LIBERALISM: POLITICAL SUCCESS, MORAL FAILURE?

The Western liberal democracies are now enjoying a period of unprecedented political success. Their great enemies of the post-war countries of Eastern Europe dominated by Soviet Russia have visibly disintegrated, and not only the satellites but even Soviet Russia herself are moving in the direction of liberal democracy. China has, of course, gone backwards since the massacre of Tiananmen Square, but even there the reaction, while real, is not complete. The Chinese authorities seem to have wanted, and still to want, to liberalize their regime, but not as fast or as much as the students did. At all events the communists’ predictions of imminent collapse in the West have proved spectacularly false, and the reverse predictions of the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan have proved spectacularly true. For while the East is convulsed the West continues to flourish in virtually every respect. To adapt the words of a late British prime minister, the West has never had it so good.

But it would be false to suppose that it is only now that liberal democracy has proved itself a political success. On the contrary it has proved itself to be this from the beginning. This is because it offers the people freedom to live life in their own way. Non-liberal regimes on the other hand, old and new, impose on their people some one vision of the good life, and forbid them, on pain of imprisonment or death, to pursue any other. So much is true, even obvious. But it is not enough, when discussing liberalism’s success, to talk only of the idea of freedom; one must also talk of the idea of peace.

It is a feature of non-liberal regimes that they introduce into the heart of the regime the fiercest of controversies. I mean the controversy over the good life. The good life or some vision of the good life is the principle and goal of non-liberal regimes, what they stand or fall by, and nothing through history seems to have thrown nations into more turmoil, strife and war than disagreement over the good life. For to disagree about this and to try to pursue some different and opposed vision of the good is necessarily to attack the very life of the existing regime, and so to become a subversive, a traitor, a mortal foe. Liberalism avoids this fearful consequence, not because it does not require agreement (all regimes require that if they are to be communities at all), but because it does not require agreement about the good life. By an ingenious trick that we owe to Hobbes, it requires
only agreement to disagree about the good life. This is the essence of Hobbesian peace, and it is this peace that is the basis of liberalism.

The agreement to disagree is a reflexive agreement, not a direct one. It is concerned, not with some good life or some vision of the good life, but with the attitude one may take up toward visions of the good life. That attitude must be one of tolerance towards other and different visions. Such a requirement is no mean or trivial one. It forces moderation and humility on every pursuit of the good. It permits us all indeed to pursue our own good, but only insofar as we allow others to pursue their own good too. Forcing one’s good on others, or pursuing a good that includes within itself the forced denial of others’ good, which must eventually provoke war, is, for liberalism, the great evil.

Liberalism is, therefore, in one sense neutral and uncontroversial and in another sense it is the reverse. It is neutral and uncontroversial because it regards all the visions of the good life as equal and does not choose or judge between them. It is controversial because it demands that nobody pursue their vision of the good life to the forced suppression of any other vision. This is controversial because in the light of one vision of the good the other visions are evil and an offense and a stumbling block, and must be suppressed if the true vision, the true good, is to prevail. Liberalism denies this and declares that no tolerable good requires the forced suppression of any other tolerable good. No good, it says, is worth fighting all the others to the death for. No good warrants extremism and fanaticism in its pursuit.

But what liberalism calls fanaticism, the followers of the true good call zeal; what it calls extremism, they call piety; what it calls tolerance, they call half-heartedness or even treachery. Liberalism has to root out this ‘zeal’ and ‘piety’ if it is to secure the peace on which its freedom is based. It has to war against all the particular visions of the good life and tame them and make them harmless. Otherwise it cannot work. Liberalism can only offer the freedom which is its badge and pride because it first imposes its own form of peace. This peace is non-negotiable and absolutely required. It is not something one is free to choose or not to choose. Liberalism may proclaim openly how it sets the people free; it keeps hidden how it also at the same time binds them.

The hiddenness of this constraint at the center of liberalism can be traced still in contemporary writers. One recent account of liberalism rests on a notion of a neutral core
of morality, or of an overlapping consensus between rival visions of the good, which all such visions are supposed to be able to accept and live by. This core or consensus is supposed to be neutral and overlapping because it takes those moral convictions that are common to rival visions and tries to make them a sufficient basis for peaceful co-existence. The core-morality, lays down conditions of respect and tolerance which, while permitting each person to pursue their vision as they wish, forbids them so to pursue it that they forcibly prevent others from pursuing other visions. For this would be contrary to the requirements of respect and tolerance.

