

## Ways to Liberalism, Old and New

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### Two Types of Liberalism

Reality is nuanced, often with minute variations confounding us in all realms, including biology, zoology, botany, let alone in spheres where human intelligence? or its absence? has had great influence. Furthermore, apart from the objective presence of complexities and diversities our ways of living present, there are also the much more diverse conceptions of how we might and ought to configure our lives. Adding, then, to nature's diversity is the way human beings are wont to conceptualize nature, including their place in it, more or less accurately.

So not only are there objectively warranted variations in how human beings ought to organize their communities, in view of diverse requirements they face at different times and in different places. There are, also, innumerable types of political orders they think up and many variations within these orders (represented by diverse renditions of, for example, anarchism, statism, socialism, capitalism and other? not necessarily mutually exclusive? conceptions of social organization that have made their appearance). If we add to this our proclivity as theorists to put even well traveled matters somewhat idiosyncratically, we will quickly appreciate why we abound in variations on all themes that catch our attention.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, over time the way we understand reality changes, too, because of the opportunity we may have and have exploited for being better informed, organizing our concepts more sharply, taking into account newly discovered differences and similarities. Thus even a basically sound understanding of some feature of reality is likely to undergo alterations, modifications, and revisions.

This is also true of classical liberalism or what has come in our time to be called libertarianism in many circles. For those in the West, especially the United States of America, the variations of understanding liberalism can be rather frustrating, even annoying, since the term "liberty" has had not just analytic but a good deal of normative, even emotive significance. So how one uses it is going to matter to many people and calls forth considerable rebuke from those who have a different rendition to offer. Although it is utopian to believe that perfect identity of meaning will ever be attained on any term, especially one with normative implications? since each of us has a stake in getting our idiosyncratic ways recorded *just so*? it borders on corruption to try to win one's ethical or political disputes by perpetrating blatant conceptual revisions.

For example, "liberalism" in popular political parlance has come to mean in the USA the championing of a strong welfare state. Why call this "liberalism" when

we all know that in its original political usage the term suggested ideas and ideals very different from what the welfare state stresses? One might argue that there is some kind of slight of hand at play here and, no doubt, that suspicion is not without some plausibility. (The same can be said of the kin concept “rights” when it is used to claim such things as that we all have a basic right to welfare, healthcare, etc.) Political mileage can be gained from persuading a good many folks, ones who do not practice independent thinking on such matters, to pick up on the implications of such revisionist linguistics. Thus, “freedom” or “liberty” can soon be used to mean just the opposite, namely, involuntary servitude and rights, too, will come to mean legally enforceable obligations, not liberty, freedom from other people’s intrusive conduct upon oneself, as they once did.

Yes, there is a good deal of subterfuge about concepts like these, ones Alasdair MacIntyre once dubbed “essentially contestable.” Still, one can also find a respectable enough tradition in Western political thought that supports the current use of “liberal” in American politics. I have in mind what has come to be called the idea of *positive* freedom. This idea is used to mean *the condition of being enabled to reach a desired or desirable goal*, as in “the truth shall set you free.”

When one is free of disease, free of ignorance, free of poverty, one is free in this meaningful sense. Furthermore, once the idea of self-causation, self-determination, origination or personal initiative is left philosophically unsupported? apparently even scientifically hopeless? the sense of being free when no one intrudes upon one, when no other person aggresses upon someone, carries little significance. Aggression from others under such conditions is but a natural impediment, no different from the “aggression” that a tornado or virus will manifest. The only true freedom is what Marx advanced, following Hegel: freedom from natural necessity.

Actually Hobbes also held the view that what human beings are most in need of is this kind of “freedom of impediments,” a notion some neo-classical economists, such as the late George Stigler, embraced. According to them, freedom is really nothing more than diminished cost, the reduction of obstacles to overcome in ones life. Furthermore, since no one is more deserving of success than another, since everything just happens, nothing is ultimately up to any of us—some kind of personal achievement for which credit and reward might be deserved—in a just society everyone ought to have as much of everything good for us as possible to arrange via effective collective, state action. That, too, leads to a polity in which basic positive freedom is prized above everything else.

Actually, classical liberalism, which has had certain affinities to modern scientism, has contributed in some measure to an understanding of human nature as passive, inert, incapable of self-determination, something that has spawned support for

the welfare state. In other words, one of the paths to classical liberalism can lead, as well, to contemporary welfare statism. In that outlook, after all, it is central that people are taken to be victims—or, rather, casualties—of their circumstances deserving neither credit or blame for their lot in life.<sup>2</sup>

But it is contemporary liberalism, as associated with the views of American democrats, the ADA, the editorialists of *The New York Times*, etc., that is most clearly loyal to that version of freedom which arises from the understanding of human nature as basically inert, as all of matter happens to be in the framework of the ontology of classical mechanics. So what people need is not *to be left free by their fellows* but *to be made free by removing natural impediments to their motion and development*.

Actually, neither classical nor modern liberalism is spared scorn from some of our major political philosophers. MacIntyre, for examples, heaps such scorn on liberalism in great abundance:

[T]he Marxists understanding of liberalism as ideological, as a deceiving and self-deceiving mask for certain social interests, remains compelling....Liberalism in the name of freedom imposes a certain kind of unacknowledged domination, and one which in the long run tends to dissolve traditional human ties and to impoverish social and cultural relationships. Liberalism, while imposing through state power regimes that declare everyone free to pursue whatever they take to be their own good, deprives most people of the possibility of understanding their lives as a quest for the discovery and achievement of the good, especially by the way in which it attempts to discredit those traditional forms of human community within which this project has to be embodied.<sup>3</sup>

The usual tirades against at least classical liberalism? that it fosters atomism, subjective autonomy and, thus, ethical relativism, decadence and social life that rests on power rather than right? may all be added to this lament of MacIntyre. It is voiced by conservatives as well as radicals, by Catholics as well as communarians.<sup>4</sup> It is the refrain we hear from such diverse sources as the crude talk shows and erudite commentaries by famous academic commentators.

