

Liberalism Is Adulthood

Deirdre Nansen McCloskey

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We all want to be adults. You want the self-rule of someone seen as an adult by others in a liberated society. It is an honor and a delight to pursue your own projects harmless to others – knitting, or model railroading – or even helpful to others – working and then trading. Remember how you felt when you first went to high school, so clearly on the way to becoming an adult. Remember how you felt when you earned your first paycheck, and were no longer going to Daddy for all your money. Remember when you cast your first vote.

That you want self-rule as an adult does not mean that you want to be lonely, or that you disdain community. In 1819 a French philosopher, Benjamin Constant, spoke of two kinds of liberty, which he called “ancient” and “modern.” The modern one is the lovely self-rule, the paycheck honestly earned. The ancient one is the equally lovely right to participate, in for example a Greek city state, proudly carrying a shield in the phalanx. “Having a voice” is the present-day phrase for it, the dignity among other citizenly dignities of a vote. Without a vote as an adult, you are a social child, a non-person, disregarded, officially subordinated. Some men opposed giving women the vote because women were after all subordinated to their fathers and then their husbands. Let’s keep it that way, they said. The vote gives you the dignity of ancient liberty.

We humans want both adult liberties, both ancient and modern. A “liberal” society gives both, providing an adult version of self-rule and an adult version of community.

The hunter-gatherer bands in which all of our ancestors lived for millions of years were in this sense strikingly liberal. If you didn’t like the current leader, you could walk away, or throw a stone at his head. Yet you belonged. Nice. But most societies since agriculture was invented in places like Iraq and Guatemala have been strikingly *non-liberal*. Unlike a hunter-gatherer, a farmer has to stay put. And the land supports many farmers, some not cousins. As soon as a man with an expansive horse

and an expensive bronze sword lays claim to the land, he claims you, too. Too bad for you. Chiefs, kings, and governmental bureaucrats ruled, and continue to rule in non-liberal societies, such as Montezuma's Aztec Mexico or Franco's fascist Spain or Juan Perón's populist Argentina.

And in a gentler way, all modern states tend to the non-liberal. We need a state – a little one, honest and competent in the style of the Dutch cities of the Low Countries in the 16th century – to exercise what the German sociologist Max Weber noted in 1919 was the very definition of a state, “a legitimate monopoly of coercion in a certain territory.” We don't want a bunch of mafia-type gangs running around the city exercising coercion. Have one monopoly, and then watch it carefully. But modern states have become much bigger, in geography and especially in taxes, taking for example upwards or 40 percent of production for their purposes of big armies (to defend against the Paraguayans) or to subsidize good ideas (especially the ideas of the ruling party's cousins).

The trouble is that many people *like* to be so ruled. It's sweetly child-like, ancient liberty gone mad, without a balancing modern liberty. Many Argentinians today, and Italians and Russians, and in truth most every electorate in some moods, wants *more* Peróns and Mussolinis and Putins, more men on white horses, more kings – in a word, more of that top-down, anti-liberal “statism.” It makes people feel childishly safe and great, in a “family” of 50,000,000 people with a father strictly in charge. “Statism,” you see, is the opposite of liberalism, being at best an ancient liberty, alone, at worst Mussolini's Italian fascism 1922–1943: “Everything within the state. Nothing against the state. Nothing outside the state.”

There's a hilarious story in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) that makes the point. The Israelites ask the prophet Samuel to give them a king, “like all the nations” around Israel, such as Babylon and Egypt. Samuel consults with God, who tells him to warn them about getting what they want. “So Samuel spoke all the words of the Lord to the people” (1 Samuel 8, also called 1 Kings 8):

This will be the procedure of the king He will take your sons and place them for himself in his chariots and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war. . . . He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves. . . . He will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards and give to his officers and to his servants. . . . Then you will cry out . . . but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

“Nevertheless, the people refused to listen.” They got King Saul, who did exactly the terrible things God had predicted. Ha, ha.

Liberalism then is historically rare, but it has grown since it first emerged as an ideal in the 1700s. By “liberal” I do not mean of course the use of the term in the United

States since about 1933, namely, “leftism, advocating a tentative democratic socialism.” Nor do I mean the cruelty of what the political left in Europe has come to call “neo-liberalism.” Nor certainly do I mean its common use in Latin America to justify a thuggish oligarchy favoring the rich. I mean its use internationally, as on the Continent of Europe now, and its use originally, beginning in the late 18th century – that is, a society of adults liberated from coercive hierarchies, whether by masters or by the state, and having dignified help for the poor. You belong, you vote, but you are not pushed around physically.

