make this response liberals must propose a theory of essential human nature. Such theories are no less contentious than theories of the good. Does acting on sexual impulse make us what we are, or living in accordance with common moral understandings that promote stable personal relationships? One answer would make restrictions on sexual conduct objectionable, the other lack of sexual restraint, and there seems no neutral way to choose between the two.

Such issues go to the heart of liberal public morality. Liberalism deals with them by suppressing their discussion and imposing its own answers by default. The practical result is like that of establishing any dogmatic principle as absolute: liberals speak of divisiveness and extremism rather than schism and heresy, and forbid questioning the being, attributes, and significance of sexism rather than those of God, but specific differences do not affect the similarity of system.

Liberalism—an attempt to create a wholly this-worldly system based only on logic and the human will—thus ends in obscurantist tyranny and so refutes itself. That result is necessary because logic and human will cannot be combined to yield authority, so to rule liberalism must somehow steal authority. It therefore demands submission to arbitrary principles and conclusions. It insists on controlling everything that affects public life, including the human soul. It responds to criticism by silencing the critic. It destroys concrete freedom by centralizing power, by undermining

standards that make free social life possible, and by destroying our connections to others and thereby making us dependent on universal systems utterly beyond our control. In the name of giving us what we want liberalism denies us everything worth having.

When judged by day-to-day experience, such conclusions may seem to go too far. “Tyranny” sounds exaggerated, other phrases like “soft totalitarianism” yet more so. In America, after all, there are no secret police and few government spies. The judiciary is independent and private property safe. Trials are public and procedural safeguards observed. One can run for public office on any platform, and write or say what one wants without fear of prison or confiscation. Tenure protects scholars with unpopular—even conservative—views. Informal restraints on thought, expression, and action appear matched by similar restraints in other societies. And above all, life is comfortable. The differences between the American regime today and the regimes usually called tyrannical or totalitarian are thus fundamental.

Nonetheless, the differences should not mask similarities that are also fundamental and justify some similarity of descriptive language. Tyranny is irresponsible government not limited by law or binding custom; totalitarianism is tyranny based on an all-encompassing theory that is the private property of a ruling elite. On those definitions medieval governments, for example, were neither tyrannies nor totalitarian; they were limited by law and custom, and the Christian outlook that justified them was in the hands not of the king but of the church, a body distinct in fundamental ways from secular rulers, often at odds with them, and bound by authoritative texts and traditions and ultimately the will of God.

In contrast, modern America inclines toward totalitarian tyranny, at least if

one recognizes the nature of liberalism as a self-contained and all-embracing scheme for life in society, the sole right of the ruling elite to interpret it, and the barriers to political action at odds with it. On fundamental issues, America is governed by a liberal elite whose power is not limited by law because the courts are part of the elite, and what the courts say is the law. Affirmative action, mass immigration, and the exclusion of religion from public life illustrate the power of that elite to force fundamental changes over strong and rooted opposition from virtually the entire people.

Such power is tyrannical. Because man is a social animal, tyranny can inhere in the relationship between an irresponsible ruling class and social institutions, as well as that between a government and the individual. A man who arbitrarily imprisons me or confiscates my property is a tyrant. Ruling elites that destroy the social institutions and relationships that make me what I am, that attack the family and abolish gender distinctions, ethnic ties, and traditional moral standards, that drive religion out of public life and tell private associations what members to choose and why, are also tyrannical.

Imprisonment and exile are punishments because they deprive a man of his social setting. Intentional destruction of that setting is plainly worse. Genocide is said to include intentional destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups. Liberalism does that to all national groups by abolishing the constituents of nationality. How can that be acceptable? When everyone must praise such actions as incontestable demands of justice, when it is all but impossible to make protests heard and critics are treated as enemies of humanity, when the existence of any higher standard is denied, the tyranny, however maintained, takes on a totalitarian quality.

Such complaints may still be thought

overblown. The limitations on opinion, expression, association, and popular self-rule can no doubt be explained away. Attacks on fundamental institutions may seem to have certain benefits, since all institutions have their injustices and corruptions. Life is still pleasant for most people, as long as they relax and concentrate on individual pursuits—"sit back and take a breath," as Hillary Rodham Clinton has suggested. Nonetheless, there are grounds for concern about the future. Irresponsible power corrupts. Free government requires a settled widespread distribution of power, as well as cohesion among the people at large so they can hold their rulers to account. Today's liberalism destroys both.

At present liberalism does not physically destroy anyone, except Serbs, the unborn, and—increasingly—the old and useless. Possibly the tally should also include murders and suicides resulting from a deteriorating social order, but the point need not be insisted on. Whatever its record to date, liberalism is one of several modern political movements that deny human nature. It makes human nature a matter of human choice and technology, as communism made it a matter of economic evolution, and fascism of human will and national struggle.