Is there anything to these vehement sentiments or are they yet another example of an intellectual ranting and raving about a system that simply will not allow intellectuals to have much more say about systems of governance than ordinary folk who like to eat at McDonalds, be entertained via MTV, and shop at Wall Mart?

The honest answer is that, if only inadvertently, MacIntyre's hostility has something, albeit minimal, going for it. The lamentable features of liberalism have to do with failing to distinguish two considerably different ways in which the system can be defended and insisting on advancing one as superior to the other, whereas probably just the opposite is the case.

## Two Classical Liberal Traditions

Now, the case for a free society, as understood within the earlier classical liberal traditions has been advanced on several basis. These include skepticism, mysticism, positivism, natural law and natural rights, utilitarianism and pragmatism. In its infancy and adolescence liberalism was primarily defended as a modern approach to politics that has gained much of its strength of certain affinities with science. The earlier and later prominent defenses may be broadly distinguished as the *positive* and the *normative* cases for freedom.

It was the 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand who put on record the most fully developed? though insufficiently detailed? normative argument for classical liberal ideas and ideals, ones that dominate the discussion of the merits and liabilities of classical liberalism in our day. Earlier hints of such a defense were available from John Locke and others in the natural law school of moral and political philosophy. In our time, it has been Robert Nozick, Loren Lomasky, Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, Fred D. Miller, Jr. and I who have carried forth the normative tradition.

In contrast, the most persistent positive case in economics is made by Milton Friedman, given his direct treatment of certain methodological issues that serve as the philosophical foundation of such an approach to social philosophy, as well as some others in that field of positive political economy? for example, David Friedman, George Stigler, now deceased, and Gary Becker, both Nobel Laureates. The late Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek have also produced non-normative arguments for classical liberal conceptions of human political economic life, as have the philosophers Jan Narveson and David Conway.<sup>5</sup>

In the classical liberal tradition, there has always been this division between the positive (or scientific) versus the normative (or moral) defenses of the free society with, of course, some shadings in between that are difficult to classify. Yet in the earlier incarnations of the position the positivist stance was clearly dominant. This stance can be traced, philosophically, to Thomas Hobbes as well as Baruch Spinoza, and includes such classical champions of the economic liberty as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo. Positivists are still better positioned, academically, but their approach is no longer so widely championed. A few years ago one could encounter Milton Friedman and F. A. Hayek on *Meet the Press* and read Friedman regularly in *Newsweek* magazine. Friedman still appears on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* now and again. You can see the same prominence evident in the appointment of someone like Richard Posner as judge of the 7th District Court up in Chicago, as well as by the number of Nobel Prizes received by other scientific economists who defend a free market system of economic arrangements for human communities. The books of these social scientist champions of

classical liberalism are very well published, by prominent publishers such as the University of Chicago, Harvard University, University of California and other premier presses. We will shortly get to those who advance the moral defense, one that today seems to be more widely championed, especially in the circles of scholars who discuss political theory and philosophy. In other words, if we take John Rawls as the philosophical representative of the social democratic? or modern liberal? welfare state, it is Nozick, Lomasky, Rasmussen and Den Uyl, and some others who are discussed as the classical liberal or libertarian counterpoints.

### **Liberalism's Earlier Love Affair with Science**

The social scientific defense of freedom once had a better standing than the moral defense in the community of political inquirers. This is because the normative defense has seemed weak, flawed in light of the scientism of the last several centuries. A great deal of respect had been accorded to approaching a problem along lines similar to those spelled out in the natural sciences for reasons that are not difficult to appreciate. They promise rigor, exactitude, precision, and practical usefulness. They also suggested that complex human problems? psychological, ethical, political, etc.? could be dealt with in the proven ways of technology. The modern era's confidence in what B. F. Skinner called "the technology of culture" can be appreciated once one considers the rapid progress of the natural sciences and the resulting technological advances, along with the age old propensity of intellectuals to seek for unifying systems of thought so as to make sense of reality. The persistent hope for the Archimedian point from which all problems could be solved, with adequate information at hand, has sometimes lead philosophers of the highest quality to jump to hasty generalizations when they were inspired and excited enough about how we might go about solving pressing human problems.<sup>6</sup>

For the last 400 years in Western civilization, the scientific mode of thinking had been proven impressive, if only by way of its great productivity. It still is, of course, although much dismay is now evident with extrapolating the methods of the natural sciences to all other studies. Most of our technology, productivity, the gadgets and technology we now take for granted are the results of science and among many this still sustains a confidence in applying universally the sort of thinking that seems to have made them possible. The hopefulness in social engineering can be accounted for by reference to the prevalence of scientific thinking, even scientism. Except for Immanuel Kant, few have attempted to abandon whole sale scientism and Kant did it at the cost of reinvigorating dualism, which has always been intellectually uncomfortable to accept because, among other reasons, of the problem of interactionism.

Another important reason why the positivist approach had been widely embraced is that the only powerful normative defense of liberalism had purged prudence from its midst. Kantianism, though normative and supportive of classical liberal institutions, had no solid place for the prime candidate that might have been used to defend the classical liberal economic order, capitalism, on moral grounds, for the virtue of prudence.

Within this tradition of ethical thinking goals or results? that is, the ends or objectives of action? and the virtues enabling one to reach them are deemed to be morally irrelevant. Doing what is right cannot be defended by reference to one's ends, only by reference to the dictates of a categorical imperative. Yet, if prudence? which aims at self-enhancement? is not a virtue, it is difficult to see how one could *morally* respect the activities that comprise much of the free market. There can be nothing seriously right about striving to make a profit, trying to prosper in life. Virtues, such as frugality, industry, fortitude and such are unavailable as bona fide moral traits within the post-Kantian moral philosophical tradition.