It was in the 18th century an entirely new idea. The word in English derives via Romance languages from Latin *liber*, meaning as an adjective, reports the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, “possessing the social and legal status of a free man (as opposed to slave),” that is, as opposed to having a human overlord empowered with physical coercion. The definition of the derived word in the past two centuries has been specifically political. In the *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* it is “Liberalism 5a. Supporting or advocating individual rights, civil liberties, and political and social reform tending towards individual freedom or democracy with little state intervention.” The meaning 5a is first recorded in 1761.

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Yet “individual” is not quite the right word for the new political definition. “Adult” is. Under true liberalism, no adult is to be treated as a slave or a child, at any rate in theory – a theory slowly and unevenly implemented. There is to be no master, no *pater familias*, no husband authorized to beat you. Beating was commonplace in the 18th century, of wives, children, slaves, apprentices, soliders, sailors, beggars. By the late 19th century the knout and the cat-o’-nine-tails and the wife-beating stick by rule no thicker than the husband’s thumb were decidedly on the decline. Flogging was abolished in the American Army in 1861 and in the British Navy in 1879. Slavery ended in 1833 in the British Empire, in 1865 in the U.S., in 1888 in Brazil, and serfdom in Russia in 1861. In the late 19th century a European asked a free American man on the frontier who his master was. He replied, “He ain’t been born yet.” In 1935 the African-American poet Langston Hughes expressed the core of liberalism well: “O, let America be America again – / The land that never has been yet – / And yet must be – the land where *every* man is free.” Aside from modest taxes and reasonable compulsion in national emergencies, no adult is to be physically coerced. Thus liberalism.

An easy yet stupid argument in favor of liberalism simplifies self-rule down to a childish indulgence of impulse, “doing anything you want,” such as carrying military weapons into the Michigan Statehouse, or refusing to wear a mask in Rio and thereby blowing novel coronavirus up your neighbor’s nose. But any adult knows that modern liberty extends only so far as your neighbor’s nose (ancient liberty is more intrusive, because the decision to do this or that, to mount an expedition of Syracuse or to build the Hoover Dam, is collective and coerced).

But likewise an easy yet stupid argument *against* liberalism simplifies self-rule down to selfishness, and claims therefore that liberalism erodes community. When some people hear the word “self” in “self-rule” they think “selfishness.” They talk a good deal about “atomistic” modern societies, and don’t see that a market is a massive method of cooperating with other people, a much more important one in our daily lives than the state. The critics of liberalism want people instead to be absorbed into the community, and not have a large space of self-rule. They see only two realms, the personal and the hierarchical, the home and the church or state, and have little idea of how markets work as a third type of cooperation.

They think in particular that wanting to be one’s self instead of solely an obedient daughter of the Church or solely an obedient son of the State is modern and unnatural. It’s not. For one thing it is not “modern.” When Constant praised modern liberty he was participating in a recent fancy that “individualism” has grown historically and recently. It has not. The individual has never had to grow. We have never been wholly collectivist – Romantic fancies by pioneering German historians in the 19th century to the contrary. One finds plenty of “individualistic” talk and action in, say, the Hebrew Bible, or Buddhism, or the literature of the classical Mediterranean, or Chinese poetry, or Japanese businessmen’s tales, or whatever. That is, one finds it everywhere one looks. Of course people also express collective tastes and constraints. But they do so nowadays as much as in *The Iliad* or other ancient texts. Bolsonaro voters, anyone? Peruvian football fans?

Nor is an adult liberalism “unnatural.” It’s human. The German-American theologian Paul Tillich spoke of “the courage to be,” the existential hero standing against the world. Great. His friend the Lutheran minister and writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer went from a comfortable academic job in New York back to Nazi Germany in the early 1940s to criticize Hitler, and died for it, as he knew he would. But Tillich also spoke of a parallel, “courage to be a part of”: Bonhoeffer felt himself a part of German Christianity, and was willing to die for it. He was not merely a lonely existential hero. He was both, and needed courage for both sides of a complete adult, the I and the we, the modern and ancient liberty.

An adult, then, is both. A child, of course, rushes from the extreme of I to the conformism of We. In Bellagio, Italy on an evening *passeggiata*, I saw a toddler denied an ice cream cone. He was outraged by such scarcity, and started shouting, surprisingly loudly for such a little fellow: “*Io, io, io!*” William Golding’s horrifying novel *Lord of the Flies* tells likewise of the murderous collectivism of little boys, *noi, noi, noi*, which their elders exhibit at football matches and fascist rallies.

