

Is Liberalism Obsolete?

Greg Gauthier; Philsoc Member's Weekend, Sunday; 18 September, 2022

The weekend's theme asks us to consider whether or not we think *Liberalism* is *obsolete*. What does this question mean? What are we really trying to get at, when we ask this question? Let us take note that there are two rather expansive and indeterminate words in this question; namely, the words *Liberalism*, and *obsolete*.

It is out of fashion these days to begin a philosophy talk with definitions, but I cannot help but do so in this case, because otherwise you will have no idea what I am asking you to agree to in this argument. So, let us begin with the word *obsolete*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *obsolete* means “*out of fashion, because no longer useful*”. Well, if that is true, then the immediate question that arises from this is, no longer useful to whom? and for what?

To answer those questions we need to tackle the second term, *Liberalism*. Encyclopedia Britannica offers us a modestly refined specification, as a “*political doctrine that takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics*”, and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy quotes John Locke largely agreeing with Britannica, that “[Liberals have typically maintained that humans are naturally in] *a State of perfect Freedom to order their own actions...as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending on the Will of any other Man...*” and that “*...the burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty; who contend for any restriction or prohibition.... the a priori assumption is in favour of freedom...*”. Max Savelle, a political historian writing mid-century, seems to agree with this rough idea:

“Liberalism... [is defined as] a self-conscious ideology of self-determination resting upon the assumption that the individual human intelligence is autonomous and that the progress of civilisation derives from the use of this autonomous intelligence in the efforts of humanity to survive and live the good life...” ~ Max Savelle, “Is Liberalism Dead?”, November 1957

So, now we have a more or less clear understanding of what Liberalism is, and to what end Liberalism is supposed to be the means. The end is the freedom to

define for oneself what *the good life* amounts to, and the method is the placement of the individual beyond the reach of either a judging or constraining authority. Liberalism, then, is purported to be useful for achieving the good in spite of any obstructing authority, and the question of the weekend is whether or not the method of individualism is no longer useful for achieving that end.

But once again, I am vexed by new questions. In the first place, why should the individual be treated as the focal point of analysis in politics, particularly if the good is what we're aiming at? What makes the individual and his autonomous intelligence a reasonable unit of analysis, given the myriad of other options? Some will say, well, because it is the frame that best enables the expansion of freedom. Setting aside the fact that this is circular, I will ask yet again: freedom... *to do what? And, to what end?* What considerations ought I account for, when deciding how to act and which ends to pursue in those actions? Without reference or appeal to some common standard of truth, that functions as a governing authority, what could it even mean to "define the good life for oneself"?

There are some who will answer with an emphatic yes, to the last question. For them, Liberalism is indeed about the total liberation of the individual will from all constraints, both natural and artificial. On this view, not only is Liberalism obsolete, it is hard to see how it could ever have been effective at this goal in the first place, because of how fantastical it would be. But even if this sort of ideally absolute liberation were possible in the material world, it still doesn't answer my core concern, which is: *what am I to do with this vast landscape of general action and unspecified choice?* Without a definite goal grounded in an idea of what I am and how I fit into the universe, and conditioning a hierarchy of values below it, every action is as meaningful and as worth pursuing, as any other. Which is to say, not at all. For, being liberated from all constraints and concerns, what could possibly be worth pursuing after that? That kind of liberation would be liberation from value itself.

If, on the other hand, we wish to back away from these sorts of absolutes, and we want to recognise that there are indeed limits to liberty – in other words, that liberty is not simply synonymous with liberation – then the next question becomes, what sort of constraints upon liberty would be just constraints? That, of

course, will require a conception of justice, and that in turn, will require an understanding of the good in a universal sense, not simply as a matter of self-satisfaction or self-definition. Justice and The Good, will then rest in a conceptual hierarchy over and above liberty, characterising whole ranges of choice as either just or unjust insofar as they conform to the ultimate end, The Good. On this view, however, the liberty of the individual cannot be the “central problem of politics”, but rather, knowing The Good, and defining justice in terms of it. And here, finally, we find that Liberalism is fundamentally incoherent (let alone obsolete), and that we are once again back in the arms of Plato and Aristotle, grappling with the core questions of fundamental philosophy. ***What is justice and what is The Good?***

The One And The Many

Plato and Aristotle devoted quite a lot of effort to these two questions. But these questions aren't actually the central problem that the two philosophers were trying to solve. You see, they were both responding to the puzzle presented to them by Parmenides: the opposition of The One and The Many. Reconciling these two principles, and discovering the rightful place of man in the resulting order was what gave rise to subsequent questions of justice and political organisation.