Yes, some defenders of liberalism appear to find it sufficient, from the moral point of view, that in a liberal polity all interpersonal actions are done by mutual consent. Yet, this isn't sufficient because people can cooperate to their own moral detriment? e.g., when they exchange heroin for cocaine and both proceed to abuse the drugs. Freedom is not really a personal virtue but a precondition of such virtues. As Hayek wrote:

That freedom is the matrix required for the growth of moral values? indeed not merely one value among many but the source of all values? is almost self-evident. It is only where the individual has choice, and its inherent responsibility, that he has occasion to affirm existing values, to contribute to their further growth, and then earn moral merit.<sup>7</sup>

Freedom is a precondition of personal virtue, of doing the morally right thing, rather than itself such a virtue. And unless the liberal capitalist society can also claim for itself the achievement of fostering personal virtues, it will lack moral standing. The prominent older versions of classical liberalism, therefore, rested mainly on non-moral defenses of the system.

So the main reasons for the superior reputation of the positivist approach is that a lot of people have had great confidence in science and the only going moral framework offered no support for liberal (bourgeois) virtues. Even in our time, when popular discourse is filled with references to ethics, family values, the cowardice of terrorists and so forth, many academic intellectuals who support classical liberal ideals would not defend the position that there are objective moral or ethical truths. The primary stance on such topics is well voiced by Richard Rorty when he

says that “Non-metaphysicians [of whom Rorty and, by his account, all other wise men are members] cannot say that democratic institutions reflect a moral reality and that tyrannical regimes do not reflect one, that tyrannies get something wrong that democratic societies get right.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Rorty himself is of the communitarian Left today, certain noted classical liberals, such as Richard Posner, have embraced his philosophical stance as supportive of the free society.<sup>9</sup> And if we include among liberals the left leaning welfare statist who do not quite wish to give up on some of liberalism’s key ideas? e.g., John Rawls? it is not difficult to see that their meager normative framework is closer to positivism than many realize. Rawls, for example, champions the intuitionist approach to ethics and in the last analysis, by denying any significant role to free will, has no room for praise and blame within his moral framework.<sup>10</sup>

This means that some of the very prominent defenders of the free society, whether in its pure libertarian or watered down welfare statist version, have been and still are skeptical of making a moral case for their system on anything but an intuitive, subjective basis, one that clearly has no other implication than that the proponent *prefers* it. Those in the classical liberal or libertarian orbit have in the past mainly thought, basically, that when a society enjoys minimal obstruction to the movement human beings are inclined to make forward, to pursue their utility or happiness, this will amount to the most natural social state for them. Ergo, non-interventionist government, laissez-faire, civil liberties and so forth. The case for liberty had been and still often made, therefore, without reference to the troublesome, mythical area of values, norms, morals. These do not measure up to the requirements of scientism, the ontology of mechanics.

### **Morality’s Philosophical Demise**

Thus for several centuries, morality or ethics had been unseated from its prominence as part of humanistic studies. From ancient Greece up until the Middle Ages, morality had been taken seriously, albeit often, especially in popular circles, as a means to prepare people for the afterlife. To wit, the notion that human beings are the sort of creatures who can make choices between right and wrong, that they have the responsibility to do the right thing, and when they do wrong, they are blameworthy for this—this had been very prominent in Augustine, Aquinas and even Ockham. At first this had been incorporated into broad teleological cosmology and metaphysics wherein the issue of what purposes or goals we ought to pursue made good sense. Later, however, human beings were seen by many as an utterly unique phenomenon here on earth—a hybrid of divine and mundane substance—though, of course, everybody acknowledged that we bled, had to eat and did much that other animals did as well. Nevertheless, our having a mind appears to

have been such a shocking, awesome fact that it was pretty much believed by all the intellectuals that human beings really are not ultimately of this earth. Augustine exclaimed,

How great, my God, is this force of memory, how exceedingly great! It is like a vast and boundless subterranean shrine....Yet this is a faculty of my mind and belongs to my nature; nor can I myself grasp all that I am. Therefore the mind is not large enough to contain itself. But where can that uncontained part of it be?"<sup>11</sup>

Thus the facts and principles that are of more interest to human life as such? among them the facts and principles of ethics, morality, politics, etc.? were for many centuries considered to be ones related to spirituality. Arguably in the age of enormous scientific and technological success, this did not bode well for such concerns.

It had been relatively easy for Augustine, for example, *qua* ontologist, to make room for freedom of the will. He was not constrained in this by any loyalty to materialism, even though Augustine was beginning to reject the influential dualist thinking of Manicheism. Indeed, even in our day, most people receive their ethical-moral teachings from church, not from science, and relate values in general to a supposed non-natural or spiritual realm. This is largely because the naturalistic framework is infected with a reductive materialist ontology and thus cannot yield a coherent account of human causal agency, purposiveness and, thus, ultimately of moral responsibility.

As science gradually made its gains on this spiritualistic approach to human life, indeed to an understanding of the whole universe, not only was the idealistic other-worldly focus beginning to recede for many of the most formidable minds but morality, too, became dethroned from its earlier lofty place. Ethics proper began to occupy a less prominent position in our educated, academic culture. Human beings were beginning to be viewed as really just more complicated physical beings. Everything was ultimately thought of as governed by the principles of classical mechanics, that is, the physics which ultimately got its major expression in the work of Isaac Newton. In Hobbes, we have only moral psychology, not morality proper.<sup>12</sup> In Locke, morality is squeezed in with great difficulty, as is free will, and with other luminaries of empiricism morality is really explained away in various causal terms? e.g., in Hume and Adam Smith.

Thus the baby was thrown out with the bath water. To appropriate the study of nature, everything that even seemed otherworldly had been abandoned. The Hobbesian notion, that human beings are by instinct inclined toward self-preservation, takes the laws of motion into the realm of psychology and ultimately social philosophy. The claim that after a period of life in a state of nature a social

contract is entered into by which society and government is formed, is founded on a mechanical physics of human life. It is the application of classical materialistic (meta)physics to politics: human beings in a state of nature, outside of civil society, are taken to be clusters of complex, intelligent matter, keeping in motion, attempting to survive. Since, however, ultimately there's too many of them, they collide and repeated conflicts ensue. Well, once this happens, their higher form of material intelligence—something like a complex computer (one prominent model of the mind in our own time)—prompts them to make rules that will establish peace.