So a liberated adult achieves both, the *io* and the *noi*, in a responsible life. The *io* faces the *noi*, and talks, interacts, makes deals. In liberalism they don’t coerce one

another. They engage in “sweet talk.” The English word “sweet” has the same root as the Latin *suadere*, modern Spanish “*persuadir*” leading to English “to persuade.” (By contrast, “to convince” is from Latin *vincere*, to conquer, and has quite another tone.) The result is a spontaneous order, like that in an ecology, or in a language, or in an artistic community. A wild forest does not have a central planner, no more than the Spanish language does, or did the Barranquilla Group of writers and artists in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet they all show an order arising from biological or human interactions.

In 1776 Adam Smith, the inventor of modern market economics (anticipated by the Spanish monks of Salamanca two centuries before), argued that “the division of labour... is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of . . . the faculty of reason and speech.” Smith taught rhetoric to 14-year-old Scottish boys in his first job, and never gave up his idea that human speech is central to the economy. (Economists soon lost interest in the faculty of speech, but would do well to re-acquire it.) A market society, like a good conversation or a good rock concert, is alert, flexible, innovative, bubbling up, democratic, unintended, creative. It is the opposite of centrally planned, and is the intersection of the little, shifting plans by individuals.

The approach of the American sociologist Howard S. Becker is to be contrasted with the approach of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu or with any other social theory that focuses on nasty striving, such as pre-Gramsci Marxian thought or the economist’s un-liberal theory of games. Becker writes (rather similarly to another Becker, the economist Gary) about his metaphor of a “world”: “which does not seem to be at all true of the [Bourdieu’s] metaphor of ‘field’ [or the Marxist metaphor of ‘class’]. [It] contains people, all sorts of people, who are in the middle of doing something which requires them to pay attention to each other [as in speaking Spanish or meeting at the bar La Cueva in Barranquilla], to take account consciously of the existence of others and to shape what they do in the light of what others do. In such a world, people . . . develop their lines of activity gradually, seeing how others respond to what they do and adjusting what they do next in a way that meshes with what others have done and will probably do next. . . . The resulting collective activity is something that perhaps no one wanted, but is the best everyone could get out of this situation and therefore what they all, in effect, agreed to.” The metaphor of a “social contract” brings the spontaneous order back to individual choice, but it is a myth, used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762 to justify statism. When did you sign a contract to use “nosotros” to mean English “we”?

The spontaneous order of adults in a Beckerian “world” is the vision of liberal economics since Smith. Not by any means do all economists adopt it. Recently the economist Mariana Mazzucato, for example, has signed on to the top-down un-liberalism of her master John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) who wrote boldly in 1936 that the expert economist is “in a position to calculate the marginal efficiency of capital-

goods on long views and on the basis of the general social advantage.” How the economist would know whether a little grocery store should be built at the corner of Dearborn and Polk in Chicago, or whether the Anglo-French Concorde airplane is a good idea, is not revealed.

If you think such statism is a good idea, why not statism in language or art or in say, rock music? Rock music embodies liberty, of both kinds, both the real ancient liberty of participation and the real modern liberty of choice. That is why tyrants hate it. American jazz had the same disruptive position in the old Soviet Union, especially during the Cold War. The state declared that “today he plays jazz, tomorrow he’ll betray his country.” Jazz records, like Bibles or books by liberals such as Milton Friedman, had to be smuggled into Russia.

True, we sometimes desire merely the comforts of Mama, reverting to childhood, and are willing to give up our liberties for the time being. We can’t be Dietrich Bonhoeffer all day long, with immense courage-to-be and courage-to-be-a-part-of, morning, noon, and night. Sometimes we just desire comfort food. The desire is harmless if we do not rush to the extreme and think of ourselves as perpetual children, to be taken care of by the Church or the State, by a theory of conservative theocracy or radical fascism/socialism.

And we especially want to make sure *other* people are adults. Childish behavior is dangerous to everybody. It is imprudent, Prudence being a foundational virtue, if not the only one. Consider teenage driving (I rest my case). The American writer and workman Eric Hoffer in his first book, in 1951, after decades in which the world had gone mad with mass statist movements, spoke of the “true believers,” the young storm-troopers staffing the ranks of revolutionary movements. A child wants others to provide, even if to provide him with orders to kill the communists and break up the Jewish shops. If under the delusion of a childish theory such as nationalism or socialism or national socialism, he will feel “adult” in believing it, and then to die on the Eastern Front.