This core is indeed neutral in the way described: it does not favor one vision of the good life over any other. But it does this only because it imposes on them toleration of their rivals. This toleration is not natural to these visions, indeed it is alien to them. By themselves they abhor it. The core-morality that is abstracted from them to justify toleration is distorted in being so abstracted. For while respect and toleration of others can indeed be found in them, it is respect and toleration of those who share and honor the true good. Those who deny and dishonor the true good, because they assert and honor some other good, are at best misguided and at worst evil. It might not always be necessary to kill them (although assuredly sometimes it is), but it will always be necessary to guard against them. They might, perhaps, be allowed to live, but they cannot be allowed equal respect, or equal privileges and protection under the law. Liberalism is neutral, therefore, in regard to each of the rival visions of the good life, not in the sense that it defends them all equally, but in the sense that it attacks them all equally. It rips from each their claim and right to make themselves the exclusive and only good.

Liberalism thus allows the many visions of the good to be, but it does not allow them to be alone. It forces them to tolerate each other, or in short to tolerate the evil. There are many people and nations in the world who would rather risk losing themselves and the good than tolerate the evil. Such people and such nations are the natural enemies of liberalism. For them liberalism is no salvation but a dire loss, no harbinger of peace but a herald of war. They see beneath its velvet glove the iron fist. Proponents of liberalism speak always and eloquently of the velvet glove; they keep a judicious silence about the iron fist. The more bold of them, indeed, might even deny it, while the less self-conscious might be wholly unaware of it. But the opponents of liberalism feel it only too keenly. One
has only to think of the many groups and individuals in the world, particularly in the Middle East, who have a passionate hatred for the United States. We might call them mad fanatics, but they call themselves servants of God.

One should not be surprised at any of this, nor upset by the iron fist. For here precisely lies the cause of liberalism’s success, the source of its appeal and the basis of its claim to civilization and progress. The many rival goods cannot exist together in their natural or illiberal state; on the contrary they thus generate only conflict. Peace can only arise in such a state if one of the goods is victorious and removes and banishes all the others. But such a peace only brings joy to the victors; it brings misery to everyone else. Liberal peace is not like this. It brings joy to all and misery to none, because its victory is the victory of all.

Such is how liberalism has always proclaimed itself. This proclamation, moreover, it has backed up with manifest deeds. Certainly the masses of poor, oppressed and deprived who emigrated to the United States from the old world and were drawn by this proclamation were not disappointed by it. For them, and for many others around the world like them, the words of Lady Liberty, "Mother of Exiles," in New York harbor ring with resounding and enduring truth:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Moreover this proclamation and its evident realization in their own lives and the lives of so many of their fellow-citizens continue to be for the vast majority of Americans today their chief source of pride and patriotism. The United States is the best regime because it is the first and archetypal liberal regime, the regime that offers freedom to all. No better defense can be offered for liberalism than this, its factual political success. Those who have tried to offer subtler and philosophical defenses, considering this political
defense inadequate, have generally come up with something worse. Their defenses, being too abstruse for the people and too unconvincing for other philosophers, have rather undermined faith in liberalism than shored it up. Besides in practical matters no amount of clever theory can outweigh the simple fact that something works. That liberalism works, has worked and goes on working while its rivals are failing, and that conspicuously, might fairly be called the decisive political fact of the present day.

But to have succeeded politically is not to have succeeded simply, and even what works might still contain defects and weaknesses. As already argued, the victory liberalism wins and proclaims as its chief success is the victory of all the visions of the good life only because it is first their defeat. This defeat, according to opponents and skeptics, brings with it many bad results.

First of all, they assert, liberalism only generates a minimalist and uninspiring morality. The morality is minimalist because liberalism does not set up any substantive vision of a good life; it only lays down certain necessary conditions or means for the peaceful pursuit of such visions. It generates only a procedural morality, not a substantive one. Such a morality is of course vital and indispensable if there is to be peace, but beyond that liberalism cannot go. For this reason liberal morality is uninspiring. What has produced the grandest achievements of the human spirit throughout history has been the striving for some great good, not the minimalist concern with means or conditions. Since liberalism provides, of express intention, no such good, it cannot generate anything grand or admirable. Everything grand and admirable that has emerged from liberal societies has not come from the liberalism but from the substantive goods that these societies have happened to contain. Liberalism does not generate any of these goods; at best it provides for their peaceful co-existence. Indeed it even takes away from them because it takes away the passion and fanatical devotion that, in pre-liberal conditions, they used to inspire.