In other words, we are normally inclined, like billiard balls, to go on moving, living, but then when we start colliding and our feedback system tells us, "Now, sit down and make some rules," we respond with the solution of the social contract. Once the rules are established, just as with traffic laws, they govern our continued movement or pursuit of our self-preservation. So, essentially, the grandfather of much of liberal political-economy, Thomas Hobbes—and I say grandfather only because he was not quite liberal, just laid the philosophical foundations of a certain version of liberalism—was a thoroughgoing (i.e., reductive) materialist who wanted to apply the principles of the physical sciences to everything. In our time this line of thinking is perhaps most forcefully and influentially advanced by Richard Dawkins.<sup>13</sup>

One result was the removal of nearly all elements of morality from the intellectual framework of a major branch of classical liberalism. (What remained was a somewhat minor “imperative” inclining us toward self-preservation, which in economics is transformed into the profit motive or utility maximization, although left room, for example in Adam Smith’s work, for an innate gregarious sentiment. But while this is something like a norm<sup>14</sup>, it is not optional for us and thus has no moral significance.)

### **Scientism and Classical Liberalism**

In this scientific perspective, the ideals we promote—the language of blaming people for violating our rights for example, for holding them responsible for rape or assault or kidnapping or all the less serious crimes—had been largely removed from the essential constituents of the framework of liberalism.<sup>15</sup> All we are, by the most fundamental tenets of this vision, is atoms moving forward and when we collide we automatically adjust and proceed more smoothly and peacefully. That's how society and its laws were supposed to have come about or, at least, this seemed like a useful hypothesis for understanding human life and society. Any mishap in the process is entirely attributable to our lack of sufficient information, not to evil, irresponsible, negligent or vicious conduct. No personal, moral responsibility could be involved in how things turn out in society (just as so many claim today, from academic psychologists to guests on tabloid television talk shows).

Of course, this view didn't affect everything since not everybody held it and even those who did were of somewhat varying minds about it. Clearly the position did not completely eliminate blaming or praising—for one, if you didn't hold these beliefs you would be blamed for being foolish or stubborn! Still, the scientific outlook became very prominent. Capitalism itself was by some ultimately rested on it.

Adam Smith, when he wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, essentially took the Hobbesian idea a step further and said that not only are we all embarking on promoting our self-interest, but the less government there is, the better this system is going to work for our prosperity. Because government intervention and regulation amount to the introduction of friction into human social life, unless all it does is keep the peace. Accordingly, the whole notion of the free market economic system owes a great deal to this tradition of scientism, of lifting the principles of the physical sciences and applying them to human behavior. Subjectivism in ethics, another tenet of a good portion of classical liberalism—the idea that all judgments of right and wrong are expressions of private feelings, preferences or desires—is really driven by this scientific outlook. Scientism doesn't allow for objective moral values because the notion of right and wrong conduct doesn't make sense if no options exist and all we can do is what we have to. Even plain value judgments? as to whether something is good or bad, e.g., a good apple or a bad stomach? are deemed to be a matter of personal preference or aversion. Here is how Hobbes put the point originally: "But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good: and the object of his hate and aversion, evil ...For these words of good and evil ... are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil ...."<sup>16</sup>

This view was for very long shared by the greatest of classical liberal economists, the main friends of the free market in academe, via their embrace of the “subjective theory of value.” For example, Professor Don Bellante points out that given that “the values and motives of individuals [are] entirely subjective it is impossible for an analyst to pass judgment on the optimality of the individual's chosen actions.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, actions cannot be judged right or wrong except by subjective standards? those the individual embraces for himself or herself. The idea is expressed in aesthetics as “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Accordingly, right and wrong conduct, too, had been thought a matter of how a person takes it, no more, at least so far as the economist is concerned with human behavior. Within pure economic analysis this stance could be quite appropriate. Since, however, economists have always been called upon to offer general commentary on political-economic matters, not just strict economic analyses, they have often taken this value-free framework with them into their studies of and rec-

ommendations pertaining to public policy matters? environmental, racial, and other topics. In these areas their value-free approach had always resonated badly with most people because, well, human life is necessarily normative, value-laden. But what was widely resisted in the wider public did not begin to become respectable until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Logically, of course, such doubts should have been evident from the outset of scientism's popularity since the debate between positive and normative analysts itself rests on the underlying view that *there is a right and many wrong ways to go about thinking about human affairs*. Holding one's adversaries guilty of bad thinking is an inescapably normative point.

### **No Way to Marry Scientism and Morality**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century even the few free market economists who overtly attacked some versions of scientism reintroduced it by the back door, e.g., by way of modeling the market along lines of more complex physical systems. This is indeed a competing approach in our own time, what with so many efforts to model human social life on quantum mechanics, chaos theory, etc.

Despite what F. A. Hayek argued? that in fact the modeling went the other way, so that, e.g., Charles Darwin adopted the framework of social scientists such as Adam Ferguson, by which to understand natural phenomena? the basic grounding remained scientism. The social theory of Bernard Mandeville and David Hume, had by that time been placed under the influence of a more complex version of scientism, one that retained the foremost ingredient of the earlier, mechanistic type? determinism, the denying of the possibility of free choice, self-governance or *bona fide* initiative in human life. For example, Ferguson held that we are motivated by "subrational drives." In turn, Hayek claimed that Ferguson, "with his phrase about the 'the results of human action but not of human design' has provided ... the best definition of the task of all social theory."<sup>18</sup>

The crucial point about scientism is its thoroughgoing determinism, its denial that human beings are agents, its relegation of human reasoning into the service of the human passions, so that cognition and self-regulation in light of understanding play no role in the explanation of human action. What matters is the simple or complex ways we are driven to behave.