Latin America is filled with grown-up children, possessing guns or lecture podiums, who cling to Marxism, the childish theory that trade is exploitation and that The Party should rule you. It drives the children crazy. During the recent disorders in Chile, after decades during which liberalism had made the Chilean poor the richest on the continent, a young true-believing Marxist would order an expensive meal, eat it, and when the bill came would stand up and announce loudly to the diners, “You bourgeois bosses pay the bill.” And then walk out. It’s childish: eat but don’t work to pay.

Liberalism, then, is the theory that a liberated person *should* become an adult, and *does*.

The “should” part is a definition of human flourishing. Though we all need love, people do not flourish merely as beloved pets. We Christians are fond of calling ourselves children of God, and it is ultimately true. But God after Eden also wants us to be adults, not childish pets. Liberty is meaningless if we cannot choose to sin, and are mere robots of God. Self-rule is fundamental, called in theology “free will.”

The “does” part is political psychology. It works as a cause of adult behavior. Liberty understood as adult behavior encourages you to take responsibility for yourself. All the other political theories are by contrast deeply childish, and correspondingly power-mad. The liberal thinker David Boaz said that “In a sense, there have always been but two political philosophies: liberty and power.” The non-liberal theories are all about power, understood as coercion, not the amiable “worlds” of Becker. They infantilize people, and give them permission to act like violent or dependent children. Consider the Shining Path in Peru. The U.S. liberal Donald Boudreaux writes that “many people believe that we human beings left undirected by a sovereign power are either inert blobs, capable of achieving nothing, or unintelligent and brutal barbarians destined only to rob, rape, plunder, and kill each other until and unless a sovereign power restrains us and directs our energies onto more productive avenues.” That’s why the statist left or right think they need massive coercion, in order to compel the barbarians and blockheads to get organized.

Long ago the picture had some plausibility, enough in the minds of its painters, at least, to justify slavery as making the Africans do something useful, or to hold Indonesians in Dutch apprenticeship for another century or two. When the Irish were illiterate and the Italians superstitious, a masterful state seemed to make sense. I don’t actually think so, but you can at least see why the masters would favor a picture of inert blobs or brutal barbarians. But the theories look a lot less plausible in an age in which the Irish and the Irish Americans have among the highest educational attainments in the world, and the Italians, despite some strange voting recently, are far from barbaric and superstitious.

In other words, modern liberalism fits the modern world of what economists call “high human capital” better than the old rightish model of dimwitted peasants properly led by the aristocracy or the old leftish model of dimwitted proletarians properly led by The Party. If ever there was a time to let my people go, and to have a go, it is now, when they are so obviously ready for a liberal self-rule. Yesterday, one might put it, was the time for the aristocracy or the state over indwellers/children. Now is the time for an adult liberalism.

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So why is a childish statism so persistently popular? Well, a childish belief in magic meets up with numerous kings and politicians and economists willing to supply the magic. "Let's try socialism," the kids say, with a comical unawareness of Russia 1917 and Germany 1933, or Cuba in 1959 and Venezuela in 1999. ("This time," they say, "it will be different, because we are pure of heart.") Until people grow up, it's going to continue to happen. The Italian poet and essayist Giacomo Leopardi described a scene a friend witnessed in Florence in 1831. In the second-floor window of a house the people down in the street saw what they thought was a phantom, two nights in a row, and were terrified. Leopardi's friend climbed up and found that *la fantasma* was a nightgown moved by the wind and lit by a streetlight. Leopardi remarked, "Why this little story? . . . In the 19th century, in the very heart of Florence, whose inhabitants are particularly discerning and sophisticated, people still see ghosts that they believe are spirits."

A modern example of magical thinking is the enactment of a legal minimum wage, a type of law invented in Australia in the 1890s and now common all over the world. The political magician says that by enacting a high minimum wage in South Africa, for example, at the suggestion of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, high-paying unionized workers will be protected from competition from very poor people, and yet no one will be hurt. The politician and a surprisingly large number of economists assert magically that businesspeople will still hire just as many poor people as before, even though the cost of hiring them has been increased by law. The magicians have no explanation for why poor Blacks in South Africa, especially young people, have unemployment rates over 50 percent. The left in the United States nowadays is enthusiastic for raising the Federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. But wait. If mere laws such a state-enforced law that you cannot pay anyone less than \$15 an hour, never mind how young or unskilled, makes poor people better off, why not \$20 an hour? \$50? \$100? Pass a law, and everyone is better off. Easy. No need to work or invest or innovate. Wave a magic wand in parliament.