Plato spent his life grappling with the puzzle that Parmenides had left behind, and the Theory of Forms was just his way of trying to come to terms with this problem. Dialogues like the Timaeus are obvious examples of his speculative romps in search of a metaphysics that reconciled The One with The Many, but Plato's best and most relevant attempt at this reconciliation, for our purposes, is not the Timaeus or the Parmenides, but The Republic. In book two, at the outset of the investigation into Justice, Plato gives us an exchange between Adeimantus and Socrates, that is clearly telegraphing this desire to reconcile The One and The Many:

Socrates: “...Justice... is sometimes spoken of as the virtue of an individual, and sometimes as the virtue of a polis... [and it is true that] a polis is larger than an individual... I propose therefore, that we inquire into the nature of justice and injustice, first as they appear in the polis, and secondly in the individual, proceeding from the greater to the lesser... A

polis, I said, arises... out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants.... and [we] exchange with one another, and one gives, and another receives, under the idea that the exchange will be for their good....”

This is strikingly similar to what Aristotle might say, but there is a significant difference. Namely, that the explanatory direction of the *telos* is top-down. Put another way, it is justifying The Many in terms of The One. Plato begins with an ordained order, discerned through dialectic and the discipline of reason, and the many parts of the polis are to conform to that order to be just. This is why his explanation of justice begins with the State, and is then transferred by analogy to the individual. It is the universal order as it is manifest in the ideal state, that is to be the model of right order of the individual soul. And this is what is, for Plato, the reconciliation of The One and The Many in politics: the right ordering of the soul in accordance with the universal soul.

Aristotle’s political order, like Plato’s, is a product of his metaphysics and his methodology for inferring the truth. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle’s methodology was not dialectic, but analytic and empirical, beginning with the many particulars, and seeking The One principle that unifies them, by powers of observation and inference to the general. Everything is analysed into categories according to their essential commonalities, and confirmed by empirical investigation. In other words, Aristotle justifies The One in terms of The Many.

The Platonic sense of the soul being entrapped by the body, is an analogy of the individual being duty-bound by his particular role within the polis. For Aristotle, however, there is an inversion of the explanation of man’s purpose in terms of his placement within the city, by explaining the city in terms of it’s function in the perfection of the man. For Plato, the polis is the ruling principle, because it is the exemplar of ideal order to which man must conform for the sake of the good. But, for Aristotle, the polis is the ruling principle of the individuals that constitute it, because it is the organ that seeks the good for all the parts, in constitution.

Eventually, the neo-Platonists, and then the Christians after them, reoriented the *summum bonum* once again, from the mere earthly excellence of Aristotle, to a *telos* that amounts to absolute reunion with the Godhead, in an attempt to

reassert The One over The Many. To do this, they couple both reason and revelation together in a kind of cooperative venture. As Aquinas put it, we were to understand what could be by nature, and grace would take us the rest of the way. Dante captured this ideal merger of Plato and Aristotle nicely, in his *De Monarchia*:

“...the proper function of the human race, taken in the aggregate, is to actualise continually the entire capacity of the possible intellect, primarily in speculation; then, through its extension and for its sake, secondarily in action. Since it is true that whatever modifies a part modifies the whole, and that the individual man seated in quiet grows perfect in knowledge and wisdom, it is plain that amid the calm and tranquillity of peace the human race accomplishes most freely and easily its given work... universal peace is the best of those things which are ordained for our beatitude.” De Monarchia, 1321

The Divination of The Many and the Death of The One

This neo-Aristotelian intellectualism, however, would eventually be reoriented away from the *telos* of beatific contemplation of God, and given much more terrestrial goals. Pico della Mirandola professed the following in a speech written for a group gathering that was to occur in Rome in 1487 (but never happened, because Mirandola was chased out by the Pope, for causing a scandal around some of his other writings). Here, however, he writes:

At last, the Best of Artisans... accorded to Man the function of a form not set apart, and a place in the middle of the world, and addressed him thus: I have given thee neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself, Adam, to the end that, according to thy longing and according to thy judgement, thou mayest have and possess that abode, that form, and those functions which thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other things is limited and constrained within the bounds prescribed by me: thou, coerced by no necessity, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand I have placed thee. . . . Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are animal; thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's

judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms of life, which are divine. ~
Pico della Mirandola, "Of The Dignity of Man", 1486

Thus, the *autonomous individual* was born bearing the imprimatur of The Creator, but now freed of his divine obligations, to reshape the world as he saw fit. Is it really any wonder, then, that by 1650, we have Descartes nonchalantly internalizing the "light of reason" within his own skull, and birthing the wind-egg of the "Cartesian Circle" in the process. Or, also, Locke in 1690, providing a justification from Genesis for absolute individual sovereignty in his less often cited *First Treatise*, in which God, being the creator of all things, is also the owner of all things, and by analogy we as creators are thus owners of that which we create. And, by 1793, we can see a defiant anti-authoritarian individualism in Thomas Paine's famous "The Age of Reason", wherein he declares that "my own mind is my own church".

The ever-widening gap between The One and The Many had begun to skew our perspective. The One shrank from view, and The Many autonomous individuals began to rapidly grow in apparent size, until eventually we came to think that individual autonomy under the ruler-ship of such a distant God was not enough, because a ruled subject that thinks he is free, is either a fool, or a liar. Thus, came the day we declared man himself to be a divine thing, without reference to God. His own mind was his own church, and now another 100 years after Paine, according to Emile Faguet, his own conscience was his own God:

"Man is sacred because he is a temple; he has divine rights because he is himself a divine thing; there is no social code against the code of his conscience; there is no collective right against his individual duty" ~ Emile Faguet, 1891

But Gods are jealous things. So, either the God of Dante and Plato had to go or the divine self had to go. Inevitably, we chose to banish the God of Dante.

"God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!", Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882

And finally, it is still not enough to simply do away with The One and declare ourselves the victorious individual absolute ends. For a God without any power,

is a God in name only. So, less than 75 years after Nietzsche we began the process of attributing to this atomised Nietzschean New Man, the very power of the God we killed. Both the power of destruction:

*"I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita...
"Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." - J. Robert
Oppenheimer, 1945*

And the powers of creation:

*At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence,
of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. – Planned
Parenthood v Casey, US Supreme Court, 1992 (O'Connor, Kennedy, and
Souter)*

And so, we have obliterated The One, and subsumed him into ourselves. We all now live in self-styled universes, each of our own creation, where we can tailor not only our surroundings, but customize to arbitrary will, our very nature as beings, including very soon, the boutique mangling of the human body itself to suit one's taste in the moment; and if some prognosticators are correct, the eventual transplantation of raw identity (dare I say, the soul) into any physical container one desires.

But as I said before, Gods are very jealous things. They do not tolerate plurality well, and the liberation of the human will and its ascendance to Godhood is coming at a great cost. The whole of the twentieth century was a constant oscillation between this ecstatic individualism, and reactionary totalitarian collectivism, as so-called liberals and progressives fought over who would define the new *telos* for man. For, now that we are no longer taking our cues from nature, or the divine Godhead, we are free to invent our own purposes. And invent we do. And then go to war over it. A war of every self-styled God against every other.

Conclusion

Thus, I say that Liberalism is not obsolete, but utterly mistaken. Liberalism is wrong, because it *personalises* universal principles into self-justifications meant to stand outside the judgement of universal principle. Which makes it incoherent at best, and as we have seen throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, catastrophically dangerous at worst.

But don't confuse this essay as an unqualified defence of The One over The Many as a singular rule of political order, either. The interesting thing about the paradox of The One and The Many, as Aristotle discovered, is precisely that there is no resolution. Wisdom lies in learning to cope with both. Yet, the wisdom to know when to expect unity and when to expect plurality, is something this generation seems to have lost. It demands either one or the other because it lacks the intellectual maturity to understand the problem.