In contrast, *bona fide* science and norms are perfectly compatible because the former must accept whatever there is to be found in nature, including some beings the nature of which include a normative component or dimension, even a moral one. Thus Aristotle could call ethics a science because he was not being reductive in his approach to the sciences as scientism has always been.

### **The Moral Viewpoint versus Scientism**

At first scientism seemed to offer support for freedom because the idea was that with less intervention in their lives by other persons, including governments, people would move about efficiently. Laissez-faire public policy is in a way like frictionless space, posing the least resistance to human motion and progress. Without government regulation, coercion, and interference, human beings would advance more rapidly toward self-preservation and self-enhancement. It makes pretty good sense.

In our day, however, a fairly vocal group of academic philosophers, taking their clues from a wide array of past moral and political thinkers, have begun to revitalize the moral case for classical liberalism, one that had been largely silenced by scientism's earlier triumph. Mainly they have found that the older view left us with serious dilemmas, especially when we set about to attempt to defend the institutions it hoped to recommend. In short, the moral dimension of human social life began to be seen as irrepressible.

This newly emerging moral viewpoint that has energized many classical liberals treats human beings as agents of their own conduct, as crucial first causes of some of what they do. Such an idea has had major problems associated with it in the past when efficient causation had been thought the only kind worthy of the name. Since with human beings the talk about what they ought to do has persisted, resisting all efforts to reconstruct moral language into some kind of technology, and since science has itself undergone some major changes, the prospects for a moral defense of the free society are no better than they were in the past.

Moral talk doesn't appear to apply to other animals, although there are, of course, some who would say otherwise. It seems right that when a dog bites the mailman, we don't believe it *ought not* to have done that, even as we lament the fact. We don't treat the dog as a responsible agent, as if it could have made a different choice and thus mightn't have bitten the mailman. We do continue to treat human beings as responsible, not as a robot or brute, with no choice about what it will do, good or bad. Certainly, however, if we are indeed what the essence of scientism contends? mechanical or, these days, computational systems? and we just behave as we do with no choice about the matter, then we cannot be held responsible, for better or for worse.<sup>19</sup>

### **Scientism isn't Enough for Political Economy**

The problem is that in the human realm, the classical liberal must always consider something along the following: "Since, as liberalism sees it, governments obstruct progress, we *should* or *ought to*, or *it is right for us to*, reduce government intervention, so government intervention is wrong." They go on to propose in their writings that coercion, government regimentation, is unjust, be it in regards to matters of fighting crime, handling the suppression of dissident literature, or planning

people's economic activities. While it seems inescapable for us to think and say such things—for even to recommend the mechanistic framework involves saying, “This is how we *ought to think*”—that kind of thinking and talk makes no sense within the scientific framework.<sup>20</sup>

Here is where the central flaw in the scientific approach to politics comes into clear focus, and it was one of classical liberalism's champions, George Stigler, who brought attention to it: If everything is governed by deterministic laws, then there is no right and wrong about anything, including, of course, tyranny and government regulation, intervention, crimes, etc.

So, ironically, the champions of classical liberalism, influenced by this scientific outlook, had deprived themselves, philosophically, of the very ideas, namely, moral analysis and, in its wake, exhortation, that could possibly undermine government tyranny and intervention. This is because the only way you can battle something that people do wrong is to see it as something that might have been done differently and could be changed by them, if they are convinced by arguments showing it to be true, in the future. If moral truth does not exist and its purported language is merely a guide for the expression of sentiments, preferences, biases, and tastes, then such convictions can never be achieved. Preferences may change but by this account not because one is convinced they are *wrong*, that one *ought to* prefer something else.

One element of classical liberalism, as an example, is that tyranny is morally corrupt.<sup>21</sup> It exists, but it might not have existed had people done things differently and it might not continue if they choose to act different in the future. Without the availability of the intellectual stance that renders such a position meaningful and true, all we can do is describe how things happened, are going on and will develop, as we do in astronomy or evolutionary biology. Fretting about how it might have happened and should turn out is irrational within such a perspective. If it is impossible for people to do anything differently—if they must do the things they do, if this is a deterministic universe through and through, such that none of us have any choice in what we do—then all we can do is look at tyranny and say that's how it has to be—as when our picnic is rained out. We can lament it a little, say it's too bad, but we cannot meaningfully say, no one ought to be a tyrant! We cannot rationally then say to politicians, presidents, criminals or terrorists that they shouldn't act the way they are acting, do what they are doing. We simply have to accept their behavior, describe it and make predictions based on what we have learned. That's the end of the matter. Such is the influence scientism has had on how we view human affairs.

In contemporary classical liberal or libertarian thought, all this has been understood to have a destructive impact on the prospect of human liberty. The notion that individuals have the right to liberty—that they have a right to trade their wares,

to acquire property, to enter into and freely consent to a contract, to resist being stolen from, to be intruded upon or governmental prior restraint—makes no sense if someone who violates those rights is doing just what has to be done. It may be bad but it cannot be wrong! The indictments against such conduct become, then, expressions of our wishes. Of course, our wishes go against the wishes those who do want to tyrannize us, intrude on us, kill us, steal from and regulate us, but there is no valid issue of who is right and who is wrong because it all just happens, for better or for worse.

*Freedom cannot be defended if it is not a matter of a genuine human option whether you respect people's right to freedom.* If a tyrant, regulator or politician cannot help, for example, intruding on them, if it is indeed an unavoidable fact that somebody murders someone, it's not even murder. It's merely a killing. It's no different from when a hyena attacks a zebra. A zebra can't say or think, nor can we think this about the hyena, that it oughtn't to do this, it is wrong. It makes no sense. Indeed, it does not even make sense to put to someone that his or her thinking is flawed, that they ought to have reached different conclusions from those they did reach since everyone does exactly what he or she must do. Criticism, even in a philosophical or scholarly context, is nonsense: no one could do better or worse than he or she in fact does.