The belief in magic comes from childhood. Sigmund Freud said just this: the child rejects what Freud called "the reality principle," and believes that if he imagines killing his father and marrying his mother, and especially if he says it (*io, io, io*), it will magically happen. Similarly, a very young child, I do recall, views the getting of goods and services as manna from heaven, or more exactly from Mama. Some adults, and even some adult economists, cling to such an ur-vision. The anthropologist Alan Page Fiske argues persuasively on psychological and cross-cultural evidence that children develop in succession four "elementary forms," which then haunt the minds of childish

adults. The earliest he calls communal sharing (you get meat because you are part of Our Crowd, or of My Mama's Family), then authority ranking (I am the chief, or the father, so I get more meat: see Terrible Twos for early instances), and then (part of a child's earliest memories at about age 4 or 5: "Play nice, Bobby") equality matching (we're all in this together, so let's make the amounts of meat exactly equal for everyone).

None of these first three ethically approved forms of allocation so far involve prices, that is, exchange rates between two different kinds, meat for milk, say, or arrow points for cave paintings. Liberalism in its economic aspect is all about mutually beneficial exchange – quite against all other political theories. Fiske says that the fourth elementary form, "market pricing," seems ethical only when a child is about eight years old, exchanging my frog for your jackknife. Some grownups never get over their pre-eight-year-old disapproval of exchange, and cling to the elementary forms one through three. A baseball commentator said of an exchange of players between teams, "Getting four hot prospects for an old player is a win." The other commentator replied, using the wise cliché in justification for market pricing, "Well, I call it a win-win."

The pre-judgment of unequal exchange, of one side winning and the other losing, of the sports-and-business talk of nations "competing," runs through the history of economic policy like original sin. It came out recently in Peter Navarro, President Trump's advisor on foreign trade, hired by Trump because Navarro – a Harvard PhD, for shame – fed back to him Trump's mafia-style prejudice that exchange is cheating backed by coercion, "an offer you can't refuse." The economists of unequal exchange from Friedrich List to Raul Prebisch to Peter Navarro never get to the pre-analytic vision of the eight-year-old, of win-win.

And even some of the best among us retain an inchoate feeling that exchange is hurtful and corrupting. I have a dear friend, a brilliant Marxist economist, who says, "I hate the market!" I reply, "Jack, you don't hate the market. Your home is filled with lovely antique furniture you have acquired through the elementary form of market pricing." "I don't care: I hate the market." Like the Wizard of Oz, a pre-analytic vision runs the show from behind the curtain.

At age 16 I agreed with Jack's feeling, and viewed myself as a socialist, admittedly unlike Jack a decidedly unlearned one. I happened in 1958 to devour in the Andrew-Carnegie-financed public library of Wakefield, Massachusetts the Russian prince Pyotr Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) and the gullible American journalist John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919). If I had instead come across Rose Wilder Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom* (1943) or Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) I suppose I would have gotten a better grasp of market pricing, earlier. Many market-loving classical liberals came to liberalism by that free-market path, and

were never socialists. Yet the socialism-to-liberalism route is very common in 20th century political biographies, such as of Leszek Kołakowski's or Robert Nozick's or Mario Vargas Llosa's or, to descend a couple of notches, of D. N. McCloskey's. (The contrary route from market liberal to state socialist is vanishingly rare.) The old joke is that if you are not a socialist by age 16, you have no heart. If you are still a socialist at 26, you have no brain. (I adjust the ages.)

Why has socialism kept its appeal since 1848 to every new generation of young people, including mine, in the face of repeated disasters in its application? Well, for one thing, you may notice (though many male economists do not) that we all grow up in families, which of course must be little socialist communities, from each according to her ability, to each according to his need, communal sharing. Friends are that way, too. Erasmus of Rotterdam started every edition of his compilation in the early 16th century of thousands of proverbs with "Among friends, all goods are common." That's right. If you buy a large pizza for the party, but then declare, "I paid for it, so I get to eat it all," you won't be invited back. Market pricing be damned: among family and friends it's communal sharing or equality matching, or, in political cases backed by coercion, sometimes authority ranking, all the way down.