In each case the motive has been to eliminate human nature as an obstacle to the recreation of the world. The difficulty has been that the destruction, in concept, of fixed and rooted human nature has led repeatedly to the concrete destruction of very large numbers of actual human beings. The sequence seems natural. If "man" does not exist, why should it matter whether men exist? Liberals do not take the threat of such inferences seriously, but it is not clear why. If "human" is content-free, so it becomes a social classification the point of which is determined politically, and if it is irrational to recognize a radical difference in rights between a man and a

dog, both of which seem to be the emerging liberal views, the stage seems rather clearly set for horrors. In the absence of a reliable way to hold government to account, the horrors may not remain forever a matter of debatable interpretation. *Soft totalitarianism may turn to hard.*

Whichever may lie in store for us, tyranny—especially totalitarian tyranny—cannot last. Liberalism will destroy itself in practice as well as in theory. Tyrants must be prudent, but liberalism cannot be prudent forever. It makes human desire the measure and so has no place for unpleasant facts. The consequences are everywhere; liberalism depends on competent elites, for example, but is reluctant to recognize human differences and so institutes affirmative action programs that make it impossible to deal with issues of relative competence. It cannot justify non-consensual authority—parental authority or even ordinary moral standards for example—and so feels bound to undermine it as oppressive whatever the consequences. The resulting disorders permeate social life, and as the generations succeed each other make orderly government progressively harder to maintain.

Further, a philosophy based on independent individuals pursuing their own interests cannot deal with issues that go beyond one's life as a self-interested individual—reproduction and child-rearing, loyalty and sacrifice, life and death. Such issues are fundamental to social survival, but liberalism can only treat them as matters of individual preference. The consequences are suicidally low birth-rates, children growing up without parental care, and an army that cannot take casualties. If such things endure, and it is hard to see what within liberalism can stop them, they will mean the end of liberal society.

The choice, therefore, is between a liberalism that must deny its own principles to rule, thus leading to corruption,

obscurantist tyranny, and eventual collapse, and a system explicitly based on authoritative transcendent goods. A system of the latter kind might be liberal in many ways, but it would reject freedom as an ultimate standard, and in present-day terms would be radically illiberal. A system of transcendent goods grounding a way of life is in effect a religion; the choice, therefore, is between the reign of force and fraud (perhaps disguised and perhaps not), and the recognition of the religious basis of society and government.

The fundamental question of politics is which religion shall be established. Authority must be based on a common understanding of principles superior to the human will that are rooted in the nature of things. To the extent that it tries to be principled, liberalism itself inevitably answers such questions. In spite of claims of neutrality, American law today embodies a religious understanding. It excludes from public life views that take transcendent religion seriously, in substance treating them as false. It cannot get by without a conception of the world and the source of moral obligation, however, and it finds both in man as the measure. It makes human genius the principle of creation and individual will the source of value. Such an outlook is religious, the religion of man as creator and judge of all things. As the response to ultimate concerns that silently motivates our public order it is our established religion.

It is a religion that fails to deliver, ultimately because it makes no sense. By trying to abolish the mystery at the heart of things it succeeds only in making all things incomprehensible. It makes man the measure, but men are weak, mutable, prone to error, and at odds with each other. Incoherence leads to incoherence: liberal neutrality is not neutral, liberal tolerance is intolerant, and liberal hedonism denies our desires. Since

liberalism has grown practically self-destructive, not even its established status can be a reason for supporting it. It must be rejected and replaced; it will not last in any event, and it will be better if it is rejected rationally, with consciousness of why it failed.

The rational way beyond liberalism is to discuss the questions it avoids and cannot answer. Intellectually, liberalism cannot survive their free discussion; a function of "political correctness" and the centralization of intellectual life is to keep questions from arising. Both modern communications technology and the liberal demand for free expression, nevertheless, make it difficult to suppress such questions altogether. When the practical strains on liberal society become severe enough, the intellectual flaws of liberalism will begin to tell. As a self-contained system poorly rooted in reality, liberalism could fall apart like Soviet communism or like the one-horse shay of New England Calvinism.

Once liberalism goes, what then? Even a bad system of thought is unlikely to be

abandoned unless there is something to replace it. A religion cannot be chosen like a suit of clothes. The religion of a people is determined by any number of things, sub- or super-rational, and is less a matter of choice than of recognition. It is nonetheless determined somehow or other. Man needs a life in common with his fellows, and common life requires a common understanding of the nature of the world and man's place in it. Our public life, to the extent that it exists, is now based on a religion that is hard to make sense of, harder to believe, and in the end relies on deceiving self and others. It will be replaced. Until that happens a better public life will be in process of formation. All that those who look for a better future can do now is to prepare for it by holding themselves apart from the existing system of things, to ask the basic questions from which all religion springs, and to join with others in answering them and in questioning those who support the present state of affairs. The rest is in God's hands.