Classical liberalism today, at least at the hands of many philosophers who find promise in it, recognizes that if one views human beings as nothing other than automatons, instinctually driven material pulsating things, then ultimately there is no way to say to them that what they are doing is wrong and they ought to change their ways, and they ought to, for example, pay compensation when they have done wrong—or even merely that they ought to apologize. That language, the language of norms, ethics, public policy and any kind of action guidance, is completely ruled out. It is no different from demonology, witchcraft, astrology or alchemy. Just as all those are bogus disciplines, so must political philosophy, political economy, ethics and public policy become bogus fields, if the scientific approach is true.

But—and this is the crucial question to raise—is the scientific approach sound, is scientism true? Are the contemporary classical liberals or libertarians right? Can their ideals be provided support based on a sound philosophy in which the normative dimensions of human life are included, given firm footing? We have already noted some problems, so let us see why there are further serious doubts about it.

### **Additional Flaws of Scientism**

A further major problem understood by now with the scientific approach is that it actually violates the most important tenets of science, which is that you ought to go with the evidence and not impose a framework from some other area where the evidence may not apply to the subject matter you are interested in understanding. If you are studying the psychology of rats and then you apply the findings to teenagers, you are likely to go wrong.

Not that there could not be some help there. Sometimes there are aspects of the rat psychology that we share, but there are aspects we don't share, just as we also fall, exactly the way in which a sack of potatoes falls when you throw it off the top of a building. It's a not a great deal of difference between a person and a sack of potatoes falling down. They both just land and make a big mess. But that doesn't mean that a person is a sack of potatoes, that only the truths that apply to the sack of potatoes apply to the person. You can take some of the findings of some of the sciences and apply them to some other subjects, but it's a very delicate process, and it has been driven, throughout the last 400 years of western civilization, by a lot more hope than evidence.

Just as the natural sciences improved our ability to manipulate nature—to control it and to extract from it all sorts of benefits for ourselves—the hope was that we could do the same in ethics, politics and so on. The assumption was made: “If we only knew the laws that drive human beings to do what they do, we can go in there and apply social engineering to human life and improve it, too.” But that hope didn't get fulfilled, as we well know now.

There are other obvious difficulties with scientism and its application to social policy. 400 years of scientism and 150 years of social science has not really improved the world a whole lot, not at least outside of the realm of technology itself where it had its home in the first place. The Nazis, the Soviets, the hoods, the child molesters, rapists, serial killers, and the rest were not rehabilitated or repelled by means of social engineering. At most, things got no worse than they have always been, except, again, where technology applies directly, as in handling household chores or producing the information highway. We also know that 150 years of interventionist economics, which is also based on Keynesian, Marxian, Galbraithian, and a lot of other social science, did not improve the world a whole lot. If anything, it has left us as confused as we were to start with, at least as a general rule, throughout the globe.

### **Returning to Proper Science**

What the current crop of classical liberal thinkers, or a good many of them at least, have come to see is that what is necessary to make amends for the oversights of scientism is to become properly scientific.

As noted earlier, following Aristotle, this would first require understanding science as a process of discovery and understanding, not the laying down of prerequisites of what things *must* be, which is the province of metaphysics and ontology, both of which are usually minimalists in their scope precisely for this reason: the prerequisites of existence or being are very few. It would, furthermore, amount to the recognition, first of all, that this animal species we call the human being has certain unique attributes, ones that cannot be derived from our understanding of other features of reality. We would learn that just because there are some things we share with the rat, the computer or the north star, it doesn't follow that we are just like those entities, that we share their basic nature or essence. A proper scientific approach reveals that with the emergence of the human species some unique attributes have emerged in nature.

### **Human Nature? *sans* Scientism, *via* Science**

The foremost of these unique attributes is that human beings can think and that this is an activity that cannot be automatic. At first, this is something we know from plain common sense. To any parent or teacher this should be obvious. Those who have dealt with children or students cannot miss that one cannot force them to think. That contribution to the rearing or educational process has to be provided by the child or student. *They have to will it to happen.* If they don't, it isn't going to happen. You can wear funny hats, you can sing songs, you can do all sorts of tricks but they are not going to pay attention until they choose it on their own initiative—because it is up to them to do it.

More technical reflection also affirms that this is a unique aspect of human beings. They produce ideas, theories, novelty throughout the parameters of their lives and none of that can be adequately explained by reference to mere external stimuli or genetic constitution. Human beings initiate some of what they do. Much of what is crucial to their lives is not simply the result of previous forces working on them.

The late psychophysicist Roger W. Sperry, who received the Nobel Prize in the 1950's for his split-brain experiments, devoted his life (after he received the award) to demonstrating, by the tools of his particular science, that there is actually a physiological basis for freedom of the will. Indeed, that free will is the power of the cerebral cortex to govern the function of the rest of the human brain.

Sperry argued that human beings have the kind of brain in which a higher portion monitors and controls much of human behavior even when some portions of the lower brain might incline one in a given direction. That's pretty much what we know from common sense: We have inclinations, desires, wishes and habits. But we can watch over these and we can guide ourselves away from or in line with them. We may want to eat more than we finally decide we should. So, we stop.

That doesn't mean that our inclination isn't there. It means that our higher brain functions are capable of monitoring and altering our inclinations. This is what we call self-restraint. This is resisting temptation.

### **Moral Responsibility**

Many of the people in academe, as well as those who end up on Oprah, Donahue and Geraldo, have completely overlooked that what most people are doing when things go awry is falling into temptation and failing to resist it. Instead, they are treated as the special, rare case in which someone is addicted or have to carry on as they do for other reasons over which they have no control. (The fact that they are put to jail may be an additional wrinkle on this story that hasn't been told yet. But I'm sure we will eventually have judges appearing on Geraldo who say, well, we can't help ourselves, we just have to put these social misfits in jail. They will say, "We are addicted to jailing people.")