Therefore, when a naïve adolescent in a theoretically non-hierarchical society, such as I was, discovers that there are poor people, her generous impulse is to bring everyone into her family – a family of, say, 330 million souls, a tentative social democracy. She would not have such an impulse if she had been raised in a hierarchical society, whether aristocratic or authoritarian, in which the hierarchy is made to seem natural and irremediable. Aristotle, the tutor of aristocrats in a slave society, declared that some people are slaves by nature. And the fictional pig/commissar in Orwell's *Animal Farm* declared that all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others. Under "capitalism," man exploits man; under socialism, it's the other way around. The literary critic Tzvetan Todorov reports that Margarete Buber-Neumann (the theologian Martin Buber's daughter-in-law), "a sharp-eyed observer of Soviet realities in the 1930s, was astonished to discover that the holiday resorts for ministry employees were divided into no less than five different levels of 'luxury' for the different ranks of the communist hierarchy. A few years later she found the same stratification in her prison camp."

The other reason socialism is attractive to 16-year-old children in a modern economy, and another reason we will have to keep refuting it with each new generation, forever, is (as the economist Laurence Iannaccone argues) that the more complex an economy becomes, and the further people are from work with some obvious fruit, being further and further up the astonishingly long supply chains of a modern economy, the less obvious becomes the link between effort and reward, and especially their social good. Close up, the economy looks to a modern teenager more

and more like arbitrary manna from heaven, to be “distributed,” as the unhappy choice of words has it, among members of a family. In the 1950s it was my condition, a teenage child of a Harvard professor whose money dropped on the family like manna. To a person embedded in a large company, and still more in a governmental office, or a monastery, or a graduate school, and most of all in a loving middle-class family insulated it seems from the market, it’s back to communal sharing.

By contrast, a person, even a 16-year-old child, who works on a family farm or in the family’s small shop has no trouble seeing the connection between effort and reward in the society as a whole, and its advantages. My students like that can grasp economics with ease. They grasp the basics of scarcity and specialization and the win-win of exchange. I have friends who grew up on dairy farms, milking cows to sell the milk twice a day 365 days a year, no breaks. They know effort and reward and the market, and make good economists, and very good workers. St. Paul of Tarsus had no trouble seeing it in the little economy of Thessalonian Christians: “If any would not work, neither should he eat.” Such a rule, so contrary to the recent construal of Christianity as a sweetly distributive socialism, is the only way in anything but a highly disciplined or greatly loving small group to get a large pizza made in the first place “for distribution.”

But the modern middle-class child doesn’t realize it, and if he spends his life in a large organization up along the supply chain it is no wonder that he arrives at age 26, and then at age 76, not understanding economics, and favoring socialism. The American Senator Bernie Sanders and the British Labour Party ex-leader Jeremy Corbyn were, like me, born in 1942. In 1958 we had the same opinion about “capitalism”: overthrow it. Getting beyond such callow if emotionally satisfying opinions is difficult. The American novelist Saul Bellow said of his early Trotskyism, “like everyone else who invests in doctrines at a young age, I couldn’t give them up.”

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Being an adult, though, is not quite enough. You have to be a real, fully adult man or woman, not a child cowering inside the grown-up clothes. Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, and the Marxist theorists and military tyrants of Latin America, think they are adults. That is, you need also to be committed to being an *ethical* adult. Ethics is fundamental in the economy and in politics, which is what is wrong with the fashionable idea in economics and political science nowadays that “institutions matter.” The Soviet Union had three successive official constitutions, each with very lovely clauses protecting liberty of speech and assembly and all manner of liberalisms. (Tyrants in the modern world all pay lip service to liberty, in a way they did not need to before the 18th century.) But all the Soviet constitutions were of course, in the English

phrase, “dead letters,” because in fact The Party, and especially the Politburo, and most especially Stalin, ruled. Their ethics determined what rights were actually exercised, namely, everything within the tyrant’s will, nothing against the tyrant’s will, nothing outside the tyrant’s will.

Contrary to the project since Nicolò Machiavelli in 1513, and economics after it had forgotten the highly ethical path of Adam Smith, selfishness does not suffice. A full adult needs, the ancients knew, and Smith wrote in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 1790) using ancient wisdom, a full set of virtues. A case can be made that a flourishing human life must show seven principal virtues. Not 613 or 8 or 1, but 7.¹

The case in favor of four of them, the “pagan” or “aristocratic” or, most relevant here, “political” virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and prudence, was made by Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. In the early 13th century St. Albert the Great summarized Cicero’s claim that every virtuous act has all four: “For the knowledge required argues for prudence [one could call it ‘competence’ and be done with it, practical competence about means, not wisdom about ends]; the strength to act resolutely argues for courage; moderation argues for temperance; and correctness argues for justice.”