Furthermore liberalism cannot help but promote a pervasive individualism. Since it permits all substantive goods and forbids the forced imposition of one good over another, it necessarily caters to the tendency of human beings to split up and go many different ways in pursuit of many different goods. It therefore promotes an atomic individualism, and thus saps the roots of communal existence and communal attachments. For groups survive and flourish best when they can compel and constrain their members to remain loyal and
committed even when they are tempted to desert. Under liberalism groups are prevented from doing that, or from doing it very well. As a result natural selfishness is let loose and the groups are denied the power to keep it in check. Atomic or selfish individualism becomes, if not universal, at any rate the all-pervading norm. The communal needs of human existence are ignored, the conditions for their fulfillment are constantly undermined, and the selfish exploitation of the weak by the strong is left unchecked.

This leads directly to another and equally serious harm. Individualism and the unhindered freedom to go one’s own way as one will are inimical to the development of virtue. Virtue is a habit, generated by long, hard training. This training has to be supported by force and compulsion, especially in youth but even later as well. Human will-power, save in the case of really exceptional people, is not strong enough to sustain on its own a long period of hard and painful habituation. There has to be external support, and that support has to take the form of forced discipline and constraint. This is evident enough in the case of the arts where skill and excellence only come through hard practice, practice that is often tedious and repugnant. Many who have excelled in such arts would not have done so had they not been forced, even against their will, to go on practicing. Since liberalism refuses to allow people to be forced into any good against their will, it necessarily undermines all attempts to instill virtue, or indeed any excellence. That is why, as time passes and the old habits die through lack of support, liberal societies sink more and more into humdrum mediocrity and moral decrepitude. They produce no more heroes and no more saints.

Indeed as a result of all this liberal societies even begin to undermine themselves. For liberalism too requires commitment and dedication on the part of its supporters if it is to survive. Should the people become indifferent and careless, more concerned with their immediate, selfish gratifications than with the preservation of their society, they will soon fall an easy prey to their enemies. The price of liberty, it has been well said, is eternal vigilance. But eternal vigilance is hard and painful. An easy-going selfishness will not be vigilant for very long, but at most only when a serious threat is palpable and to hand. Already on several occasions this century the liberal regimes have almost been caught napping by a ruthless enemy. They survived largely because of the selfless devotion of a handful of exceptional souls. Where is the guarantee that such souls will be there next time?
Given the way liberalism systematically fails to generate or to preserve the conditions necessary for their emergence, it systematically fails to provide for its own survival.

These criticisms may be somewhat overstated, but it would be hasty to deny them altogether. They leave us, however, in a painful dilemma. We must either have liberalism or illiberalism. If we have illiberalism, then we will not have much peace or liberty. There will instead be the conflict of visions of the good life, and no free choice between those visions but the forced imposition of one of them by the victors. If, on the other hand, we do have liberalism then we are all too likely to have a minimalist, uninspiring and basically self-interested morality, a weak and anemic community life, little or no virtue, splendor or excellence, and a self-destructive indifference.

But are these alternatives really so stark? Is the dilemma really so ineluctable? Perhaps not, but we cannot ignore the problem it poses. We must find some way out of it. I suggest, therefore, something along the following lines.

To begin with we must opt for some basic liberalism. The conflict of all visions of the good life against all must be avoided. This of course could be done if one of these visions became completely victorious, but then there would be no freedom to choose between rival visions. If there is to be peace with any real freedom about what life to live, there must be liberalism. Only liberalism can secure peaceful co-existence between rival goods. This fundamental political fact and its truth demonstrated by deeds must be held onto with unyielding firmness.

But here is where we need to be careful as well as imaginative. Liberalism can come in more than one form, or rather there is a difference between liberalism when taken in its fundamental idea and when taken along with additions and elaborations. The fundamental idea is an absolute necessity, otherwise there will be no peace between the rival visions of the good and no freedom to choose. But the same is not true of the additions and elaborations.