Criticism of any position implies not only, as noted before, that one might have done otherwise but also that some criteria are being applied to which adherence is required. And if we deny the capacity for human initiative, there is no way to make sense of criticism, in the last analysis: one's insistence on following certain standards would also be the result of nothing more than certain forces that make one insist on it. Those who would deny those standards would have as valid a ground for that as those who embrace them. All propositions, in the end, would turn out to be equally sound, equally true, which would produce intellectual chaos.

### **Moral Chaos versus the Normative Case for Liberty**

In a sense this result has actually been achieved in certain circles. Multiculturalism is distinguished, in part, for insisting on the impossibility of making any distinction between cultures that are better and those that are worse, even in their understanding of the world. That this is itself a claim to a better understanding of the world does not seem to disturb the proponents of the position. We can learn from it at least that the implications of the deterministic, value-free approach are quite drastic and intellectually intolerable. Truth itself dies once freedom is denied.

So we can affirm human initiative without violating science or the tenets of coherence. So what are the broad political implications of this?

We start with noticing that under most normal conditions, unless a person has been terribly abused or kept in a closet for the first 12 years of his or her life, human beings have the capacity to make free choices, that they actually can initiate some of their conduct and the conduct is not simply explainable by reference to past events. From this it follows that human beings have to learn to act because they are not given prompters, instincts, that tell them what to do. Put generally, we all, except for the crucially incapacitated, have to learn to live right.

This accords with most of the cultural practices throughout human societies and history. We send people to school. We don't expect them to acquire knowledge of chemistry or computer science or philosophy by instinct the way in which most birds and bees acquire most of their behavior through instincts. Birds don't forget to fly south—the bulk of them do not make a mistake and stay home. They don't have this problem. Human beings are the ones who can act badly or well, on their own initiative.

Furthermore, another implication of this understanding of human nature is that we are self-responsible creatures, that a great deal of what is important in our lives, we must individually produce. We have to play a very decisive role in what happens in our lives. If we don't, we don't learn. We don't realize the cost of mistakes. They come back to haunt us. This can be noticed right in the course of discussing the topic at hand. If someone disagrees, the implication is that one has argued badly. If someone agrees, the implication is that one has argued correctly. One is held responsible for either.

### **From Moral Responsibility to the Free Society**

When we consider what self-responsibility implies, the notion of liberty starts creeping into our vocabulary. It turns out that this self-responsibility requires, in a social community context, that people have their own private jurisdiction where both their achievements and their failures are within their own domain and not dumped on others. Here one can notice the implications for environmental ethics and politics. Human beings, who are self-responsible, who can create as well as destroy, need to have their own dominion, their own private property wherein their achievements and mistakes take effect. That implies, for a legal system, that the institution of private property is essentially a humanistic institution. Everyone must have a private domain, a sovereign status, within society, one that others must respect and governments are established to protect. It is appropriate to our nature as human beings not primarily, as economists argue, because it leads to prosperity, not because it leads to creativity, but mainly because it accords with our human nature as self-responsible, moral agents.

We human beings need to know what props are available with which to guide our lives and make choices. We human beings need to know whether when I want to be charitable, can I take Jim's telephone and give it to somebody, or is it only my tape recorder that I can give to somebody? If we all get confused about this, as we do in this society and nearly all others, then the requirements of our humanity are not being met. Such a society is literally demoralized.

Throughout Western intellectual history, it has been mostly religion that has stressed the moral nature of human life. Of course, Christianity learned this from the Greeks and Romans, who had something of this in mind already. Socrates em-

phasized the virtuous human life, as did Aristotle. And from that it follows that some measure of individual responsibility and liberty are necessary conditions of society. Both the secular natural law tradition and the Christian stress on each person's responsibility to save his or her soul imply the free society. From the secular viewpoint, however, these implications were suppressed by scientism. And within the religious framework the zeal involved in making everyone conform to God's will tended to extinguish the libertarian implications.

In the last analysis, the free society has two strong traditions advancing its defense. The scientific approach reigned supreme in earlier times. In ours it is the normative approach that is gaining prominence. To decisively determine which of these is the better, which is true, is a topic for a much longer and detailed discussion.<sup>22</sup> But we can already see that there is no obvious superiority to the scientistically inspired position that denies freedom of the will, ethics and normative politics in human life. It seems, also, that such a view stands a better chance of being a successful intellectual defense of the free society.

What can be said in reply to MacIntyre, accepting his comment on its face as a sincere lamentation about something possibly devious in the liberal tradition? For one, the attempts, following Hobbes, to reduce all understanding of human affairs to physics, in the last analysis—which today emerges as the extreme mathematization of economics and some other social sciences—could be taken as a ploy, a way to avoid the hard questions. Put plainly, by making all human action driven by the profit motive or utility maximization, the question of whether it is right or good to vigorously pursue profit is avoided. If wealth-maximization is an innate drive, if survival is such an innate drive, *a la* Dawkins, well then no one need to prove that it is a good thing and the argument is won before it begins. Then, also, a subjective value theory enables us to skip a lot of tough issues in ethics and politics and the view that such a theory leads to liberalism becomes, once again, a kind of ploy.

The fact that this ploy is played out by Marx just as vigorously as it was by Smith and his neo-classical or Austrian economic followers may indicate, however, that what we have witnessed is not so much self-deception as the desperate effort to remain true to a misguided paradigm of intellectual respectability: scientism. Furthermore, all along we could also witness a defense of liberalism that avoided these mistakes, the natural law classical liberal tradition. It is this tradition that has become reinforced in very promising ways by the work of twentieth century classical liberal political theorists.