The other three virtues for a flourishing life, adding up to the principal seven, are faith, hope, and love. These three so-called “theological” virtues were not until the 18th century regarded as political. Before the Romantics and their nationalism and socialism they were thought of as achieving the salvation of an individual soul. The theological virtues could also be called “peasant,” to contrast them with the aristocratic four, or “Christian,” without implying that Christians have been especially skilled at achieving them. The case for the three Christian virtues is made very early in the history of that great Jewish heresy. When in about 50 AD St. Paul in his first extant letter praises the theological three he appears to be drawing on a tradition already established among the emergent Christians (1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8). His most famous statement of it, adorning now many cards from Hallmark, is of course 1 Corinthians 13: “Faith, hope, and love, these three abide. But the greatest of these is love.”

The theological virtues can be given, however, entirely secular meanings. The “love” in 1 Corinthians 13 is *agape*, transcendent love, not desire or even friendship. An adult without some sort of love for the secular transcendent – science, art, the nation, football – is not flourishing. Faith is the virtue of identity and rootedness. It is backward looking: who *are* you? Hope is forward looking: who do you wish to become? Both sustain humans, and indeed can be viewed, with *agape*, the virtue of connectedness, as the characteristically human virtues. A woman without faith is no

¹ Or so I argue at length in *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

person. She is as we say “hollow.” A man with no hope is without a life project. He goes home this afternoon and shoots himself.

The four pagan virtues and the three Christian make an odd marriage, consummated in the middle of the 13th century by Aquinas in his analysis of the virtues. The seven often contradict one another. No free, adult male citizen of Athens, for instance, regarded love by any definition as a primary virtue. It was nice to have, doubtless, but in no sense “political,” and was devalued therefore in a world that took politics as the highest expression of human virtue.

From about 400 BC to about 1749 AD the moral universe was described in the West as mixtures of the Seven Principal Virtues, containing hundreds of minor and particular virtues. The seven are primary colors. They cannot be derived from each other, and the other, minor colors *can* be derived from them. Blue plus red makes purple, blue plus yellow makes green. But you can't get red from maroon and purple. Honesty, that bourgeois virtue, is justice plus temperance in matters of speech, with a dash of courage and a teaspoon of faithfulness. Courage plus prudence yields enterprise, another bourgeois virtue. Temperance plus prudence yields thrift, said also to be bourgeois. Temperance plus justice yields humility, said to be Christian.

Various moderns have tried to make up a new color wheel, with “integrity” or “civility” or “sustainability” as primary. Thus a *New Yorker* cartoon in 2002: a man who looks like he's just returned from a grilling by a Senate committee about Enron and other accounting disasters says to his little son, “Honesty is a fine quality, Max, but it isn't the whole story.” Making up new primaries is like depending on purple and green, or chartreuse and aquamarine. These are good and important colors, among my favorites. But they are technically speaking “secondary,” or even “tertiary,” the palette of Gauguin and Matisse against that of late Van Gogh and late Piet Mondrian. In the ethical case the faux primaries are accompanied by no tradition of how to mix or array them.

By the grace of Darwin, we now see that calculative virtues are not particularly human. They can be found in the least human of beings, in ants justly sacrificing themselves for the queen, or dandelions prudently working through the cracks in the sidewalk. The terminology is of course figurative, a human attribution, not Nature's own way of putting it. But that is what we are discussing here: human figures of speech. Nature has no words. Natural history has taught us since 1859 to realize that the lion is not actually “courageous,” ever, but merely prudent in avoiding elephants, with a bit of justice, perhaps, in acknowledging the hierarchy of the pride.

Courage and temperance are emotion-controlling and will-disciplining, and therefore, we now realize, more characteristically human than prudence and justice. And the most human virtues are those secularized theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, providing the transcendent ends for a human life. The rest – even courage and temperance – are means.

The seven are a roughly adequate philosophical psychology. Any full description of the human virtues would do just as well, surely, so long as it names them and does not collapse them all into duty or utility or contract from behind a pre-natal veil. (A vice is a notable lack of one or more of the virtues.) Confucian thought, or Native American traditions, or African traditional law and custom, have local versions of the Western Seven.

You can test their adequacy by imagining a person or a community that notably lacks one of them. A loveless life is terrible; a community without justice is, too. Philippa Foot, one of the rediscoverers of virtue ethics (most were women), wrote in 1978 that “nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom [her word for prudence], while communities where justice and charity [the King James Bible’s word for love] are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror, or Sicily under the Mafia.”