What I particularly have in mind is this. It is possible to justify liberalism on several different grounds. One can say that no one knows what the true vision of the good life is; one can say that there is no true vision but all visions are equally acceptable; one can say that there is no way of deciding between visions save by subjective feelings which differ from person to person; or one can say something else along the same lines. To say one of
these things, and, as a matter of fact, in most liberal societies one of these things is commonly said and commonly believed, is to take up some definite position towards visions of the good life and to enter into the controversies that such positions generate. For instance many supporters of the particular visions say about their own vision that it is the true one, that the others are false, that this can be proved or is in some way evident to those of good will, and that if some fail to see this it must be due to perversity, ignorance, reprobation by God and the like. But in fact it is completely unnecessary to get involved in any of these questions. Liberalism does not need to say anything about the visions of the good life other than that it is wrong and undesirable to try and found political society on the basis of them. It is wrong and undesirable to do this because of the war and oppression such attempts produce. But having said this, one can, and indeed should, leave all the other questions about truth, knowledge, proof and so on completely alone. For let, if you will, one particular vision be true, even provable. Still, given that some people, indeed many, will deny this, however falsely or perversely, war or oppression must follow if an attempt is made to found society on its basis. Given that this is so (and even the partisans of the true good could hardly deny it), then one has all one needs to justify a basic liberalism.

So one can have liberalism without at the same time having all the relativism and skepticism about the good life that is rife within existing liberal states, and perhaps above all in the United States. Of course skepticism and relativism are possible positions and liberalism cannot rule them out. But what it need not do, and what, insofar as it is purely liberal, it should not do, is promote or endorse them. On the contrary, given the fact that, under liberalism, these positions are almost bound to become the prevalent ones, liberalism should go out of its way not to endorse or promote them. It should instead warn against them, not, to be sure, by declaring them false, but by expressly refusing to declare them true. It should publicly announce that it takes no stand on the issue but has deliberately left that to each to work out for themselves. It should publicly announce also that those who decide that relativism and skepticism are false and that there is a good life that is the same for all and can be known by all, are not by that fact alone somehow enemies of liberalism or crypto-tyrants. It should even publicly announce that those who say one must be a relativist or skeptic to be a true liberal are themselves the enemies of liberalism. They are peddling
distortions by identifying liberalism with one particular position when in fact liberalism freely permits many other ones.

If one could achieve something like this, one could remove from liberalism some of the defects mentioned earlier. For by expressly restoring the idea that there might indeed be a true vision of the good life (although liberalism itself refrains from deciding this matter), one can restore and preserve within liberalism some of that commitment and devotion to the good which seems to be a prerequisite for the highest and grandest of human achievements. Of course one does not restore this devotion altogether or up to the point of fanaticism, because that is contrary to liberal peace. But one restores enough of it to parry the charge that liberalism must collapse into mediocrity.

One can, in this same way, also parry the charge that liberalism must produce selfish, atomic individuals and undermine the possibility of genuine human community. For while liberalism tends to produce such individuals, there is nothing in it as such that absolutely requires this. Communities of all kinds can and do flourish within liberal societies. They are nevertheless also threatened by a careless or indifferent liberalism. For just as liberalism can, if it cares, expressly counter the tendency to relativism and skepticism, so can it also counter, if it cares, the tendency to individualism. Moreover it can do this in a similar way. It should not deny individualism; on the contrary it must permit it. But it can expressly deny that individualism is a necessary part of liberalism, or that the atomic individual is the most liberal individual. It can and should assert, on the contrary, that close-knit communities, exercising tight discipline and care, moral and intellectual, over their members from youth up, are as compatible with a liberal state as the atomic individual. It must, as a result, also acknowledge and protect community rights in addition to individual rights. It must uphold the right of communities to expel or exclude those who do not conform. For communities cannot be if they cannot do this. Besides it is no part of liberal peace in its basic idea that individuals be allowed to join any group whatever, or to do whatever they wish within any group whatever.

Liberalism must, of course, impose some limits on the power of groups, but it only needs to do this so far as is necessary to preserve peace and freedom. This will clearly require that communities not seek to dominate other communities, and that their members be free to depart. It may even, in extreme cases, require that some communities not be
allowed to exist. Beyond that, however, liberalism need not, and should not, go. Of course such restrictions will take away something from the power of communities and so weaken them. But the kind of weakening involved is well worth it and something we need not lament. Enough will be left to communities to enable them to fulfill their needed role in human life. At any rate there is no compelling reason to suppose that this should not be so. Besides, if one insists on demanding more, the loss in terms of peace and freedom will be far greater than the gains in terms of community, virtue or splendor.

These changes to liberalism in favor of elements of illiberalism will generate a sort of liberalism different in many ways from what now exists. It will be a minimalist liberalism as opposed to an expansive one, and there will be added to it from the outside elements that, while not necessarily incompatible with it, are not generated, preserved or justified by it. But it is in this way that we will be able to escape, to a large degree, the dilemma posed earlier. We will have some of the best of liberalism and illiberalism together. Liberalism will give us the means for political success without having to deny us at the same time the means for moral success.