Thus it would appear that MacIntyre's ire is highly selective: on all fronts essentially normative theses had been advanced in scientific garb, whether socialist or liberal. It is my contention here that once the contemporary normative case for liberalism is fully appreciated, it can be seen as a most successful attempt to under-

stand human community life, not in the slightest inconsistent either with proper science or reasonable moral sensibilities.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Why does this not appear to be true in the formal and the natural sciences, such as logic and chemistry? Partly because the subject matter is more simple and general? one studies electrons not as individuals or even special collections but as such, simply as electrons. And a logical inference, just in terms of being what it is, is independent of any variations of content, substance. Beginning already with the biological sciences, not to mention the humanities, however, variation is the ontological norm. Individual and special differences become vital. Furthermore, there are personal and special goals that begin to be served in how an account of such matters is laid out, what is stressed, etc. None of this makes the substance of the discussion in these areas ontologically any less concrete and definite.

<sup>2</sup> Tibor R. Machan, "The Status of the Victim in Social Theory," *Filozofia Istrazivaja*, Vol. 41 (1991), pp. 489-97.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" in Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> Amitai Etzioni, Charles Taylor, Roger Scruton and others have voiced such laments.

<sup>5</sup> Although John Locke's liberalism is usually classified as a normative approach, Locke himself seemed inconsistent in his approach to philosophy in general and to political theory. In the former he was, like Thomas Hobbes, a materialist and empiricist. It was some of the theological approaches that would best qualify as normative defenses? e.g., advanced by Francisco Suarez, Samuel Puffendorf and M. J. de Condorcet. In our own day the examples of the positivist approach in philosophy are Jan Narveson, *The Libertarian Idea* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988) and David Conway, *Classical Liberalism* (London: Macmillain Press, Ltd., 1995), and, of course, many more in formal economics and political economy (Milton Friedman, Goerge Stigler, Gordon Tullock, et a.). The normative approach is exemplified now in the works of Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature, An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publ. Co., Inc., 1991) as well as myself and others who carry on the work of the novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss this as the "blow up fallacy" in my *The Pseudo-Science of B. F. Skinner* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

<sup>7</sup> F. A. Hayek, "The Moral Element in Free Enterprise," in Mark W. Hendrickson, ed., *The Morality of Capitalism* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1992), p.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Seer of Prague," *The New Republic*, July 1, 1991, pp. 35-40.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Posner, "Pragmatism versus the Rule of Law," (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1991 [transcript]).

<sup>10</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 104, where he claims that "The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is ... problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit." Although this does not quite embrace Skinner's vision of human nature as lacking all free will and human dignity, it comes mighty close to doing so.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Lib. X, chap. 17. 8ff

<sup>12</sup> In moral psychology, the phenomena we welcome versus lament in human behavior is explained by reference to features of our psychology: drives, motives, passions, inclinations, etc. The element of intentionality, involving free thought and action, is excluded as mysterious, not consistent with universal efficient causation. Morality proper, however, requires that human beings be capable of genuine free choice, the capacity to cause their significant actions on their own, with influences given proper due but only as influences, not as causes. See, for more on this, Tibor R. Machan, *A Primer on Ethics* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> A norm is a standard by which we judge the goodness of something, say, an apple, seal or chimp. In the case of human life, some norms are e.g., medical, others ethical or political. Those of the latter type pertain to how we ought to act, while those of the former to the involuntary, non-volitional advantages or disadvantages we enjoy.

<sup>15</sup> It is not that the language of ethics had been fully purged? clearly in the personal lives of the thinkers, then or now, such language cannot but make its appearance. The trouble is that the foundations of classical liberalism had been very inhospitable to that language. It is interesting to see how one proponent of scientism tried to expunge that language once and for all? see, B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971). Classical liberals in our time avoid this but try the alternative tactic of re-conceiving of the meaning of ethical and moral language along lines of emotivism? *via* defining “we ought” or “we should” as “we prefer” or “we approve.”

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Don Ballente, “Subjective value theory & government intervention in the Labor Market,” *Austrian Economics Newsletter*, Spring/Summer 1989, pp. 1-2. I discuss how the free market economist could continue to uphold the principle of voluntary exchange even if it were possible “for an analyst to pass judgment on the optimality of the individual’s chosen actions,” as this is deemed possible by cognitivist moral theorists. See Tibor R. Machan, *Capitalism and Individualism, Reframing the Argument for the Free Society* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990). See, also, Tibor R. Machan, “Individual versus Subjective Values,” *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 16 (1989), pp. 49-59, and “Why it Appears that Objective Moral Claims are Subjective,” *Philosophia* (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> F. A Hayek, “Dr. Bernard Mandaville,” in C. Nishiyama and K. L. Leube, eds., *The Essence of Hayek* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 1984), p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> If scientism as derived from the natural sciences were true, human beings, too, would be bundles of inert particles being moved about in the universe, and there would be no question of right or wrong about what they do, nor about what they believe (which is one place where scientism leads to serious difficulties, since it is unable to make sense of people being wrong, even as to what they think).

One contemporary advocate of the resulting determinism observed, “If [‘Left Wing politics is less given to attitudes and policies which have something of the assumption of Free Will in them’], should one part of the response ... be a move to the Left in politics? I leave you with that bracing question.”<sup>19</sup> Never mind that this “bracing question” can have no clear meaning, given that it contains the term “should.” Our response will be whatever it will be, nothing over which we have any control, nothing that we *should* or *should not* say in response to it!

<sup>20</sup> The late Professor George Stigler, a Nobel Laureate in economics and a supporter of deregulation, had actually bit the bullet and accepted the consequences of this Hobbesian, scientific approach to

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human life. He was a great champion of the free market. Yet he also accepted the consequences of scientism. In one of his talks, at the Mt. Pelerin Society, he argued that we live in the best of all possible worlds! Why? Well, because there is no other possibility. Since there is no choice about what we will do, the world we live in is the world that came about through the laws of nature. There is no other way that it could be. So, blaming people, including governments, is entirely futile. It is like protesting the weather or one's height or age.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the best example of the expression of this in earlier times, from a classical liberal perspective, can be found in John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *CATO's Letters: Or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects Vols. I & II* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., Machan, *Capitalism and Individualism*. See, also, Tibor R. Machan, "Reason in Economic versus Ethics," *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 22, No. 7 (1995), pp. 19-37.