But so what, for a liberal political philosophy of the good society?

Martha Nussbaum’s book, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (2006), attempts to add the love of others to the accepted axioms of political philosophy. She criticizes on this count the strictly contractarian assumption of Prudence Only. At one point she articulates what I am going to call the Nussbaum Lemma: “I think it implausible to suppose that one can extract justice from a starting point that does not include it in some form, and I believe that the purely prudential starting point is likely to lead in a direction that is simply different from the direction we would take if we focused on ethical norms from the start.”

The Nussbaum Lemma is profoundly right, and it is – as she shows in her book – devastating to the project since Machiavelli in 1513 or Hobbes in 1651 of pulling a just rabbit out of a purely prudential hat, containing mere competence about calculating self-interest. You can’t get virtue *J* from a starting point consisting only of virtue *P*. Virtue *J* has to be in from the start. You have to put the rabbits into the hat if you are going to pull them out.

But the Nussbaum Lemma applies also to her own project in her own book. *You can't stop with prudence, justice, and love of others*. It is implausible to suppose that one can extract faith, temperance, hope, courage, the fullness of love (connection, including connection with nature, say, or science, or God, or the poor), and other qualities constituting as I have claimed a flourishing adult from a starting point that does not, in Nussbaum’s words, “include them in some form.”

What of it? This: political and economic philosophy needs to be done with all seven of the virtues, not merely with some cleverly axiomatized sub-set. My point, and Nussbaum’s if she would but admit it, is that to characterize people with one or another of the boy’s-own “models” said since 1513 or 1651 to suffice for theories of justice or politics or economics will not do. Characterizing humans as Prudent Only, or even as prudent and just, with love of others tacked on, will not do. Adults also have identities (faith), and projects (hope), for which they need courage and temperance, those self-

disciplining virtues. And they all have some version of transcendent love – the connection with God, the traditional object, though as I say the worship of science or humanity or the revolution or the environment or art or rational-choice models in political science have provided modern substitutes for Christianized *agape*. A life without the transcendent cannot answer the question, So what?

The entire set of seven virtues is necessary to get the liberal, or socialist, or fascist, project going in the first place. This is important. Full human adults – not saints, but people in possession of their own whacky and personal and, alas, often idiotic versions of all seven human virtues – are the only beings who would be *interested* in forming a human society.

To put it still another way, suppose you have in mind to make fully flourishing human adults (or fully flourishing living beings *tout court*, if you include the animals, and even the trees). If this is your end, namely, a society consisting of such beings, then your social-scientific means must as Nussbaum says “focus on ethical norms from the start.” You have to put the rabbits into the hat. In order to have a society that shows prudence, justice, love, faith, hope, courage, and temperance you need to arrange to have people who are . . . prudent, just, loving, faithful, hopeful, courageous, and temperate “from the start.”

The “start” is called “childhood,” mostly ignored in modern Western political philosophy and emphatically so in non-feminist economics (it is not, by the way, in the Confucian or Hindu traditions, and was never in the ancient Mediterranean). A political/ economic philosophy needs to focus on how we get in the first place adults who are prudent, just, loving, etc., and who therefore would *care* about the capabilities of good health, emotional attachment, affiliation, etc., or about the appropriate constitutional changes to obviate prisoners’ dilemmas, or about the categorical imperative, or about the greatest happiness. This is what feminist economics has been saying now for four decades, and what also comes out of some development [note the word] economics, and even, reluctantly but persistently and embarrassingly, out of such unpromising-looking fields as game theory, experimental economics, behavioral economics, realist international relations, the new institutionalism, and constitutional political economy.

§

So liberty is liberty is liberty, the liberty of a free adult man or woman. It is the courageous liberty to be and to be a part of. It is a balance of ancient and modern liberty. It is the prescription for a flourishing adult in all philosophies of dignity. It is the right to live and love as you wish, without being mastered by another human.

The opposite is one or another sort of tyranny. In Orwell’s other anti-authoritarian novel, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949) the Party man O’Brien explains what a future of fascism, left or right, means: “But always – do not forget this, Winston –

always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. . . . If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.” Some people nowadays, the literal or near fascists, Action Française or the US Alt-Right, seem to long for something like such an outcome. They reckon I suppose that they will be the Party people reveling in the intoxication of power. But other French and American people, quite without such loony longings, may get the boot on the face. Forever.

Let's not. Let's be liberal and adult.